

# The Diocese of Melbourne and Indigenous Matters

Prepared for the Diocesan Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group

From its earliest days, the Diocese has maintained an interest in the Indigenous people of Australia and accepted that this was an integral part of the life of the diocese. This interest has taken many forms and has waxed and waned in intensity over the years. Sadly the history of this involvement has not received the attention it deserves.<sup>1</sup>

Probably the most important period was the nineteenth century when the Diocese was closely associated with a number of Aboriginal missions. It managed some missions on behalf of the government and some of the staff – particularly clergy - were effectively appointed by the Diocese. The history of these missions is central to the lives of many Victorian Koories, and the Diocese is obligated to reveal as much information as it knows. It seems that few immediate records of these missions are located within the Diocesan Archives, most known records being located at the Public Records Office of Victoria and the State Library of Victoria.

It is important to recognize that any review of this area needs to include work carried on by Anglicans from Melbourne, and not simply activities undertaken by official diocesan organizations. This decision avoids the rather pedantic discussion of which organizations have been ‘officially’ part of the diocese.

## Historical Activities of the Diocese prior to 1914

The earliest church work concerning Aboriginal people in Melbourne is probably that of Mr George Langhorne who, in 1837 at the invitation of the authorities, established a short-lived mission near the present site of Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens. He was known as a Catechist of the Church Missionary Society<sup>2</sup> at a time when the church was seen as a key sub-agent working amongst Aboriginal people on behalf of the government.

In 1848, Bishop Charles Perry took up his appointment in Melbourne. His involvement with Aboriginal people does not appear to have been given the attention it deserves; he worked closely with his Evangelical friends in England who were politically active in support of Indigenous people across the Empire; they were particularly influential within the Colonial Office. In the early 1850s, the Diocese established Melbourne Church of England Mission to the Aborigines of Victoria which had oversight of this work during the second half of the nineteenth century. This led to a particularly active involvement with the First People of the area.

We can learn something of Bishop Perry’s attitudes from this extract of a talk given in 1860 at a meeting in Melbourne which was concerned with the Ebenezer Moravian Mission in the Wimmera. He was reported as saying:

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<sup>1</sup> The most substantial history of the diocese is: James Grant. *Episcopally Led and Synodically Governed: Anglicans in Victoria 1803 – 1997*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the title Church Missionary Society refers to the organization which is known as the Church Missionary Society of Australia. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Diocese of Melbourne maintained a separate organization called the Church Missionary Society. In this essay, unless otherwise noted, the term will refer to the former organization established in 1799 as an arm of the English Evangelical movement.

What they (the meeting) would presently hear he had no doubt would remove from their minds the impression - if it had ever existed – that the aboriginal population of these colonies were mentally incapable of being savingly benefited by the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. He knew that this impression had got abroad, and they had all most likely been more or less influenced by it. It was, however, undoubtedly an error, and an error that was alike dishonouring to the Gospel itself, and to its Divine Author; for that Gospel was designed for all mankind, - it was to be preached to ‘every creature’; and it was therefore doubtless adapted to meet the wants, and to grapple with the depravity of every nation, tribe, and family of the children of men. His Lordship concluded by a most solemn and affectionate appeal to those present, who, in comparison with the poor benighted savage of Australia, might indeed be regarded as the ‘Children of the kingdom’. If then they were unmindful of their mercies, and profited not by their privileges, they would see at the Last Great Day many of these poor benighted and too often despised aborigines, received into the kingdom of God, while they themselves would be for ever –‘shut out’.<sup>3</sup>

After this, there was a reading of *Psalm* 113, which included the words:

Who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwelleth on high.  
Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth!  
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill;  
That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people.  
He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.  
Praise the Lord. [KJV]

Fifty years later, there were still people in Australia who were debating whether Aborigines possessed a soul!

