Indigenous Reconciliation: What Can the Church Offer and Receive?

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The gospel of reconciliation impels the church to engage actively in overcoming social conflict and injustice. I wish to argue that where indigenous minorities are marginalised by immigrant majorities the church can in many ways contribute to and be enriched by national indigenous reconciliation.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is all about the setting right of relationships at all levels; in this sense reconciliation is the mission of God (Schreiter 1997; Reconciliation Network 2005; Langmead 2008). The mission of the church is to cooperate with the mission of God for peace, justice and reconciliation. It is to "embody God's reconciling love and make it present in the world" (Lederach 1999: 160). It takes many forms in both word and deed: proclamation, prophetic engagement, embodiment, "living into" the new community, care for creation and so on. One of the tasks of mission is to discern the major areas where the Good News addresses society and promises liberating change.

One of those major areas is the conflict produced by different ethnic identities.

The Gospel and Ethnic Minorities

The Good News of reconciliation between ethnic groups within the church is the possibility of diversity in unity. While people of all nations, races, tongues and cultures are welcomed in their diversity, they have a fundamental unity through being baptised in Jesus Christ and becoming "a new creation" (2 Cor 5:18). Claims of group superiority or inferiority are wiped away as, in Christ, all are of equal standing before God, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal 3:28). Paul's contribution to understanding the message of Jesus on this point is profound. As John Barclay argues, Paul, like Jesus, does not in his theology erase cultural and ethnic differences, nor does he accept cultural barriers; instead he relativises them (Barclay 1996: 211). The extent to which the church is yet to realise this reconciliation is the extent to which we still need to be "evangelised", that is, changed by the Good News.

The Good News of reconciliation between ethnic groups is, however, not restricted to the church. The Christian mission for reconciliation also includes throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into working for a society which approximates the values of the kingly reign of God (or the "commonwealth of God"). While we may believe that true liberation occurs only as we open ourselves to Jesus Christ, we do not hesitate to join those who advocate human rights, social justice, social reconciliation, hearing the voice of all and showing special concern for the poor and marginalised. In an era when identity politics sometimes leads to fundamental and seemingly irreconcilable differences between ethnic groups, the "relativization of political, national, cultural, ethnic and racial absolutes is one of the most important implications of the message of reconciliation" (Schwöbel 2003: 37).

All of this applies directly to the conflict between oppressed ethnic minorities and the majorities they have to live with. Inspired by Jesus' acceptance of those in Jewish society whose voice was not heard and who were treated unjustly, Christians can join others of goodwill in defending ethnic minorities against mistreatment and working politically to ensure that they are not denied land, cultural freedom, health, education, employment, housing and fair treatment before the law.

The focus of this paper is the treatment of indigenous minorities who have been swept aside by immigrant majorities. (While it is hard to say precisely which are indigenous peoples, the commonly accepted list is long and the total number globally is estimated at 250 to 350 million (World Bank 2007; International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) ; Wikipedia contributors)). The Native American tribes (or First Nations) are examples, as are the Aborigines of Canada (McKay & Silman 1997), the Maori of New Zealand (O'Sullivan 2005), the Australian Aborigines and the indigenous Taiwanese. Fiji also experiences conflict between indigenous Fijians and immigrant Indians (Premdas 1997).The indigenous hill tribes of India and the Central American indigenous peoples were displaced earlier in history, making their claims for land ownership fade with time but not dulling their sense of indigenous identity nor their claims that they have been treated unjustly. The process continues, with the transmigration of Javanese Indonesians to the contested province of West Papua threatening to leave the West Papuans an indigenous minority.

It is disturbing to note the similarity of their experiences, especially those subjected to Western colonialisation (Markus 1994: 18-20). Their close relationship to the land was misunderstood, denied and broken. They were subjected to gradual land dispossession, often through trickery, broken treaties or violent dispossession. They have suffered decimation, loss of culture, loss of language, deteriorating health, continuing violence (Niemira 2007) and a general despair as they have struggled to find a new identity on the edge of an overwhelming immigrant culture. Many have succumbed to boredom, unemployment, alcoholism, violence and abuse as symptoms of their cultural malaise. While some have experienced a cultural renewal and have recovered their pride against the odds, many have been reduced to playing to the tourist trade as cultural oddities or (in the United States) as casino owners. In many cases, indigenous people are both the most socially disadvantaged and the most marginalised people in their own country. On this basis alone they should claim the urgent attention of the church in its mission of reconciliation. (Strictly speaking, the need is for national conciliation, not reconciliation, as friendship is to be established, not restored (Pike 1999: 28), but "reconciliation" is widely used to cover both meanings.)

