

Why Cross Cultural ?

Introduction

In a world of marked separation between people of different races and ethnicities it is important that we work to unmask racism and search for ways to overcome ignorance. The roots of racism go deep in Australia and have had a devastating impact on the lives of indigenous people. In Australia, racial prejudice combined with privilege and power has created a deadly mixture. For some racism permeates every aspect of their life.

In the present Australian setting, particularly post 11th September 2001, the Bali Bombing in October 2002 and evident in the public debate about what Australian's response to asylum seekers should be, we have seen a disturbing re-emergence of xenophobia and fear of difference. It is especially timely that we challenge the negative stereotypes and images that abound, and model community in new ways as God's people. 'Confronting racism' is a central part of the mission of the church and of our identity as Christians. Those who do this workshop become part of a developing network of people in the Uniting Church concerned to address and overcome racism.

It is an educational program that explores strategies to confront and overcome racism in church and society. The program provides some of the building blocks (awareness, skills) for building such communities in the places the participants come from. It seeks to further encourage our Uniting church in its commitment to building a multicultural church where we live together as people from different cultures in worship, witness and service. Through scripture, stories and role-play, small group dialogue and interactive exercises, participants will:

1. *Develop greater awareness and skills to understand the significance of different cultural backgrounds and experiences and be encouraged to take specific steps to reduce one's own ethnocentrism*¹
2. *Reflect on the systems of oppression that separate people and how lives are impacted by racism.*²
3. *Reflect on biblical themes that undergird a commitment to celebrating diversity and respecting difference: the interconnectedness of God's creation, the call to justice and sharing; the challenge to build cross-cultural communities of love, justice and inclusion where the gifts of all are valued.*
4. *See the need to develop sensitive and effective community healing and begin to explore ways of bridging racial, cultural and other divisions in the congregations, communities and work situations from which people come.*
5. *Work with others to confront racism within the Australian context and be linked to a network of people in the Uniting Church working to eradicate racism.*

The 'Confronting Racism' workshop is the first step in a programme of cross-cultural learning that contributes to the ongoing task of identifying and overcoming the barriers that exist between people because of different cultural backgrounds. It aims to contribute to the building of communities of reconciliation, justice and sharing that celebrate diversity and respect difference.

¹ Definition of ethnocentrism: "the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures". Macquarie Concise Dictionary

² Definition of Racism from HREOC (1998): "Racism is an ideology that gives expression to myths about other racial and ethnic groups, that devalues and renders inferior those groups, that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social cultural and power inequalities in society". Another definition used in this document is: "Prejudice plus power plus privilege equals racism".

Theological Underpinning

All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus witnessed to this when he broke down the barriers of ethnicity, class, gender and age. Working to overcome racism is therefore an integral part of how we understand the Gospel. It is motivated by Biblical and Gospel values of equality, justice, freedom and dignity. Our mission is set in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community. The rainbow mix of people is a gift from God, and can be seen as a foretaste of life in the heavenly kingdom. (Revelation 7:9-10).

This model for breaking down racism and building up human community is grounded in theological understanding of creation and redemption. Everything in this universe is interconnected, and we are part of the wholeness and goodness of God's creation. But we have become alienated from God, from one another and from right relationships with the earth. There is a groaning within creation (Romans 8). All around us we can see the evidences of our separation from one another and from nature. We in the church know this brokenness and separation by the name - sin. We have sinned by dominating nature and living within systems of dominating one another. We are part of systems that benefit some at the expense of others creating inequality and suffering, injustice and many forms of "isms".

In I Corinthians 12 Paul spoke of the interdependence of the body of Christ, "When one part suffers, all suffer." When the human body is out of joint, as in a dislocated shoulder, there is great pain. When we become disconnected from one another as members of God's human family, there is fear, pain, brokenness and isolation. Through the course of the Old Testament, God sent prophets and others to remind the people of what God wants for human community "to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God". Finally God sent Jesus, to live out what it means to be fully human. Jesus shows us what it means to live with one another as God intended in creation. He ate and sat with those his society named as outcasts.

He calls us to welcome the stranger and the child; to cross the barriers that society sets up; to not allow fear to determine relationships. Jesus became the bridge for us to God. Through Christ, God calls us to be reconciled with one another, to build new relationships, learning trust and love and forgiveness rather than fear, suspicion and enmity. The risen Christ moves us to open locked doors to share the good news. Jesus leads us to continue his work of breaking down barriers. The Spirit's gift enables us to celebrate our diversity and to experience oneness. With the Spirit's help we step into newness of life, build communities of justice, reconciliation, respect and love. The church is called to witness to the values of the kingdom, and live in ways that herald in the new creation.

