



RECLAIMING COMMUNITY

MISSION, CHURCH AND ABORIGINAL WISDOM

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BROOKE PRENTIS

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RECLAIMING COMMUNITY

MISSION, CHURCH AND ABORIGINAL WISDOM

Language is important.
Words are important.
Perspectives are important.

This Tinsley lecture is entitled: “Reclaiming Community: Mission, Church, and Aboriginal Wisdom.” Let us look at some key words and phrases from this title from an Aboriginal perspective

Community - A word that can bring comfort, celebration, commiseration.

Mission - A word that can send shivers down your spine.

Church - A word that can illicit frustration.

Aboriginal Wisdom - A beacon of hope shining a light on a path forward for the Australian church today.

PERSPECTIVES

My interpretation of these words as an Aboriginal person shows a difference in perspective.

Maybe the non-Aboriginal perspective of these words could be:

Community – we want to reach

Mission – saving souls

Church – what we do on a Sunday

Aboriginal wisdom – I dare to think of the multitude of responses that could come forth.

Aboriginal peoples, and non-Aboriginal peoples see the world differently. We know that in the Indigenous worldview there is no separation between human and non-human, we know that time is not linear but cyclical in nature. Or maybe many non-Aboriginal peoples don't know this and hence we begin to see and understand our problem.

This difference in perspective can also be applied to how we see our nation, Australia. I am continually in circles of non-Aboriginal peoples that praise the state of our nation, they revel in the fact Australia is “young and free”¹, they applaud our economic success

¹ https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/pmc/Honours/anthem_words.pdf

in the global market, they salute our land of mateship and a fair go.

If Australia is to truly embrace us as Aboriginal peoples we must change the language. The land now called Australia is ancient, our economic success has been built on the free slave labour of Aboriginal peoples, mateship is exclusive and the land of a fair go does not apply to all.

The state of our nation is something I am constantly reckoning with, concerned about and confronted by. The question that troubles me every day is what is the state of our nation? Where I start with trying to answer this question, is an issue that has been around for over 200 years: The relationship with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. And more importantly not just the relationship, but the distance in the relationship. To me, a part from the obvious cultural differences, one of the drastic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples is our perspective on the state of our nation.

You see when you walk this sacred land as an Aboriginal person you see, hear and feel a very different perspective on the state of the nation compared to what the mainstream media, Australian society, and even our Parliamentarians, try to tell us. The covers are removed from your eyes, the blocks are removed from your ears and you are made aware of the miseducation of your mind - you see the true state of our nation – You see a nation in chaos, a country in a mess, a land in ruins.

CHURCH AND STATE – HOW HISTORY AFFECTS THE PRESENT

This difference in perspective can also be applied to how we see the Church, and Christian mission. For me, the state of the church cannot be removed from the state of our nation.

I have been in many denominations and individual congregations where Australians continue to believe that state and church are to be separated, but the perspective of an Aboriginal Christian are that they are intimately tied together and they are founded in the colonial invasion of the land now called Australia. Whilst Australians often know little of the true history of Australia, mixing up Cook and Phillip, forgetting the Dutch altogether, let alone recognising Aboriginal peoples as having the world's oldest living continuous cultures. World history, pre-1788, is poorly known by the average Australian.

Our journey with the close tie between church and state takes us back to 1452. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V, issued a papal bull, *Dum Diversas*², a precursor to the Doctrine of Discovery. It was issued in response to a request from King Alfonso V of Portugal. Its effect would be to grant permission to invade and take possession of property³ whilst also granting forgiveness for all sins.⁴ An extraordinary claim and command that would pave the way for colonial invasion, destruction, and a multitude of sins including theft, rape, and murder.

2 <http://unamsanctamcatholicam.blogspot.com.au/2011/02/dum-diversas-english-translation.html> Given in Rome at St. Peter, in the year of the Incarnation of the Lord 1452 on June 18th, in the sixth year of our Pontificate. Posted by Boniface at 9:19 PM

3 “We grant you [Kings of Spain and Portugal] by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, counties, principalities, and other property [...] and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery.

