

Christian communities in contemporary contexts -- reconciliation and healing

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What I have to say today has as much to do with power as it does with context. My status as empowered or disempowered depends so much on the context and relationships in which I find myself. As a younger, Asian, migrant, lay woman, I might occupy a disadvantaged position, but as an educated, middle-class, English-speaking Australian, I occupy a privileged position.

In October 2009, a 'Towards Edinburgh 2010' gathering was held in Melbourne. We considered two of the themes for this conference: Christian mission among other faiths, and Christian communities in contemporary contexts. Both of these themes touch on some of the major challenges facing Australian churches and Australian society as a whole. Among the speakers was Graeme Mundine, who shared with us the same call that we heard yesterday, for all Australians — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — to be freed from what binds us.

Reflecting on the concerns that have come from the Australian study process, and from my own theological studies, I want to ask: How does the church work towards the mission of God in contemporary Australia, in helping shape a culture of healing and reconciliation?

Christians have a message of reconciliation and redemption. This has been the gift of the church to the world in many places and times, and we must continue to make room for voices of reconciliation. In the Christian tradition, reconciliation involves a number of steps: those who are to be reconciled meet together; sin or guilt is acknowledged; Christ's message of forgiveness is heard; the penitent makes amendment or restitution.

The area of greatest shame in Australia today is the continuing injustice against Indigenous Australians, the fruit of the original dispossession in 1788. Throughout Australia, Indigenous people have the highest indicators of social and political disadvantage, and poorest health and life expectancy. The gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is about ten years. I want to look at how the Christian model of reconciliation has been or could be a model for our society, from the perspective of a migrant in a land of many migrants.

1. *We meet together.* This sounds obvious but does not happen often. Injustice prevails in part because it is hidden. In many parts of Australia, especially in some of the larger cities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may live in different worlds and never meet. This is reflected in the churches; for example, a recent study in the Anglican diocese of Melbourne found that only twelve out of 128 parishes reported having Indigenous members.

2. *We acknowledge our guilt.* Two years ago, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised for the practice of stealing children from their families, a practice that has parallels in the Canadian story that we saw yesterday. The public response to this apology showed that many Australians understood the power of a single word, 'Sorry', and of acknowledging the sins of the past. Some of the churches have also issued apologies for their complicity in taking children into their institutions and missions. But these were apologies for only one out of many atrocities that were committed against Indigenous people. Non-Indigenous Australians live on stolen land. We may not personally be guilty, but we benefit from the continuing dispossession of its original inhabitants.

3. *We are forgiven.* As voices for justice and reconciliation entered the mainstream, other voices tried to drown them out. Some historians and commentators have tried to preserve a colonialist, paternalistic view of Indigenous people. They resist what they call 'black armband' history, that (according to them) dwells on our collective guilt. In the rite of reconciliation, after the confession of sins, the penitent is told, 'Your sins are forgiven'. Without the promise of these words, we who are guilty may shrink from confession, and refuse to enter the process of reconciliation, or jump too quickly to restitution without really understanding our sin. The promise of forgiveness both requires confession and makes it bearable.

4. *We make restitution.* This step has barely begun. Material compensation has not been offered to the stolen generations. Compensation for the theft of land is still resisted. In the Northern Territory, the new government continues the previous one's policy of racist and paternalistic denial of human rights of Indigenous people.

In Australia today, churches are among the voices for reconciliation and restitution. Indigenous and non-Indigenous are not reconciled, but Christians have a language and a model that can perhaps change the way Australians think about — and work towards — overcoming this great injustice.