

Think Piece:

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

Recognition

May 2011

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Standing at the International Arrival gates at the Airport recently I was waiting for my loved one to come home. Each time any of the doors opened I strained my neck to look through the doors, waiting for that first glimpse, that first moment when once again I could 'see' him for myself and know that he was home and safe. As he finally came through the door he was looking for me too, knowing that I would be waiting eagerly to welcome him home.

How wonderful it is to be seen by someone who looks at us with eyes of love. What a joy to be recognised when you have come from being among strangers.

The theme for National Reconciliation Week this year is 'Let's talk recognition'. It acknowledges the deep need we all have to be both recognised and embraced. Recognised for who we are and what we contribute and what we represent; accepted and valued as unique individuals who have an important part to play in the wider community. This recognition must exist for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

There can be no reconciliation until there is a genuine acknowledgement that Aboriginal people have the right to be both recognised and embraced.

Since it is our belief that all people are made in the image of God, Christians must therefore be called upon to stand against any destructive or dehumanizing barriers built up by one person or group against another. We must work towards recognising each individual as valuable and with their own contribution to make. To do this we need to learn to celebrate both our similarities and our differences. It is not sufficient to acknowledge our 'sameness' although that must be done, we must also acknowledge and recognise that which makes us different. It is not sufficient to give token acknowledgment to unique cultural contributions if this is where we intend to leave it.

"Reconciliation means embracing Aboriginal peoples as an integral feature of our Australian inscape. Embracing demands more than tolerating, accepting or acknowledging Aboriginal presence. Embracing requires more than ruling, as the High Court did in 1992, that this land was not terra nullius, but inhabited with Aboriginal peoples. Embracing extends beyond celebrating Aboriginal Arts, music and mystery as exotic additions to our cultural displays. Embracing as an act of reconciliation means embracing the other party as 'other'; it means respecting and celebrating the difference."

Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation and restoration. We are to be the proclaimers of God's love for every human being, not in spite of our differences but in acknowledgment that in our differences we more fully represent and reflect our creator. Our goal then must surely be to arrive at a place where Indigenous Australians, their culture, customs and spirituality, are valued, not in a 'we must tolerate them' sense but as an integral and essential element within the spirituality and soul of

Australia. It is only as this occurs that we can honestly claim to be recognising and embracing Indigenous Australians.

As sons and daughters of God we celebrate that God knows us by name, welcomes us as part of the family, and recognises the unique gifts and contributions that are ours, and longs for us when we are far away. How wonderful it is to know that we are embraced and accepted, how we long for this as human persons. In my experience this is the shared longing of Indigenous Australians. They are simply asking that they too can receive recognition. They are asking us to acknowledge that this is their home, that their contributions are valuable, and I would argue essential. It is nigh time that we started to view our Indigenous brothers and sisters through eyes of love, to stop viewing them as strangers but to recognise them for who they are and what they have to contribute.

"May 27 marks the anniversary of Australia's most successful referendum and a defining moment in our nation's history. The 1967 Referendum saw over 90 per cent of Australians vote to give the Commonwealth the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and recognise them in the national census."

On 3 June, 1992, the High Court of Australia delivered its landmark Mabo decision which legally recognised that Indigenous people had a special relationship to the land – that existed before colonisation and still exists today. This recognition paved the way for Indigenous land rights called Native Title."

We celebrate these significant moments in our nation's history but I would suggest that perhaps it is time for us to take it the next step, to go beyond

verbal assent and legal recognition to genuine recognition, person to person. As in all relationships the only way to truly recognise someone is to take the time out to get to know them. We must take the initiative to learn from Indigenous people about their history, their values, their culture, their fears, their hopes and their dreams. Just as we each value being recognised we must endeavour to recognise these people whose land we share. We will only do this when we genuinely take time to overcome our fear of the other and come to know and love Indigenous people with all their similarities and differences.

My experience tells me that Indigenous Australians are patient and gentle teachers. When I have had the courage to risk relationship they have always responded with good humour and graciousness, far greater than I deserve.

What a joy it is when individuals through relationship are no longer strangers but people who we look for, recognise, honour and love. God forbid that we should continue to perpetuate a situation where Indigenous Australians do not feel welcome, recognised and embraced in their own home. As Christians if we remain passive bystanders and refuse to become constructive agents of reconciliation then we are guilty of withholding love to a neighbour, the love of God is not manifested in our lives and we give life to a defective gospel.

1. Habel N. 1999, Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul. Harper Collins: Sydney p155
 2. Reconciliation Australia website. www.reconciliation.org.au/home/get-involved/national-reconciliation-week
 3. Reconciliation as the mission of God. Christian Witness in a World of Destructive Conflicts. A 2005 Paper from 47 Christian Leaders Across the World. www.reconciliationnetwork.com. P8
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