4 “we grant, by the power of your sacrifice, a plenary forgiveness of all and individual sins, crimes, trespasses, and digressions”

This papal bull, this Christian doctrine that caused such trauma, destruction, and death, has not been repudiated.

In the wording of this papal bull, it discusses “islands, harbors, seas,” and when we look at the wording from Cook’s journal as he landed on Possession Island on 22 August 1770, we see the correlation of the colonial invasion of Australia forever tying state to church. It is as though Cook’s words were designed to mirror wording from the papal bull, “I now once more hoisted English Coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast...by the name New South Wales, together with all the Bays, Harbours, Rivers and Islands situate upon the said coast”.⁵

It could also be said that the lie Australia lived until 1992, Terra Nullius, also has papal, and therefore Christian foundations.

Australia, as a nation, has not dealt with its true history. I propose that we are still living under colonial rule. The Australian Constitution only serves to further compound this, being a colonial document written by a handful of white European men. We have not dealt with stolen land, stolen wages, stolen generations – the sins of our nation, sins that in many cases were committed by the church or the church was complicit in.

In light of Australia’s history and the links between church and state, the lack of progress in the recognition and rights, equality and freedoms, justice and love, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in 2018, the time has come to reckon with ourselves as Christians in the land now called Australia. To reckon with ourselves

requires that we look at community, mission, and church.

Let us start with community.

COMMUNITY – A LIGHTBULB MOMENT

It took a Cree man from the Swan River Band in Alberta to shine a light and help me identify the reason for a 228 year old problem in our nation.

You see, I thought, community meant community. When Christians talked about community I thought they meant community, like the Aboriginal community. I thought I had allies with non-Indigenous Australians Christians because we spoke the language of community, a common language. However, I was confused as to why I kept extending the hand of Aboriginal friendship and it was not gladly taken by the Australian church. I asked why the Australian church was not engaging with the Aboriginal community.

The Cree man was Indigenous theologian Ray Aldred, and what he illuminated for me was that when as Aboriginal peoples we talk about community, and when as Christians, predominantly the non-Indigenous Australian Christians talk about community, we are actually not talking the same language.

Whilst these are the same words, they have very different meanings. It took me 17 years as a Christian to realise the way I used community and the way the Australian Church uses community were two very different things. It took me 17 years as a

5 <https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-34.html> Secret Instructions to Lieutenant Cook 30 July 1768 (UK)

Christian to realise that difference in the use of this single word, community, showed that post-colonial is only an academic aspiration and not a reality in present day Australia. It took me 17 years as a Christian to see why I was frustrated with the Australian church, how that was rooted in our history as a nation, and how the church and Christians have a key role to play in how we can find a way out of this impasse.

When you google “community church”, 21 images come up. What does “community church” mean from these images?

Well there are 16 buildings, the inside of two empty churches, and only 3 images have people in them.

Common generic phrases I hear in Australian churches or see as part of logos or church visions are:

- “Church in community”,
- “Outreach to the community”,
- “Serving the community”.

Specifically we can see “community church” tied to:

- “Loving Jesus, His Word & His Mission”,
- “A place of care and concern”, “Worship, grow, reach”,
- “Love, Teach, Reach”,
- “Where love flows into life”,
- “Love God, Love People, Live by Power”,
- “Real life, real church, real community...”.

We think about these phrases as we google images of “community church”.

Why didn’t I wake up sooner? I should have realised the community the Australia church speaks of isn’t the community I speak of. There are key phrases missing. Where is

kin, brother, sister, sharing, resilience?

Where are the images that say, as we do as Aboriginal peoples, “Come in, sit down, take a load off, have a cup of tea and a yarn, Do you want a bikkie too?”

So what is Aboriginal community?

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Many of you may have gone immediately to an image of a remote Aboriginal community, perhaps, Kiwirrkurra, about 700km south of Kununurra. Our remote Aboriginal communities have unique cultures and challenges and deserve much of our love.