In the early days of the Port Phillip settlement, the Church’s intention was to ‘the appointment of English missionaries to visit periodically the native tribes, and to reside amongst them a sufficient time to learn the language, to acquire a knowledge of their numbers, habits &c.’ Note, there was no mention of establishing mission stations. Presumably it was not long before there was no land left for the Aborigines, who were placed on reserves and the church asked to manage some of those reserves.<sup>4</sup>

The Anglican Church established a number of Aboriginal missions, of which Lake Tyers (est. 1861) and Lake Condah (est. 1857) are the most widely known; the principal missionaries were the Rev John Bulmer and the Rev John Stahle respectively and their wives who gave the best part of their lives to this challenging ministry. Their work involved working in an unfamiliar culture and at times their support of Aboriginal people led them into conflict with well-known Anglicans in Melbourne; a case in point was the legislation to force people of mixed race off missions. In 1898, CMS<sup>5</sup> took over responsibility for these missions from the Diocese. This phase of Anglican work was largely finished by the beginning of the Great War as the government assumed direct responsibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Anon (1860) *Missionary Success Among The Aborigines*. Melbourne: Goodhugh &Co, reprinted from *The Christian Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1860. [On line, SLV]

<sup>4</sup> The Wesleyan Church established a very early mission near Birregurra; its recently-published story gives a good understanding of the issues of the day: [Heather Le Griffon, *Campfires at the Cross*, North Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2006]

<sup>5</sup> At the time it was known as the Church Missionary Association of Victoria and Tasmania.

In addition to this a number of Anglicans were actively involved in managing the government's Aboriginal settlements<sup>6</sup>, such as the Rev Frederick Strickland and the Rev Joseph Shaw at Coranderrk.

The second Bishop of Melbourne, James Moorhouse, whose years of office were 1876 – 1886, whilst being a very different man from his predecessor, continued with strong episcopal support for the church's involvement with Aboriginal people.<sup>7</sup>

At different times, various changes in government policy transported Victorian Aborigines to missions distant from their homeland, with a range of consequences, not the least being marriages between people from different localities.

A consequence of the Church's involvement with these missions was that, even to the end of the twentieth century, older Koories would often describe themselves as 'Church of England', quite a number looking to Anglican clergy to conduct funerals, sometimes with a link to St Mark's Fitzroy. Fortunately some of these links have lasted into the twenty-first century, but they are fragile links.

## **Diocesan Activities in the Twentieth Century**

With the establishment of the Working Group on Aboriginal Matters, the last two decades of the century was a particularly active period for the Diocese. This was initiated by a motion of the 1981, and charged with the following responsibilities:

- *The provision, for the use of parishes, of up-to-date information and educational material.*
- *The initiation of action in areas of service to the aboriginal community especially in Victoria.*
- *The Provision of material for the use of the Archbishop and other spokesmen which make in public statements.*

At various times the Working Group included representatives from other Victorian dioceses and the Uniting Church. Its membership included representation from the Anglican Board of Missions (ABM, later known as the Anglican Board of Mission – Australia ABMA), the Bush Church Aid Society (BCA), the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Mothers Union (MU), all of whom were engaged in ministries to Indigenous people in their own right.<sup>8</sup>

For most of the next 20 years, a stipend was maintained for a part-time worker, sometimes assisted by a second worker. In 1987 an Indigenous person, Mr Larry Walsh was appointed to work with the committee. He was also linked to the Dioceses of Ballarat and Gippsland, as well as a Victorian ecumenical group. Larry's ministry was to work with parishes in a consciousness-raising exercise and to seek and maintain contact with Aboriginal groups and individuals. This experience encouraged him to be critical of a number of past and present Church attitudes and practices in

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'mission' was used, regardless of whether or not there was an association with a church.

<sup>7</sup> See Morna Sturrock's biography: *Bishop of Magnetic Power: James Moorhouse in Melbourne, 1876 – 1886*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Press, 2005, pp. 142 ff.

<sup>8</sup> There were a number of name changes for this committee, mainly reflecting changes in membership. Committee Chairmen included Archdeacon Barry Martin, Bishop Oliver Heyward, Bishop John Bayton and the Rev'd Murray Lamont.

meeting Aboriginal expectations. His work assisted the diocese to recognize the church's past involvement with Koories and the gulf existing between the church and many Koories.