The response of the church to this situation is made more complicated by the fact that in many cases the church has "missionised" these people as part of their being colonised by the West. While sometimes the church defended indigenous people against westernisation and commercial exploitation, it has also often been complicit in denigrating indigenous culture and religion and helping to "civilise" indigenous people in western ways. The gospel of reconciliation today often needs to include repentance and reparation on the part of the church before the liberating power of the gospel can be felt.

It is clear, then, that if the gospel of reconciliation includes Good News about justice, reconciled relationships and the dignity and worth of all humans, the church is called to engage in the process of indigenous reconciliation. I will argue that the church not only has something to offer in this process but has some valuable things to receive in the process as well. The church is important to the process of indigenous reconciliation, yes, but the process of indigenous reconciliation is also important to the church.

What I have summarised already will be illustrated using the example of the Australian indigenous reconciliation process and the church's role in it. While its details are specific to the Australian context, many of the principles which emerge will have relevance to other contexts. Note that I speak as an Anglo-Australian, so although I can express solidarity with indigenous people I do not presume to speak for them.

The Australian Indigenous People: A Case Study in Injustice and Broken Relationships

The Australian indigenous people have been oppressed, marginalised and in conflict with the dominant society in Australia since European invasion and settlement in 1788, when a British penal colony was established in New South Wales. For the whole period, almost without exception, British and then Australian governments have failed to see the critical importance of a process of reconciliation between conqueror and conquered, and to this day there has been no treaty or compact.

Thought to have numbered about 300,000 in 1788, the indigenous population sank to about 60,000 in the 1920s and has risen to about 520,000 in the 2006 census (Broome 2002: 15, 178, 283; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). While at first indigenous people outnumbered Europeans, they were defeated by a number of factors, including the superiority of the gun over the spear, the trickery and violence of settlers, indigenous susceptibility to western diseases and nomadic habits not being a match for the European practice of permanent houses and enclosed grazing and agriculture. So it was not long before the indigenous people, previously spread across the continent in 500 proud language groups, were an ethnic minority in their own land, struggling to survive the threat from outside.

When I was at school in the 1950s and 1960s the history textbooks we used portrayed Australia as a virtually empty land and Aborigines as pitiful and primitive people who hardly put up a fight when the British arrived and who found it hard to adapt to "civilisation" (meaning western ways). In the last fifty years a clearer picture has emerged of the fierce resistance the invaders encountered, the massacres that occurred, the arrogance of European settlers in regarding the natives as not-quite-human (thereby justifying their murder) and the massive drop in numbers that occurred within decades of encountering Europeans. For example, it is estimated that in 1790 there were about 60,000 indigenous people living in Victoria, having been there for about 40,000 years. By 1830, when Europeans settled there, this figure was reduced to between 10,000 and 15,000 due to smallpox epidemics caught from Macassan sailors passing by. Then within twenty years, staggeringly, the population was reduced to less than 2,000, due to violence and disease (Broome 2005: 91).

A brief summary of the main dimensions of the injustices and sufferings of the Australian indigenous people is sufficient here to indicate the scale of their marginalisation. A great deal has been written on this subject, though some of it is still hotly contested at the political level.

Dispossession. The fundamental injustice remains one of invasion without treaty, in which a set of peoples deeply connected to their land as mother, as source of life and as sacred were cut off from their land and thereby robbed of their identity, law, mythology and spirituality. A land rights movement has gained some territory since the 1970s, but not until 1992, in the famous Mabo high court judgement, was the legal fiction of *terra nullius* (asserting that the British settled an empty land) overturned. The subsequent Native Title legislation has been very restrictive and allows activities such as mining to override native title. Many indigenous groups, unsurprisingly, have been unable to show an unbroken connection with the land they are claiming and their claims have failed.