However, I was born, raised, and live in an urban Aboriginal community context, identifying with the second largest Aboriginal community in Australia, that of Brisbane or Meanjin, with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of 54,000⁶ peoples in the Greater Brisbane area.

For me, Aboriginal community is a place to find comfort, to celebrate, and to commiserate – whether that be in mourning or in injustice.

Let us first look at celebration. Our major celebration is NAIDOC week from the first to the second Sunday in July, every year. In every capital city and many regional locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples gather to celebrate our cultures. In Brisbane we have nearly 100,000 people attend the NAIDOC celebrations in Musgrave Park. We invite non-Aboriginal friends to join with us. Still we have no public holiday to share this significant time and celebration as a nation. And still many in the Australian community

6 http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/3GBRI?opendocument

do not know about NAIDOC week. Many Christian schools celebrate NAIDOC week but our churches larger remain unengaged.

However, even this celebration is forged out of commiseration as it has its foundations from William Cooper and the 1938 Day of Mourning protesting the lack of equality and citizenship rights as a boycott of January 26th commemorations. It was William Cooper who designated the Sunday before January 26th as a day of mourning which was then later moved to the first Sunday in July and has now become part of what we know as NAIDOC week.

Secondly we look at commiseration. Our major time of coming together as Aboriginal community is January 26th. This is a time where we mourn together as a Day of Mourning, where we console each other through a Day of Invasion, and where we commemorate together as a Day of Survival. Although the media often portrays a small gathering of angry Aboriginal people, the truth of the community that gathers is so far from that portrayal. One of the largest gatherings is in Melbourne, Naarm, where over 60,000 people gather on this date. This is very interesting as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of greater Melbourne is only 24,000⁷ which shows that our community is attracting many non-Aboriginal peoples as well.

Another key time we come together as the Aboriginal community is for funerals. You will notice that I used the plural funerals, not funeral. The reality of the lack of closing the gap hits us hard, both in the life expectancy gap, numerous health issues, as well as our high rates of suicide.

In Brisbane, on average, there are three Aboriginal funerals held each week. Most of our funerals have upwards of one thousand people in attendance. We are in a constant state of grief from loss of family members.

We come together to comfort one another, based on cultural practices and community that is over 60,000 years old, and on a collectiveness – there aren't individual invitations to NAIDOC, January 26th or funerals – you often attend as a group.

Community. A word that can bring comfort, celebration, commiseration.

THE CONTRAST OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

I've thought about how non-Aboriginal community is shaped and formed, remembering that non-Aboriginal community is also part of who I am.

For me, non-Aboriginal community comes together mainly in times of celebration – birthdays, anniversaries, weddings. This is often individually – there is an individual invite and you decided individually about attending.

The contrast is stark. The difference in how we view community and mobilise as community has an impact on mission and church.

7 http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/2GMEL

THE IMPACT OF THEOLOGY ON MISSION AND CHURCH

There is much for Western theology to learn from Indigenous theology. There is much for Westerners to learn how as Indigenous peoples we see the world and simply do life. For me, it is the understanding of community from which all else flows. Aldred points out the Western paradigm of Western theology of truth-telling which ultimately results in uniformity being most prized rather than unity in the midst of diversity. Aldred continues to point out the ultimate devastation in the result that community is lost and an extreme individualized religion fills the land. Isolation is confused for diversity and coexistence is equated with community.⁸

For me, Australia is a community of coexistence that is equated with community. I also think the Australian church is a community of coexistence that is equated with community.

And there is my light bulb moment. Community for us, as Aboriginal peoples, is unity in diversity. The word “Aboriginal” is not our word. It is a word that represents over 300 nations of peoples in this land we now call Australia. It is a word we have had to embrace to survive. But how many of those nations can the non-Indigenous Australian Christian name? Can you name five Aboriginal nations? Can you name the land of the Aboriginal nation which you are sitting on today?

For me, this is what I call “Reclaiming community: Mission, Church and Aboriginal Wisdom”.

THE PERSONAL CHALLENGE OF ONE ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN LEADER

I once ran a thriving and growing Aboriginal church west of Brisbane. It was defunded, closed down, and the property eventually sold. This was not what the community wanted. I kept being told the denomination did not have any funds, but yet I saw other congregations and programs being funded. The answer to my unanswered questions were not that the denomination could no longer fund the ministry but that they chose to redistribute resources elsewhere.

In a meeting with the Head of Church of this denomination, shortly after they closed their only Aboriginal church in the country, I said, “I realise the problem. You don’t think you have anything to learn from us as Aboriginal ministry workers. When you finally change your mindset, and realise the wisdom to be gained from Aboriginal peoples, especially how we do ministry with such little resources, it is then that your denomination will grow, but until that time, your resources and church attendance will continue to diminish. We can help you. But you have to want that help.” Still to this day, I think they had no idea what I was talking about and they have never engaged in a conversation with me about how I could help them grow church attendance and strengthen the churches presence and relationship with their local community.

I also think of the non-Aboriginal church community. I have many non-Aboriginal friends who feel immensely lonely in their church. The Aboriginal perspective because everything is done in community, collectively, together, should mean no one ever feels

8 Ray Aldred, *The Resurrection of Story*

lonely. The Australian church must reckon with itself in the isolation its members feel. An example of this is an 80 year old non-Aboriginal woman who had attended the same church her whole life. She broke her arm and couldn't drive. There was no one in her large church who would come and take her to hospital to have the cast removed. *Is this community?*

Perhaps this is where the non-Aboriginal church can learn from Aboriginal community in how we care for and respect our Elders.

Let us turn now to mission.

MISSION – ARGH!

When Australian Christians talk about mission to Aboriginal peoples – one of two extremes come to mind – horror or hope. The history of Christian mission in Australia cannot be separated from colonization and the reality that the missions established for Aboriginal peoples were either places of horror or hope.

I remember when I first started going to church in 1998, before I became a Christian at the age of 21 in 2001, the church was constantly using the word 'mission'. Mission meant only one thing to me, and it was something to be feared. The only mission I knew of was Cherbourg mission which only serves a purpose to send shivers down your spine, creating that sense of someone walking over your grave.

Cherbourg mission was nothing short of one of the most horrific social experiments in modern Australia. Where Aboriginal peoples from many nations and many thousands of

kilometres in distance were rounded up from across Queensland and placed in an area of originally 1,280 acres and then later 7,000⁹ acres. Peoples forcibly removed¹⁰ from their homes, for no reason, thrown together, who did not know each other, who could not speak each others language, some who were grandmothers walked in chains from Woodford to Cherbourg¹¹, a distance of approximately 200 kilometres without any water, where you could be beaten for speaking an Aboriginal language, where children were separated from mothers and fathers – forced to not look at each other, let alone hug one another, in the dining halls for fear of being beaten, 10 year olds sent out as domestic servants or stock hands and never paid a wage, where permission to leave the mission could only be granted by a white man and where permission was often not granted. Cherbourg was originally established by the Salvation Army in 1900 but control was taken over by the Queensland government in 1905. The mission was controlled by the Queensland government until 1986.

Just as I said do you know the names of Aboriginal nations, do you know the names of Aboriginal missions, and their stories of horror and hope?

A meme has been doing the rounds on facebook for sometime with the picture of an Aboriginal Elder and these words, "When the Missionaries came to our country they had the Bible and we had our land. Then they said, "Let us Pray". We closed our eyes and when we opened them we had their Bible and they had our land."

This quote is attributed to Desmond Tutu but it's relevance to Australia is a reality. Many

9 <https://www.qld.gov.au/atsi/cultural-awareness-heritage-arts/community-histories-cherbourg>

10 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld)

11 <https://southburnett.com.au/news2/2013/09/27/walking-in-the-footsteps-of-history/>

ask, “but there must have been some good stories of mission for Aboriginal peoples”. Maybe there are but there are many more stories of horror. The stories of hope often came from Aboriginal peoples finding refuge and places of safety from the murderous and stealing intentions of the first settlers/invaders – an act of survival.

Did you know in Hermannsburg mission, a Lutheran mission in the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal peoples developed scurvy because of a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables? The missionaries however, did not develop scurvy. Scurvy was something I learnt about in primary school because it affected the sailors and first fleet and was a disease synonymous with being on the seas, not in the desert. During this time in the Hermannsburg mission, during the late 1920s, it is estimated 85% of the children died.¹²

Do you know the story of Old Mapoon in Western Cape York. A Presbyterian mission established in 1891, that was very successful. The community was on their homelands, there was a church, a school, a shop that created an economy in the Western sense, and good support from the missionaries. This was to be brutally disrupted when in 1963, Government ordered Queensland police to storm the mission. They burnt all the buildings, including the church, to the ground while the people watched, and forcibly removed the Aboriginal peoples, splitting them up and placing them in several different communities all across Queensland, some over 2,000 kilometres away. It should also be noted that the missionaries left the mission two months before this horror played out.

We still deal with the Great Australian Silence. The exact clause, in section 9 of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld), as well as other state legislations said this,

“cause every Aboriginal within any District...to be removed to, and kept within the limits of, any reserve situated within such District, in such a manner, and subject to such conditions, as may be prescribed. The Minister may, subject to the said conditions, cause any Aboriginal to be removed from one reserve to another...”

The church actively participated in this, or maintained its silence right into the 1970s and even 1980s. We must reckon with ourselves. Today, our remote Aboriginal communities live in constant fear of being removed from their homelands. Where is the Australian church in raising your voices with ours to stop this destruction of which we still have not learnt from.

Mission. A word that can send shivers down your spine.

THE REALITY OF MISSION TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLES TODAY

But what of mission to Aboriginal peoples today. Well, we often say we are the most over evangelised group of people in Australia today.

The 2006 Census showed that 73% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identify as Christian. This is higher than the non-Aboriginal population. The 2016 Census showed a decrease but still showed

12 <https://www.southaustralianhistory.com.au/hermannsburg.htm>

a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identify as Christian. But often the first reaction of the Australian church is to pray for the saving of our souls – “We pray they learn to love God” I have heard in far too many a prayer – mission to Aboriginal peoples. However, the Aboriginal wisdom turns this on its head, as we are the ones who can provide mission to the non-Aboriginal Christians.

Eddie Arthur said, “The Western mission movement has been deeply influenced by the highly individual nature of the society that gave it birth. Because of this, we have tended to operate in a context which sees the salvation of individual souls as the highest priority of mission and the success of mission measured by the number of people *making decisions*.”¹³

As Aboriginal peoples we find our identity within community. This is why I believe the Australian church should change the sense of mission to one that reclaims community. The Australian church will have to embrace Aboriginal Christian leadership for this to occur.

As Auntie Denise Champion, in her book “Yarta Wandatha”, displays her Aboriginal wisdom and says, “we’ve lived our lives through many decades – two centuries now – of colonial rule where it’s always been the case where the white way was the right and good way, and our way, the Aboriginal way, was not. There was no intelligence. There was even the thought that we were beyond salvation because we didn’t even have the capacity to think. But once you hear the stories you realise very quickly that our society was a very ordered society and it was very respectful of the Creator and all

created things and beings.

We have been in this country for thousands of years. The missionary movement has been here for two hundred years.”¹⁴

Aboriginal peoples have much to teach the Australian church about community, mission, and God in this land now called Australia. The question is will the Australian church make room for this teaching?

So what of church?

CHURCH – GRRRR

When an Aboriginal person is in crisis, often the first point of call is the church. But the reality of our encounters with the Australian church highlight racism, a lack of sharing of resources, a segregation and separation.

