



National Council of  
Churches in Australia



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Ecumenical Commission

## **“Are we on the Bus?”**

*A look at the situation of Indigenous Australians place in Church and Society through the eyes of one who is still standing at the Bus Stop.*

**Speech delivered to the United Faculty of Theology<sup>1</sup> – October 1<sup>st</sup> 2009**

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Peace be with you...

I wish to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Aboriginal Owners of this place, the Wurundjeri Peoples of the Kulin Nation, where we are meeting here tonight. I pay my respects to their ancestors, those of today and keep in my prayers and thoughts those who will take over this role into the future. May the Creators blessings be always upon them as they struggle to keep their identity and live in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia.

The analogy of the bus I am going to use tonight is not my own and therefore I wish to credit a ‘Practical Black Theologian’ who I had the pleasure of meeting recently at a World Council of Churches Consultation on Racism in Doorn, The Netherlands. Dr Anthony G. Reddie is a British Methodist Theologian of Afro-Caribbean descent which makes him a very interesting fellow. He is a Research Fellow at the Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and is a consultant in Black Theological Studies for the British Methodist Church. Dr. Reddie has been the Editor of Black Theology, an international Journal, since 2001. I have found his latest book ‘Working Against the Grain’ to be a very interesting read.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uft.edu.au/>

Black Theology springs out of Liberation Theology and Practical Theology but I leave the rest for you as Learned Scholars to work out the rest.

In his talk in Amsterdam, Reddie used the analogy of the bus to try and picture where the Black Peoples of Britain and the world are situated within Church and Society. I will try to use this same analogy to see if it speaks of the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples here in Australia. I do not propose it as the latest 'Bus Stop Theology' but hopefully as a way of understanding where we, as Indigenous Australians are at.

Let me first explain Reddie's bus analogy.

If you can think of the bus as being the Church or Society on the move, zooming along. On the side of the road is a bus stop, where people are queued up waiting to get on the bus.

The first thing we need to consider is why I, and my fellow travelers, are at the bus stop waiting for the bus. I am at the bus stop because I am on a journey. I am on a journey to find a sense of true meaning and true self. This journey takes in my own cultural roots and histories; my beliefs as a Christian and my culture as an Aborigine.

Like many of you, I am sure, I want to move forward in life. We know and believe that things can be better if we move. There are some problems though of uprooting oneself from the place one is at. We, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are tied to a certain bit of earth. We draw our identity from it and even if we move or are moved from it, it still draws us back, maybe that's why I'm at the bus stop I am looking for my journey home? Maybe it's that longing to be in a safe,

secure, loving place that brings the best out of me which draws me to the bus stop. Not the situation of our communities today but the physical place which gives me my identity and uplifts my spirit and gives me strength.

So I am thinking of that while I am standing at the bus stop. While I am waiting I am not just idly standing there, it is an active waiting. I am trying to grapple with identifying the important things I will need for the journey ahead. This active waiting is a very Aboriginal way of looking at life. We talk, we think, we watch, we wait, and then, when the time is right, and we will know when it's right, we act.

While I am at the bus stop I am looking at the people around me who are also waiting for the bus. I am asking myself, are they people I know or do they look like they are going to the same place I'm going to? Are they young or old? Do they have similar interests? Are they friendly? Do they come from the same cultural background? Are we in a nice warm shelter or are they out in the elements? Are they waiting for the same bus as me, or are they on a different journey?

When the bus eventually comes to a stop in front of us I want to know where it is going. I look to see what the indicator says. Then I look at who, if any, are already on the bus. Is there anybody I know going my way? I look to see what sort of people are on the bus and how they are relating to each other. I look to see if there are any seats left or is there standing room only or no room at all? I wonder if I will have to fight my way on to the bus or will we proceed in an orderly manner. I wonder how we will decide who will sit where – will we just take the first available seat, or is there some system to the seating, and if there is – how will I know where my place should be?

Then I look at the driver. Does he or she look like they know what they are doing? Do they look like they know the route we are to follow? Do I have confidence in them and do I want to go with them? Do I feel welcomed by the driver, or is the driver intent on the road ahead and not really concerned with the people on the bus.