Genocide. In both of its usual meanings — a program to wipe out a people and a program to wipe out a culture — Australia has committed genocide against its indigenous people. The early massacres at the point of a gun or due to poisoned flour are well-documented (Reynolds 1982), though a few historians still challenge the extent of these (Windschuttle 2002). Some killings are within living memory. In order to help a dying race to die, it was government policy in the early 19th century to "interbreed" full-blooded Aborigines in order to genetically assimilate those who still survived. There has been no

official apology for this dark past, and the offence of the genocide is continued by those who continue to claim it is exaggerated by academic historians. Indigenous people were not counted as citizens with voting rights until 1967.

Loss of culture. As a result of being moved from their land and later being placed in settlements run by governments and church agencies, the indigenous people have largely lost their language, culture, customs, mythology and identity. Here the church bears some responsibility for condemning many aspects of culture it would not now see as incompatible with the gospel. Few urban indigenous people have much connection to their people and culture. While there are many government programs targeting Aboriginal disadvantage, control of them was removed from indigenous people in 2004 when the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission — where commissioners elected by indigenous people dispensed funds — was abolished, and Aboriginal programs were absorbed into "mainstream" departments (Office of Indigenous Policy Co-ordination 2006).

Poor health and substance abuse. From the first contact indigenous people suffered from diseases they had not known and a supply of alcohol, which they soon found would numb their pain. Currently they have a life expectancy nearly twenty years shorter than the Australian average and suffer three times the diabetes rate (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation [CAR] 1999: 9). Several of my indigenous friends spend much of their time going to funerals of relatives who are not old by western standards. Alcohol addiction is a widespread problem, and amongst teenagers in outback communities petrol sniffing as well.

Removal of children from parents. The children systematically removed from their parents in the name of child protection or assimilation between the early 1900s and about 1970 have come to be known as the "stolen generations" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [Australia] 1997). Here again the church was complicit, co-operating with government policy by taking many children into Aboriginal orphanages, some of which were harsh and lonely places for the children. Many who suffered the tragedy of removal are alive today and are testifying to their experiences. The feature film *Rabbit Proof Fence* tells one such story. No federal government apology to the stolen generations was given until February 2008.

Deaths in custody. Due to police violence, high incarceration rates and indigenous suicide due to despair, indigenous deaths in custody reached alarming rates in the 1970s and 1980s. Following a royal commission (Cunneen ca. 1998) the death rates have dropped, but the numbers of indigenous people in prison are ten times the national average (CAR 1999: 9) and indigenous suicides (both in and out of custody) are still significantly higher than the average (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ; Elliot-Farrelly 2004)

Secondary violence and sexual abuse. It seems that one consequence of experiencing violence and oppression is secondary violence, where the oppressed take out frustrations and despair on those nearest. Fuelled by alcohol and social dysfunction, indigenous violence, sexual abuse and child abuse has increased.

Marginalisation. Indigenous people are, by almost any social indicator, the most disadvantaged group in Australia. The unemployment rate is estimated at over thirty per cent. Average annual income for indigenous people is two-thirds the national figure. Indigenous rates for home ownership, school completion and tertiary qualifications are all less than half that of other Australians (CAR 1999: 9).

Lack of political will for reconciliation. For a brief period there was political will for indigenous reconciliation. A Council for Reconciliation was funded in 1991 for a decade, to promote national reconciliation by a variety of means, both at the grassroots level and through conferences, publications and declarations. But the federal government of John Howard (1996–2007) withdrew support for "symbolic" reconciliation in favour of "practical" reconciliation, meaning focusing merely on matters such as health, education and housing

instead of treaties, land rights, apologies and acknowledging the past. Prime Minister Howard pointedly refused to say "Sorry" to indigenous people, so the Council's proposed "Declaration Towards Reconciliation" in 2000 fell on dry ground. Relations between indigenous leaders and the government entered a new and more hopeful phase in November 2007 with the election of a Labor government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The offering of an apology to the stolen generations was one of the first actions of the Rudd government, and reconciliation is on the agenda again.

In summary, the recent history of the relationship between the indigenous people and other Australians, particularly their governments, has been more like a running sore than a scar from the past. Until the nation resolves its past and begins to deal respectfully in the present, the social, political and spiritual consequences of living in an unreconciled relationship will plague Australia into the future. The gospel of reconciliation is clearly relevant in this context.

What the Church Can Offer Indigenous Reconciliation

Most of what the church can do overlaps with what Australians of goodwill can do, even if its action is motivated by a biblical and theological vision for reconciliation and it more easily acknowledges the spiritual dimensions of social reconciliation. It has a particular role, however, because about seventy per cent of indigenous people identify as Christian due to missionary activity in the past (Hughes 2004). The church is more entangled than most other groups, for better or worse, and needs to take the moral and political lead as a key player in the national process. Here are some of the major ways in which the gospel of reconciliation can be played out in the process of indigenous reconciliation in Australia. There are, perhaps, some analogies that can be drawn for other countries and contexts.

Repentance and apology. The church has to a large extent been complicit in the sins of the nation, in sharing a sense of European superiority, engaging in mission in a culturally insensitive way, carrying out unjust government policies (in running mission reserves and orphanages) and failing to speak more clearly against the oppression of indigenous people. This is not to overlook the Christians who defended indigenous people in Australia's early history or the positive side of mission reserves and the welfare work of the church (Harris 1990). Churches have recognised that repentance and expressing an apology are the first steps in reconciliation, and nearly every major church group and denomination has made a clear statement of this nature since the 1980s. It is a sign of the graciousness of indigenous people that these have been invariably accepted in ceremonies across the country. The challenge is for churches to realise that this is just the first step. If reconciliation stops here, it is incomplete. For example, promises have been made to make available records of "stolen children" from church-run orphanages, to help inmates to track their families; this has begun, but is going slowly.

Solidarity with indigenous Christians. Beginning "in our own backyard", the church can contribute to indigenous reconciliation by showing solidarity with indigenous Christians. This includes sharing property and funds, ensuring that indigenous voices are heard in church councils, training indigenous leaders, listening to their experiences and responding practically. It also involves public advocacy on indigenous issues. It is encouraging that Christians are well-represented on bodies such as Reconciliation Australia and Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR). But, perhaps with the exception of the Uniting Church in Australia, the resources being put into ongoing, thoughtful and practical solidarity with indigenous Christians are few. Indigenous Christians are struggling in leadership, resources and a sense of partnership.

Expressing respect and honour. The church can contribute to ongoing practices of paying respect to the original inhabitants of Australia and custodians of the land. It is a growing custom, at more formal events, to recognise the tribe on whose land the meeting is being held. Plaques are also appearing on church buildings acknowledging prior indigenous custodianship of the land. Giving honour where it is due is one aspect of symbolic reconciliation. It sends a message counter to dominant social messages, where indigenous people are usually ignored or seen as "losers".

Working to overcome disadvantage. The biblical notion of reconciliation embraces both restored relationships and restored shalom. There is no need to choose between symbolic and practical reconciliation. The church can be involved (and is involved) in working in culturally sensitive ways to overcome social disadvantage, particularly in the areas of health, education, employment, housing, welfare and access to the law. Whether in delivering services (as churches or as individual Christians) or campaigning for better public policies, the church is a key player in tackling what is often a highly complex set of social issues.

Defending indigenous rights. While Australia has had legislation prohibiting racial discrimination since 1975 it does not have a bill of rights, nor does it recognise the right of indigenous people to any degree of self-government. There has often been the need to defend indigenous people against government decisions which strip them of power or resources. There have been political and legal fights to gain native title, oppose mining on sacred sites, spend resources according to indigenous wishes, and (most recently) to be consulted in tackling child abuse in outback communities. The gospel of reconciliation includes defending the weak and giving voice to the voiceless. In a climate where non-indigenous Australians are fickle in their attention to indigenous affairs, the church has a crucial role to be vigilant on behalf of indigenous people, listening to their cries and magnifying them in the political arena.