There are countless examples of where the Aboriginal community has asked a church for us to hold funerals in their church building. The next stories are not generalisations but are real life examples of a number of churches. We can be told, “no, because the last time an Aboriginal funeral was held in that church the Aboriginal people used all the tea and sugar.” Or “no, we can’t have Aboriginal people drinking onsite and all Aboriginal people drink.” Or “yes, but we will need to charge you.” In our times of grief, we can face so much hurt from the Australian church.¹⁵

We then think of the state of Aboriginal churches in Australia. I want a researcher to help me document every Aboriginal church in Australia and photograph the state of the facilities. Aboriginal church buildings are often ones that are leftover and in disrepair.

13 <http://www.wycliffe.net/missiology?id=3962> Accessed 28 December 2017, Missio Dei and Bible Translation by Eddie Arthur
14 Champion, Yarta Wandatha, 30.

This ends up costing the Aboriginal ministry more money in the upkeep of the property and is a greater financial burden in the long run. Three Aboriginal churches I know of, in capital cities, I am sure that non-Aboriginal peoples would not even use the toilets in the buildings because they seem like third world conditions. At least these churches are still operating and standing.

We think of the Aboriginal churches that are closed down. I have three examples of Aboriginal churches of various denominations being closed down even though they have been growing church communities. The church in Old Mapoon that was burnt down in 1963 has still not been rebuilt – there are Elders whose dream it has been to see the church rebuilt in their lifetime, who have passed before seeing the dream become reality.

We then think of the non-Aboriginal churches that aren't welcoming to us. I appeal to non-Aboriginal churches, display our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags – these are a sign of welcome; commission an Aboriginal Christian artist to paint a painting or cross to hang in your church as a sign that you are committed to recognising us; display Aboriginal Psalm 23 by Uncle Rev Ron Williams. Invite us, or simply accept our invitation to speak in your churches. And above all, call out racism as a sin, hold your congregation accountable.

Church. A word that can illicit frustration.

ABORIGINAL WISDOM – AHHA!!!

Dhanggal, a teacher and interpreter of the Yolngu peoples when asked about how the Christian God fits into the story of her peoples said, “God was there in the beginning and we always believed in the spirit. God the creator was always there and he is there in the songlines and in the stories of the land. And he has been reintroduced to us again through the missions. It's not complicated for us.”¹⁶

There is so much Aboriginal wisdom to share. It starts with relationship. Same as community – it starts with relationship. It also takes time.

Aboriginal Wisdom. A beacon of hope shining a light on a path forward for the Australian church today.

STRONG COMMUNITIES – ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES LEADING AUSTRALIA

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian artworks are a great way to display this wisdom. My dear friend Safina Stewart, a Wuthathi and Maubiag Island women gave me permission to share her painting, “Stronger Communities”¹⁷, as part of this lecture. Safina's words that go with this painting are this:

“This painting is a stunning reminder that strong communities are built upon the foundations of strong families and that families are strengthened when supported by community. The figures of the elders,

15 These quotes are based on real life examples of responses from churches and Christians and are not isolated comments.

16 The old man and the sea (and Gotye): the story of 'Australia's only guru' Paul Daley in Wallaby Beach, Arnhem Land Mon 8 Sep '14 12.42 AEST Last modified on Wed 15 Feb '17 06.07 AEDT

17 <http://artbysafina.com.au/portfolio/land/strong-communities-2/>

fathers, mothers and children are subtly revealed in the silhouettes of the trees. Hidden within the mountainside are family campfires representing our Indigenous community.”

But there is much more to share of this painting and why I picked it and its relevance to reclaiming community: mission, church and Aboriginal wisdom.

Whilst this is a painting of encouragement for Aboriginal community it is also a painting of encouragement for the Christian church in Australia. As the Christian church in Australia we need to become community if we are to grow and if we are to be more like Jesus.

The added elements to Safina’s “Stronger Communities” painting point out that as Aboriginal peoples we are peoples of the land and sky. The white dots that border the top and bottom of the painting represent the DNA of Aboriginal peoples, the bloodlines, the thousands of generations. These strands are community of past, present, and future. We are First Nations peoples. Each beaded line is one person’s spirit, dancing with another through life and in community. The strands are not pulled in tight because they do not suffocate one another – we are free to be ourselves displaying our diversity.