Once I've answered some of these questions I may get on the bus or I might decide this is not the right bus for me and wait for the next one. That's if there is another or perhaps I will decide that I am better off where I'm at now.

Last week I was at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's (NATSICC) national assembly and I ran a workshop using this analogy and I must say it worked very well as a tool to encourage discussion about the relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with the Churches. Some interesting comments were made and some thought provoking issues were raised. For some people though the image was redundant and they said, "we are already on the bus, and Jesus is the driver". Well yes, to some extent that may be true. We have an image of being on the bus, and that bus being a welcoming, kind environment. But for many of us that is not the truth of our experience. For some of us the Institution of the Church is driving the bus and it can only go so far because the Institution prevents us from growing. Some say we are the Church, but still we find that we are not able to make decisions, or do things how we want to because the Institution does not let us. It places rules and regulations on us that limit us. Some would say that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have had self-determination – but this too is not true. We have never really had true self-determination. We have always been governed and financed by those outside.

Others might say it's not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who experience the limits of the Institution, that if we choose to belong to a Church,

then we choose to engage with the hierarchy and structure of the Institution. I believe however that we can look back to the early church and take our cue from the way those early leaders engaged with the local cultures. Church, as a Church, is a culture that grows, it is about give and take and it is about engaging with that which already exists and connecting with cultures. An example of this connection is how the early Church developed feast days and events such as Easter around existing festivals and days of importance.

But turning back to the bus image, when the bus arrives I have to ask myself whether I want to jump on board. For me to make that decision I need to feel confident that it is Jesus driving the bus. Not an imitation or some other figure in control.

I also have to consider the consequences of my decision. What will happen if I stay at the bus stop? What would happen if I jumped on anyway, even when it doesn't feel right? Do I need to have faith that this is the right bus for me, or can I jump on and reserve the right to hop off if it turns out to be the wrong bus? Or, if I jump on, can I change the nature of the bus I am catching.

The value of the bus analogy for me is that it does raise all these questions in my mind. It's a vehicle, so to speak, which can challenge us to think about our relationship to Church and each other. In particular, I think the image particularly resonates with me because it calls to mind that this is where we, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are in both Church and Society. We are trying to work out whether we want to get onto the bus. Our biggest problem is that whenever we get involved, when we board the bus, we experience a gradual erosion of ourselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We are struggling to find the balance between being a good Christian and being part of that

culture, while still retaining our own cultural identity. I am reminded again of those early days of Christianity and the linking between the festivals of the old culture and those of the new. At the time it would have been a successful melding of two cultures. But over time the original culture has been overwhelmed and subsumed to the Christian way of doing things. Who of us now really know much about the practices and Gods of ancient rituals that once sustained cultures, and whose celebrations of new life coincided with Christian celebrations of death and resurrection?

We do not want our ancient rituals, customs and ceremonies to be taken over by Christianity; that is not what we mean when we say we want to be joyfully received and to be part of the Church. No, we want to retain our own culture and identity. We want to be part of society and Church, we want to be included. We want to be central to an Australian Church. But we do not want our own culture to be eroded – or appropriated.

As the situation stands at the moment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples do not feel welcome on the bus, but we have a ticket – we were given the ticket at baptism, so we have as much right to be on the bus, and to feel comfortable there as every other person. We need to build a bus that we are all comfortable in.

So what do I want the bus to look like? To feel like? And where do I want it to go?

Well, my image is that God is the body of the bus, the Holy Spirit is the fuel that drives the bus and Jesus is the NatSav that gives us direction! And who drives? We all do, we take turns and share the driving responsibility.

I see the bus as a place of safety inside a shell. It's a cocoon in the best possible way - it is a vehicle that takes us home, that takes us to the Dreaming or Heaven. It is a cocoon that interacts in the world; it's not a fortress that shuts us off to the world. We don't just hurtle along on our bus oblivious to the world around us, no – we stop, revive and survive. We interact in the world, but we can always return to the comfort, welcome and safety of our bus.

