

World Council of Churches Living Letters Statement

At the invitation of the National Council of Churches of Australia (NCCA) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) to the World Council of Churches (WCC) a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christians have come as a Living Letter to the Aboriginal Peoples of the Northern Territory in Australia.

We come from around the world; from Bolivia, Egypt, The United States of America, The Philippines, Indonesia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia and bring with us our own stories and experiences as Indigenous and marginalised peoples. We have come to hear the voices of Aboriginal Peoples and to bear witness to the injustices they face on a daily basis.

We thank our Aboriginal brothers and sisters for the very warm welcome we have received everywhere we have travelled. We have visited communities and peoples in Darwin, Galiwink'u, Mapuru, Wadeye, Hermannsburg, Amoonguna, Mount Nancy Town Camp, the Anglican Northern Territory future leaders and the students of Nungalinga College. We deeply appreciate the generosity people have shown us by inviting us into their homes and lives. Our only regret is that time and distance did not allow us to visit more communities.

We have gained valuable insights and have been profoundly moved by what we have heard. We are concerned to observe the discrimination, oppression and racism that Aboriginal Peoples experience on a daily basis. We are dismayed by the lack of consultation and negotiation from Governments of all levels as they make and implement policies and programs that have significant impacts on Aboriginal Peoples.

Many of us are shocked because we did not realise this is still happening in Australia. We have had insight into the “other” Australia. The one that is hidden away and not talked about honestly. Our shock was compounded by the fact that Australia is quick to condemn human rights abuses in other countries, and yet perpetuates them in its own backyard.

We too say “enough is enough!” As Christians we affirm that respect of the whole human person is important. We have heard of the injustices being perpetrated against Northern Territory communities and believe that they are not just against the Aboriginal Peoples of these places but they are being perpetrated against humanity and against the will of God.

The things we have heard about and seen this week remind us that colonisation is not something that happened two hundred years ago, it is ongoing. As Indigenous and marginalised peoples from other lands, we feel a connection to the struggle of the Aboriginal Peoples. We too experience colonisation and systemic racism in our own contexts.

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We have heard about the Northern Territory Emergency Response, also known as the Intervention which was initiated by the Howard Government ostensibly to address child abuse.

We have heard the Intervention has taken control of the lives of Aboriginal Peoples through such measures as compulsory income management and compulsory acquisition of leases over Aboriginal land.

We have heard that it was necessary to suspend aspects of the Racial Discrimination Act in order to implement these measures.

We have heard of the people's confusion and despair at these extreme measures and their hope for change with the change of Government in 2007. Despite this hope, the Labor government has continued the Intervention which remains a blight on Australia's reputation.

We challenge these unjust and racist structures and systems and question the Australian lawmakers about how they conduct their business just as Jesus questioned the Pharisees and lawmakers of his time.

The Intervention has been a failure because the Government has not listened to Aboriginal voices and has not negotiated or properly consulted about any aspect of these policies. The Government used armed forces to implement the Intervention. People continue to be forced from their homelands and outstations. People are being treated like criminals without just cause.

The Government and the media continue to paint a picture of Aboriginal dysfunction and yet refuse to look in the mirror at the devastating effect that their own cultural practices have on Aboriginal communities.

We say to the current Government you have had three years to "reset the relationship with Aboriginal Peoples", yet you have failed to do so. In fact we have heard in every place we visited that life has not improved under the Intervention, it has in fact deteriorated. We have heard of despair, anguish and confusion throughout the Intervention years and the dismantling of communities.

We have also heard and seen the strength of resistance. "The oldest living, surviving culture in all the world" has not been crushed. The will of the people to stand up for their rights has heartened us and inspired us to action. We feel a great responsibility to ensure that the time and stories that was generously shared with us will produce positive outcomes and that their voices will not go unheeded.

To our Indigenous brothers and sisters we say; "You do not stand alone". We will endeavour to support and encourage your resistance against injustice. We affirm your right to self-determination. We affirm your right to live in your own Traditional Lands

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and we affirm your right to maintain and enrich your cultures and ensure your traditions are strengthened and passed on for generations to come. We encourage you to continue to draw on the strength of your cultures to resist the debilitating effects of the ways of the colonisers.

We stand in solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples of Australia, but more than that we commit to speak out and tell the world what we have seen and heard. We strongly encourage the Churches in Australia and the World Council of Churches to commit themselves to take action to support your political rights, your human rights and your rights as Australian citizens. Our first action will be to produce a report which will detail our observations, concerns and recommendations arising from this visit and through our actions we will show that this Living Letter visit is not a “breeze blowing in the wind.” To our Indigenous brothers and sisters we say “Your fight is our fight.”



The Living Letters Team

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