The longest-serving Project Officer was Mrs Margaret Waterhouse OAM, who was appointed in 1991. Margaret developed strong relationships with many Koories, as well as developing a significant ministry to parishes. Through much of the 1990s she was assisted by Mrs Betty Ashton, who had been an ABM missionary in PNG for an extended period. They conducted many workshops throughout the Diocese aimed at educating people with a view towards developing reconciliation on many fronts. Many parishes used the creative materials which they produced, an essential part of which was to learn about local issues. Particularly popular were their materials written to support the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> Dr Joy Sandefur worked as Project Officer on behalf of the Working Group during the period 1999 – 2003. The work of these Project Officers was often difficult because of the occasions when they threatened deep-seated prejudice, but their witness for justice was sensitive and strong.

From time to time, the Working Group either made submissions on Indigenous matters directly to governments or prepared a brief for the Archbishop. Not insignificant was its contribution to General Synod in the development of *A Prayer Book For Australia* (1995).

Through much of the 1990s, the Chairman was Bishop Oliver Heyward, who had considerable experience with Koories whilst he was the Bishop of Bendigo. Towards the end of the decade, Bishop Oliver concluded that there were two main tasks for the Diocese. One was to develop links with Victoria Koories in some form of chaplaincy role, the other was the education of non-Indigenous Anglicans with a view towards people who were better informed and more supportive of Indigenous Australians.

The last decade or so of the Working Group on Aboriginal Matters, and its associated staff stands out as a period of significant and effective ministry, resulting in a very real impact on the thinking and activities of people in the parishes of the Diocese. Particular high spots were linked to the work of the National Reconciliation Commission and the release, in April 1997, of *Bringing Them Home*, a report of a national enquiry concerning the 'stolen generations'. An important service recognizing the latter was held in the Cathedral.

*Bringing Them Home* challenged institutions to make their records available for Indigenous people tracing their roots. The Anglican Church recognized that many, if not most, of its residential children's homes would have included Indigenous children. Multiple closures and amalgamations of these created considerable difficulties for anyone seeking to locate records of former residents. In order to facilitate enquiries, a small guide-book was produced *For The Record*, by James Boyce.<sup>10</sup>

The 1990s was also the time when the national General Synod recognized Indigenous Anglicans, including establishing a national role for an Aboriginal bishop and a Torres Strait Islander bishop, enacting the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council and designating a number of seats at General Synod for Indigenous persons. For much of this decade it was difficult to find an

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<sup>9</sup> This runs from 27<sup>th</sup> May, the anniversary of the 1967 referendum until 3<sup>rd</sup> June, the anniversary of the 1992 Mabo judgement; liturgical materials can also be found by consulting the index of *A Prayer Book for Australia*.

<sup>10</sup> James Boyce. *For The Record: Background Information on the Work of the Anglican Church with Aboriginal Children and Directory of Anglican Agencies providing residential care to children from 1830 to 1980*. Anglicare Australia. Melbourne, 2003. [ISBN 0 9579756 2 7] Copies may be found in the State Library of Victoria and at Anglicare Victoria.

Indigenous representative for the Diocese of Melbourne, but Mrs Waterhouse acted as an important support for the Council and was officially endorsed as an Honorary Member.

**Indigenous Clergy:** Historically, the acceptance of Aboriginal people into ordained Anglican ministry is not one of the bright spots of the Australian church. Indeed, in comparison with New Zealand the word ‘shameful’ might be appropriate. The first Aboriginal ordained was James Noble, a Queenslander who was made a deacon in Perth in 1926 after decades of fruitful ministry. The first Aboriginal priest was another Queenslander, Patrick Brisbane, ordained in 1970, but who passed away in 1974; the second was Michael Gumbuli Wurramara ordained at Ngukurr in 1973. The first Aboriginal bishop was Arthur Malcolm, consecrated in 1995. Fortunately, the Church was not quite as tardy in ordaining Torres Strait Islanders.

In 1999, Janet Turpie-Johnston, a member of the Gunditjmara people from western Victoria, became the first Indigenous person to be ordained in the Diocese of Melbourne. Jason Hobba from NSW was then ordained in 2004 and the Rev Helen Dwyer from South Australia in 2013.

**Diocesan Synod:** From time to time throughout the life of the Diocese, Indigenous matters have been the focus of debates and resolutions of Synod. These have often followed issues of public discussion, expressing an Anglican viewpoint on a particular issue. Commonly this had resulted in public exposure in various forms of media.

Quite a number of resolutions have had the Diocese as their focus; actions resulting from these have been variable. For instance, the motion to establish the Working Group on Aboriginal Matters must surely be one of the most significant such resolutions of the late twentieth century. However for a variety of reasons, other motions such as those involving financial commitments have not resulted in significant action.

At various times, the Archbishop’s Presidential Address to Synod has focussed on contemporary Indigenous issues.

Here is a list of topics which have been the subject of resolutions of the Synod of the Diocese:

- ‘Stolen generation’ (1997)
- Urging government consultation with Indigenous people (1998)
- Reconciliation (1997, 1999, 2000, 2002)
- Seeking a new date for Australia Day (2000)
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (2001, 2002)
- Custodians of the land (2004)
- Recommending the establishment of a levy to facilitate employment of Indigenous people (2007)
- Welfare of Indigenous people, reconciliation and partnership (2008)
- Restitution (2010)
- Flying the Aboriginal Flag (2012)

Another report from the Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group includes many of the resolutions passed by Synod. Unfortunately there has not been a regular form of reporting to Synod on the outcome of such resolutions.

## Activities of Organizations linked to the Diocese

To the average Anglican, the boundaries between the work of the Diocese and these organizations is usually impossible to locate and not worth the effort of attempting to do so.

Of the organizations listed above, CMS is probably the one with the most enduring front-line contact with Indigenous people. In Victoria this included oversight of missions in the nineteenth century; in the late twentieth century (1983 – 95), the Rev Graeme and Maree Vines were located in East Gippsland with responsibility for mission amongst Aborigines, most of whom were linked to Lake Tyers.

In 1908, the Victorian branch of CMS, with the support of ABM, established the Roper River Mission (later called Ngukurr) on the south-eastern edge of Arnhem Land at the request of the Bishop of North Queensland; this was the first enduring Anglican mission in the Northern Territory. The project was in many ways a cooperative effort of the whole Australian church in a manner which has few parallels.<sup>11</sup>

CMS followed this with the establishment other missions at Groote Eylandt (Angurugu and Umbakumba), Oenpelli (Kunbarlanjnja) and Rose River (Numbulwar). These missions remained under the control of CMS until about 1970, when it requested the government to assume direct management. It continues to have missionaries located in the Top End, mostly concerned with the training and support of church workers. During most of this time, CMS workers have included clergy and/or laity from the Diocese of Melbourne.

ABM also has a long involvement with Aboriginal people in Australia's north; the best known is probably John Brown Gribble (1847 – 1893), the founder of Yarrabah Mission near Cairns and his Geelong-born son, Ernest Richard Bulmer Gribble (1869 – 1957). It established and/or supported a number of missions, including Edward River (Pormpuraaw), Mitchell River (Kowanyama), Lockhart River and Yarrabah in Far North Queensland and Forrest River (Oombulgurri) in Western Australia<sup>12</sup>

For many years, both BCA and MU have supported Aboriginal people in a variety of ways and continue to do so. Both Anglicare Victoria and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, welfare agencies associated with the Diocese, engage with Indigenous clients.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, the Diocese has engaged directly in supporting Indigenous people, especially through Nungalinga College, a national training centre in Darwin.

Thus, there is a very large number of people in the Diocese who are linked with these organizations and receive regular communications about their work. This has created a significant group of informed Anglicans willing to support Indigenous causes at time such as Synod debates on various motions.

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<sup>11</sup> Murray Seiffert, *Refuge on the Roper: the origins of Roper River Mission, Ngukurr*. Acorn Press, Brunswick East, 2008, outlines the Victorian involvement in this mission.

<sup>12</sup> Much of this work is covered in the book by Noel Loos, *White Christ Black Cross: the emergence of a black church*. Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> See Boddé, R. *Anglican Diocese of Melbourne: Anglican Indigenous Ministries Survey, 2009*. A Joint Project of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, Anglicare Victoria and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, October 2009, available on the Diocesan Website.

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