

**THE INTERFAITH CENTRE OF MELBOURNE
2019 World Interfaith Harmony Week**

REPORT

Event: *Listening to The Statement from the Heart*

Faith leaders and their Communities stop and listen to the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in hope for ***reconciliation and healing*** our nation's broken heart.

Sunday 17th February 2019, 3.00 pm - 5.00 pm

St Oswald's Anglican Church, 100 High Street, Glen Iris, Melbourne, Australia.

World Interfaith Harmony Week

We came together to celebrate the World Interfaith Harmony Week first proposed at the UN General Assembly in September 2010, by H.M. King Abdullah 11 of Jordan. Just one month later the proposal was unanimously adopted by the United Nations.

The World Interfaith Harmony Week is based on the pioneering work of The Common Word initiative which started in 2007 and called for Muslim and Christian leaders to engage in a dialogue based on two common fundamental religious Commandments; Love of God, and Love of the Neighbour, without compromising any of their own religious beliefs.

The two Commandments are extended by adding Love of the Good, and Love of the Neighbour. This formula includes all people of goodwill. It includes those of other faiths and those with no faith.

For our 2019 event, The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne's focal point centred on 'Love of the Neighbour', on 'Listening to our Neighbours', the First Nations People, the oldest continuous living culture on the planet.

The venue was an Anglican Church where the Priest is an Indigenous man, a Wiradjuri man. The priest, Rev'd Glenn Loughrey is also an artist, whose artwork adorns the walls of the Church, along with the traditional stained glass windows.

Background to the Event

Australia's original Constitution came into force on 1st January 1901.

First Nations People were not consulted. The document excluded them and enabled their exploitation. In 1967 two discriminatory provisions were removed by referendum. The First Nations People were counted in the Census and allowed to vote.

There are still controversial references to race in the Constitution and no overt inclusion of First Nations people and their long history of over 60,000 years and spiritual connection with this country.

During 2016 -2017 there were 12 separate regional consultations of Indigenous people which sent delegates to the First National Constitutional Convention to Uluru (sacred massive sandstone monolith in the heart of Australia) in 2017.

On 26th May, 2017, at Uluru, the voice of over 250 First Nations People gave Australia the gift of the *Statement from the Heart*.

The Statement from The Heart

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is *a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.* It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates.

This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take *a rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish.

They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.*

It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

There is a momentum of support for *The Statement from the Heart* from many non-indigenous Australians. Within our religious and spiritual communities, support is growing; we see this in small projects undertaken to more advanced projects but there is little understanding among many newer immigrant groups and indeed many older Australians.

As people of faith and people of goodwill, we have a responsibility to make the *Statement from the Heart* known to our communities so that all may learn about the true history of this land and understand why, our Neighbours, the First Nations People, wish to have a Voice enshrined in the Constitution for self-determination.

The Event

Aunty Helen Bnads, Birri Gubba Nation and Familial Connection to Cherbourg Aboriginal Mission, gave the Acknowledgement of Country and then read the *Statement from the Heart* to over one hundred people gathered in the Church. We reflected silently on the words.

Anglican priest, Rev'd Glenn Loughrey, Wiradjeri man, spoke about the importance of Winha-nga--rra Listen, Hear and Reflect. He spoke about the spiritual ties of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Peoples to the land.

Six faith leaders spoke about how their communities have listened to the First Nations People and what actions they have taken. The more established communities spoke about the kinds of support they had given, such as establishing dialogue and organising friendship walks and donating scholarships at Universities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait students. They spoke about how the true history of the First Nations People must be heard and support given for a Referendum.

Faith leaders of the newer immigrant groups spoke about how their communities come to Australia and have settlement challenges; their time is taken up in finding accommodation, finding work, looking after their children and going to their sacred places of worship. The leaders spoke about how moved they were to read the *Statement from the Heart* and how they would begin to teach their communities about the First Nations People, the custodians of the land on which we live. They would begin by giving information and "getting the conversation going."

Rev'd Glenn Loughrey said he would love to work with them.

Religious and spiritual leaders who were Speakers:

- Dr Philip Bliss OAM, Jewish Community Council of Victoria
- Bishop Peter Danaher, President, Victorian Council of Churches

- Tris Mardiasuty, Islamic Council of Victoria
- Makarand Bhagwat, Hindu Council of Australia (VIC)
- Dr Diana Cousens, Buddhist Council of Victoria
- Jasbir Singh Suropada, Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria

Dr Calvin Bowman, organist and Megan Kenny, flautist, provided beautiful music during the event.

At the closing of the event, faith leaders and the audience were invited, if they wished, to sign large copies of the *Statement from the Heart* in support of the First Nations People's invitation to walk with them "in a movement of the Australian people for a better future."

Results and Impact

- Participants met over afternoon tea and reported how they were moved by the speakers and the *Statement from the Heart*.
- Many felt that Love of God and Love of the Neighbour, and Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour was in action on that day and that there was hope that all non-indigenous Australians will understand the true history and go to our Prime Minister to move forward with a Referendum.
- A Reconciliation Banner, created by Rev'd Glenn Loughrey, with artwork, will be placed in over 20 mosques and temples in March. The original pull-up banner has a Christian sentence about reconciliation. Rev'd Loughrey has given permission for religious leaders to use his artwork, delete the Christian message and add a message of reconciliation from their faith tradition.
- A Hindu leader is beginning to lead a group on *Listening to the Statement from the Heart*.
- A Sikh leader has offered to bring a large group from his community to learn more about the First Nations People from Rev'd Glenn Loughrey, Wiradjuri man, to meet with his congregation, share food, and Walk in the Reconciliation Garden.

Photographs and short reports of the event were sent out to thousands of people via Newsletters from several religious organisations as well as being placed on social media:

- Islamic Council of Victoria Newsletter: www.icv.org.au Newsletters: *Issue #295 - 28 February 2019 / 22 Jumada Al-Akhirah 1440 A.H.*
- St Oswald's Anglican Church <https://stoswaldsgleniris.net.au/>

Information was placed on The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne's website: www.interfaithcentre.org.au

The event was video taped and edited.

Link to YouTube: <https://youtu.be/VWgKUpQ6CKA>

- Rev Helen Summers OAM
Director, The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne