

# A bishop brings love of God to the heart of an ancient culture

**W**ITH its intervention in the Northern Territory, Australia's Government and its workers have ignored the religious, language, history and traditions of Aboriginal communities.

This is the view of the territory's Anglican bishop, Greg Thompson. He is a hands-on clergyman, having worked as a young man in the Territory with young, often troubled, people who practised petrol sniffing. In 1988, after ordination, he returned to Darwin as a parish priest, where he established a care ministry and was president of the Northern Territory Council of Social Service in 1992-93.

He later served as NSW secretary of the Bush Church Aid Society, before a five-year stint as rector of Darlinghurst where, as he put it, judges and sex workers shared Holy Communion. He was one of the first chaplains to Sydney's medically supervised injecting centre.

Clearly needing a change, he moved to Canberra in July 2004, as rector of St John's, Reid. About three years later he was elected Bishop of the Northern Territory.

Recently, in an address to a

Graham  
Downie

The way I see it



forum arranged by Christians for an Ethical Society in Canberra, he launched a broadside at the present and previous governments over the intervention.

"When Government people visit, they do not seek out church leaders, who are the most stable people." Acknowledging errors by missionaries, he said at least then Aboriginal children were literate in English and their first languages. "Now they are literate in neither."

In a most telling example of the disregard for Aboriginal culture, he cited the roll-out of the intervention in Santa Teresa, a community of 540 people 69km south-east of Alice Springs. There, Government officials unilaterally took over the well-established Women's Spirituality Centre for occasional visits by mental health workers.

"The paintings, cultural items



Anglican  
Bishop of the  
Northern  
Territory Greg  
Thompson.

and other contents had to be removed to make way for the intervention's use of the building, including a room used by one of the women for her traditional healing." The woman who had run the centre was told she would have to get a "proper job" and was assigned to picking up papers.

"When we dismiss the religious worldview in which we live and do not understand the hidden values and beliefs that shape communities, we unintentionally diminish them," Thompson says. "...What is hard for government to hear is the failure of the relationship

between government and indigenous people and particularly when older leaders know and express a longing for mission days."

He does not intend to whitewash the culture-denying actions of missionaries or their participation in the policy of governments to remove children. But he says the call for the old days of missionaries reflects the need for relationships with non-indigenous people who offer friendship and the sharing of spiritual matters that are central to a community. "The Church, along with other agencies and government, must remember the

past and seek to find genuine partnerships for a better future. Given the history of violence and removal of children, it is amazing the Aboriginal people are able to welcome outsiders."

Thompson says the intervention means well but does not engage people in ways that will galvanise and sustain healthy change among the people in its sight.

"As our own Western approaches and processes often lack an integration between our spirituality and our lifestyle decisions, so our policy and practice exclude or marginalise the central shaping relationships in Aboriginal communities - belief and kinship. And this inevitably leads to the oppression of distinctive peoples within a dominant culture and the suspension of human rights."

Australians hold up the unique gifting of indigenous Australia but want to make them more like us. We want them to be shaped by a national dream that includes them. But we suspend their rights, stereotype their communities and impose controls which would outrage people in southern Australia.