Keeping reconciliation on the national agenda. The "decade of reconciliation" (1991-2000) ended with a whimper in a politically hostile environment. The "declaration towards reconciliation" was ignored by government because it involved an apology for the past. Aboriginal leaders are suffering from low morale as steps towards reconciliation are few and far between; instead conflicts and indigenous woes dominate the media. In this climate the role of the church as bearer of hope and the possibility of reconciliation is crucial. It needs to be reminding the nation, as theologian Norman Habel did in his book, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul*, that "reconciliation, in the deepest sense of the concept, is not only political and social, but also spiritual and human. Furthermore the soul of Australia is at stake." (Habel 1999: 6)

Setting out what reconciliation involves. Much has been written on the elements of social or national reconciliation (See, for example, Helmick & Petersen 2001; Lederach 1999). Drawing on theological resources, Habel suggests five principles involving truth, justice, identity, forgiveness and suffering. The truth must be told, especially by the oppressed parties, and history understood with new eyes. Some restitution for past wrongs, whether in reparations or the restoring of rights and dignity, is needed, for there is no reconciliation without justice. The cultural identity of both parties needs to be valued equally, without one party being considered "the other", alien or invisible. Some healing of the relationship, through ritual, apology and forgiveness is needed over time for a new spirit of co-existence to grow. Finally, reconciliation involves pain as we open past wounds and hear the stories of deep suffering; the past cannot be dealt with unless it is faced (Habel 1999: 34–43). Several of these principles are commonly ignored in the political arena, and will only be brought into play if people (including Christians) keep reminding their leaders of the deep moral and spiritual malaise that results from glossing over fundamental relationships in

society. Christians, in particular, having experienced grace and forgiveness can offer the fruits of their relationship with God: "Rooted in the experience of God's grace, the church can offer space for truth, for justice, for healing, for new possibilities." (Ross 2004: 105–106)

At the centre of reconciliation is justice-based restoration of relationships. There is a deeply personal dimension to this. Audrey Ngingali Kinnear, an indigenous leader who chaired the National Sorry Day Committee said of the first Sorry Day, "Many of us cried for weeks. To have other Australians saying sorry and giving us the opportunity to talk about our experiences … was the beginning of our healing." (Reynolds 2003: 35)

What Indigenous Reconciliation Offers the Church

I have argued that the gospel call for the church to be an ambassador of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20) applies with urgency in the case of indigenous reconciliation. This is an issue the church cannot avoid and which ought to be an ongoing priority.

But it is not a one-way street, in which the church engages in mission from high moral ground and holding all the wisdom. In fact, given the ambiguous history of Christian mission, particularly in its relation to indigenous people, there is as much to learn as to give in the process of national indigenous reconciliation. As the church engages with repentance and humility, open to genuine partnership with indigenous people, it will find itself and be greatly enriched.

The learnings — or gifts to be received — come from the Australian church gaining its true identity in serving the poor, finding its home in the Australian continent, being enriched by indigenous spirituality and becoming relevant to wider Australian society.

Discovering its identity in serving the poor. It is clear from the biblical prophets and the life and teaching of Jesus that if we wish to worship God we need to pursue justice and defend the poor and the outcast. Isaiah 58, for example, reminds Israel that if she wants to draw near to God, find healing and experience life as an unfailing stream she should not fast but seek justice, set the oppressed free, feed the hungry and clothe the naked. In Matthew 25 Jesus says that in serving the poor we serve Christ himself (Mt 25:31–46). Among other ways, Christ is incarnate among the poor, identifying with them and to be found in them. As C. S. Song puts it, "God as Immanuel is not only God-*with*-suffering-human-persons, but God *is* suffering human persons" (Song 1990: 169). Or as Jürgen Moltmann argues, if Christ is to be found among the poor, the church only becomes the church when it is to be found where Christ is — serving the poor (Moltmann 1977: 132).

So, in offering public friendship with indigenous people — the most disadvantaged group in Australia — and pursuing national reconciliation, the church is not only engaging in the mission to which she has been called as an ambassador for God's justice and reconciliation but will discover Christ and the church's true identity.