This is healthy relationship bringing healthy community – community that brings about empowerment of the other without the need to suffocate the other to bring power to oneself. Many things that represent us, as Aboriginal peoples, are unseen to the non-Aboriginal person.

The campfires are in the bedrock. The campfires are how we gather as community.

The background has the colours of sunrise and sunset – both at the same time. I have said before that as the sun sets each day I often think of the chaos, mess, and ruins our nation is in and it is at sunrise that I feel hopeful. Stronger communities turns this on its head and we pray together as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal allies in community that Aboriginal peoples “will have peace at sunrise, and joy at sunset”.¹⁸

But the non-Aboriginal person and community is in the painting too – you can watch and support the trees, being Aboriginal Christian leadership, grow. Our non-Aboriginal allies are the ones who watch us grow and in watching us, become stronger themselves as they form community with us. Our roots go deep into the bedrock and grow deeper as our allies keep their word, listen to us deeply, advocate for us strongly, and join voices with ours to defend us.

I invite non-Aboriginal peoples to become allies and through our roots that go deep into the bedrock, so to is the invitation to grow with us.

Jean Vanier said, “It is only as we put our roots down into the earth that we begin to see the fruits. To be earthed is to come alive in a new sense of mission. A new capacity to give life is born, not by myself but in the body of community.”¹⁹

It is time for Australia to come alive in a new sense of mission – one lead by the community of Aboriginal Christian leaders.

Community that embodies learning and growing together. Community that sings a

18 Penny Kleemann, “When we love our Aboriginal neighbour as ourself”, a prayer written for January 26th 2018 prayer services.

19 Vanier, Jean. Community and Growth. Bandra: ST PAULS, 1991.

new song, dances a new dance, beats to a new drum. Together, Aboriginal Christians leading the way with non-Aboriginal allies following, we reclaim community.

This image show us what mission and church will look like when we embrace Aboriginal wisdom.

RECLAIMING COMMUNITY – THE HOPE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CHURCH

I believe the hope for the church in Australia is to reclaim community. Community for me can only happen collectively. Aldred presents that the gospel was intended for the community. Aboriginal wisdom can teach Australia about community, mission, and church. In Aldred's paper he refers to Leslie Newbigin who said, "The West will not move from evaluating the gospel with a scientific empiricism to having its scientific empiricism evaluated by the gospel until it hears the gospel told back to it from other cultures."²⁰ Here in Australia that is from Aboriginal cultures.

The Aboriginal wisdom that must be applied to community, mission, and church is not one founded in the individual – community is us and we, not you and I. The church is crying out for community, Australia is crying out for community. Let our churches be the campfires that provide life, sustenance, and heart. Let us study the gospels together in community using Jesus as our example. Jesus did his ministry in community with the twelve disciples, Jesus spoke to the community, the community interacted with Jesus. Let us move away from the Great

Commission as a call to us individually which sounds like colonisation. Let us move towards the commission to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself." However, let us move away from the view of loving just one neighbour for we live in community – literally you will usually always have two neighbours, even your neighbours next to your church buildings, but our neighbour is not just the refugee or asylum seeker, or the person with a disability, or the person suffering from domestic violence, or the prisoner, or the person in hospital, or the Aboriginal person, but all of these combined. Jesus calls us to love all peoples.

All peoples are found in every community. Community has the ability to love all our neighbours which is the example Jesus set for us. Aboriginal community is a great example of this as it extends right across this land now called Australia, especially the Aboriginal Christian community.

Let us move away from the individual, embracing the ancient Aboriginal wisdom of the Creator, the Holy Spirit and Jesus in this land, who have been here collectively and as one since time immemorial.

Australia needs community, I believe if the Australian church embraces and empowers Aboriginal Christian leaders as teachers and leaders, we will see community thrive, our churches grow, and revival in this land we call Australia. The time is now.

20 Ray Aldred, *The Resurrection of Story*, Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks; The Gospel and Western Culture*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 22.

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