The bus that I want to build is one we are all comfortable in and that have all had a part in building. I don't think that we have ever been asked what we want the bus to be like; whether this is the model of bus we want to travel in and whether this is the direction we want to go in; we have only been given the option to hop on – or hop off.

I am not the only one who wants something different for the future. In February this year, NATSIEC ran its second Christ and Culture Conference, with the theme of Christ through Culture. One of the things we did at this conference was to invite a futurist, Professor Tony Stephens, along to guide us in thinking about what kind of futures we want. The reason we did this is because we often say “we don't like this and that” and we want things to be different. But the challenge for us is to get beyond the wishy washy. The challenge is to become active change agents to create the futures we want. None of us are fortune tellers. I am not talking about predicting the future. But I do believe that if we decide where we want to be in ten, twenty, fifty or even one hundred years time, we can take action now to create that future.

So, at the Christ and Culture conference we asked the participants to envisage the community of church in 100 years time. I want to share with you the kind of future

for our Churches envisaged by the conference participants who were Indigenous and non-Indigenous and representative of a cross section of Churches.

### **An Australian Church...**

The community of Church of the future is a spiritually enriched church of people proud of the traditions and spirituality of this land which recognizes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality. There is a decrease of former cultural influences and increase of influence of our location “where we are”. Indigenous theology is joyfully embraced. Culture and language is alive in the stories, gospel, music and dance. Rituals are simple and tie ritual and ceremony to meaning in life.

### **Christ Centered...**

The Community of Church of the future goes “back to basics” - to Jesus’ teaching. It is Christ centered and land sourced and is grounded in the lives and experience of people (not Christ from above, but below). Rituals and symbols connect to Christ and land. There is a focus on the gospels and the kingdom. It is a Church that is connecting and prophetic – “We are the salt of the earth, a bit of salt makes it tasty – making it tastier makes the church more appealing and understanding”.

### **An open and inclusive reformed church...**

The community of Church of the future is an inclusive church with praying, listening, contemplative and inclusive worshippers. Women and men are equally involved at all levels and the Church has the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. The Church is welcoming with doors open - the invitation is out to all to “be part of me, the body”. Young People, youth and children are more engaged. There is acceptance of the Gay community. Age old crusty, rusty structures have been demolished. There is flexibility. Individuals do not feel marginalized and everyone is involved in creating Church. The Church is



of the people, for the people, by the people and is not limited to buildings but is more orientated around sacred spaces.

### **A Just and caring community...**

The community of Church of the future is one of Just communities serving all which speaks to my friends - the outcast, and the excluded. The Church recognizes the marginalized and actively works towards reducing their marginalization. The church is Prophetic.

### **Leadership...**

The Community of Church of the future is not hierarchical rather it is collaborative with decentralized power and authority. There are ordained women across all denominations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are recognized as equal and they are ministering across the churches. There is new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership who have been well trained.

### **Sharing...**

The Australian Churches of the future share their resources including clergy and church buildings. For example, they share clergy for funerals. There is also increased sharing of theology.

### **Healing...**

The community of Church in the future is a healing community. There is healing of disunity through diversity. Churches repent their role in stolen generations and hand over land and financial capital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for reparation.

### **Education...**

Church schools are accessed freely by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Church...**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander church is self-supporting, self governing and self propagating and autonomous.

### **Justice...**

The community of Churches recognizes and acts on climate change and catastrophe. They recognize human ecology and are in harmony with all of creation;

### **Interfaith...**

The community of Church in the future is in dialogue with those of other faiths.

So this is the sort of Church we hope for. The question is can we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, create this Church together. Or do we need our own bus? My opinion is that schisms fracture the church. I prefer to see us as all - different people, with different starting points - all travelling to the same place. We are all part of the human family, we are all created equal and we are all created in the image of God. So I prefer to create a new model of bus, together. I don't want to stand at the bus stop for ever. I want to be on the bus. But I want to be on a bus that we have all created together, that is freely moving, all welcoming and which values and accepts my contribution as an Aboriginal person, and an Aboriginal Christian.