Being at home. Immigrant Australians, particularly Australians of British descent, have been likened to exiles because they have been slow to come to terms with the vast and harsh Australian continent "so far from home", where "home" is the United Kingdom. Much has been said about how "at home" we feel in this land, the church included. Brendan Byrne suggests, in line with our argument so far, that non-indigenous Australians will only experience a "home-coming" when we are reconciled with those who lived here before us.

> An ambiguity hovers over our tenure — the moral and spiritual ambiguity of a conquest that is physical but not yet fully human. Our holding has yet to come to terms fully with the manner of its taking: that our possession meant radical and usually bloody dispossession of those here long before us. A subtle alienation will subvert our tenure of this land so long as we do not own this

> truth and seek, in reconciliation, to remedy its lingering effects. (Byrne 1992: 79)

In helping the nation to face its past, apologise, repair the damage where possible, seek justice and overcome the alienation that lies within the soul of the nation, the church will open the door to "coming home". It is humbling to note that indigenous leaders consistently speak of dealing with the issues so that we can live together in peace on this continent. The invaded now accept the invaders; the wronged do not seek revenge against the wrong-doers.

Being enriched by indigenous spirituality. It is often forgotten that contextualisation is a two-way critical interaction of the gospel and culture. If they have eyes to see, those sharing the gospel can be greatly challenged by the insights of those receiving the gospel. The Australian indigenous people were, not long ago, new Christians who largely took on the Christian ways of the missionaries they encountered (Grant 1996). Now the immigrant church is learning much from indigenous spirituality. Without trying to summarise these things here, we can point to several areas as examples: religion as daily spirituality; a deep connection to the land; a particular form of contemplative existence (*dadirri*); a broad sacramentalism; the importance of community; and celebration and sharing (Pattel-Gray 1996; Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997; Stockton 1995).

In listening to the stories and experiences of the oppressed, as a central part of indigenous reconciliation, the church is beginning to hear about indigenous ways of experiencing God, both Christian ways and traditional ways. The process has much to offer a church bound to European ways of following Jesus, experiencing God and relating to each other and the land.

Becoming more relevant to Australians. When engaging missionally in society, some see a tension between seeking relevance and remaining true to Christian revelation. On the contrary, the church can only gain in relevance by being true to its calling to seek justice and reconciliation for indigenous people. In most societies, and certainly in Australia, those outside the church judge it according to whether it is focused on heaven or earth, whether it is wealthy or gives itself to the poor, and whether it practises what it preaches. Even if it loses some friends through fearless advocacy, it gains credibility and a hearing for the Good News that drives Christians to side with the oppressed. The church knows it is part of nation-building in the best sense. It is doing public theology, engaging rather than withdrawing into its own world. Far from being a distraction from evangelism, to serve Christ by serving the poor — in this case indigenous people — is itself evangelistic, by announcing the Good News through "living into it". It is to proclaim God's commonwealth by being ambassadors of reconciliation.

Thus the combination of increased relevance and the opportunity to share the Good News of God is one of the ways in which indigenous reconciliation is not only a central part of the mission of the church but also a gift to the church and its mission.

Conclusion

I have argued that the issue of reconciliation between immigrant majorities and indigenous minorities is a crucial issue for countries where injustice and conflict has occurred. For countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, where missionaries arrived with European domination and where a Judaeo-Christian heritage is to be found, the church has a central role in indigenous reconciliation, though the context and role are unique in each country.

In the Australian case, indigenous people have suffered invasion, great injustice, violence, cultural despair and marginalisation, and are now the most socially disadvantaged group in the country, still subject to arbitrary decisions made by governments on their behalf without consultation.

The gospel of reconciliation, with its promise of just and restored relationships, calls the church to engage with the indigenous reconciliation process as a matter of priority.

The church has much to offer, leading the way in expressing repentance, showing solidarity with indigenous Christians, showing respect and honour, working to overcome social disadvantage, defending indigenous rights, keeping reconciliation on the national agenda and reminding others what reconciliation involves.

It also has much to receive and learn in the process, including gaining its true identity in serving the poor, finding its home in the Australian continent, being enriched by indigenous spirituality and becoming missionally relevant to wider Australian society.

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