Sadly the reality, in many of our churches as in society at large, falls far short of this Biblical vision. Racism is sin, and God is against it. What is needed is a repentance that leads to active reconciliation. As Christians, our commitment to strive to overcome racism must be a commitment to work and pray for a process of change. We belong to one human race and our diversity is a gift from God.

View of the Uniting Church in Australia

The Uniting Church since its inception has been involved in ministry in ways that affirm the dignity of all people, advocating for social justice and committed to combating racism and working towards an inclusive vision for Australia. At the inaugural Assembly in 1977 the Statement to the Nation included the words *"We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole"*

human race. We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for **the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond...**"³



In the mid 1980s the Uniting Church's then Commission for World Mission produced a study guide entitled "*Justice and Love for all in Australia: How can the UCA Handle Issues of Racism, Land rights, Migration and Right Wing Opposition as Christians*". The document was specifically responding to heated public debates on Land rights and Asian migration. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the position in that document that called members of the Uniting Church to actively work against racism. The document is powerful challenge to all to take seriously the issue of racism. Some of the theological and biblical principles mentioned within this document are included in the following extract:

RACISM IS A SIN, IS DEMONIC AND HERETICAL

Christian commitment against racism stems out of the central tenets of our faith. Racism is not about attitudes only. It is about one racial group using its power to maintain cultural, economic, political and social power over another, and to denigrate or destroy that other group. That is why we need to understand both the anti-land rights campaign and the anti-Asian immigration campaign as racist. The experience of Aborigines has been one of dispossession. It is similar to the experience of the poor man in Nathan's parable to David (2 Samuel 12:1-16). The wealthy man had thousands of sheep, but killed his poor tenant's pet lamb to feed a guest. The cry of the Aboriginal people for land justice is like that of the Psalmist in Psalm 10, "Why does the Lord stand far off when the wicked greedily pursue the meek?" Release and justice for the oppressed are a prime concern of God. The history of Israel began when they were an oppressed racial minority and God rescued them. (Exodus 3: 7-12). God is the God who saw, heard, knew about their sufferings and came down to deliver them. So from the beginning racism was obnoxious to the faith of Israel and all the law codes enjoined special loving care for the strangers who lived in Israel. (Exodus 22: 21, 23:9; Leviticus 19: 33; Deuteronomy 24: 17-18). We do not know any longer, who these strangers were - whether they were the original inhabitants of the land, or refugees from neighbouring countries, but Israel was required to exercise justice and compassion towards them. Anti-racism and justice for a minority group is not something peripheral to the faith. It arises out of the very self understanding of the faithful. In Genesis God is said to have created all race from one stock. God created all in the image of God. To discriminate is to deny the creatorship of God (Genesis 1: 26, 10: 32). And in the New Testament God is said to have commenced a new creation with Jesus Christ as the Head of it. In Jesus Christ the divisions of humankind are broken down and all are reconciled and a new unity is created among us. To practise racism therefore is to deny the efficacy of the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ. It is to say that nothing has changed - we are still not reconciled; there is no new humanity. (1 Corinthians 15, Ephesians 2: 11-19). To practice racism furthermore is to break the unity of the Body of Christ, to fracture the Church. It is to deny the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ - a witness to the Kingdom of God. And finally in the Book of Revelation (7: 9-12) there is a vision of an

³ Statement to the Nation, 1977 (See Handouts section for copy of 1977 and 1985 statements)

innumerable multitude of every nation, tribe, race and language each crying out in their own language, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb". What sort of an Australia do we seek? What kind of world? It is a vision consistent with this vision of the Kingdom - a diversity of cultures and languages; justice and righteousness between them; love that gives cohesion and unity; celebration and joy in the diversity; affirmation of different lifestyles and no ghettos. The Uniting Church affirms with Christians of many nations that God is creator of all things; that the human race is one; that racism is a sin, is demonic and heretical; and that in combating racism we share in God's redemptive work, and personal and communal repentance.

A key aspect of our identity as the Uniting Church has been our commitment to stand alongside indigenous people, recognising that racism has deeply scarred relationships in this land. This has involved us in a journey of covenanting with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the Uniting Church on this covenanting journey in 1985.⁴ In the Bicentennial Year, the Uniting Church offered another Statement to the Nation from which the following extract is drawn.

We give thanks for those times when the Australian society has established justice, equality, and mutual respect among people; has placed care for the people who have least above sectional interests; has welcomed new migrants and refugees; has exercised solidarity and friendship in times of crisis in Australia across divisions of race and culture; and has engaged constructively with the peoples of Asia, the Pacific and the rest of the world as peacemaker. In the last two centuries the movements of history have brought together here in one nation, people of diverse cultures. As a church which is itself composed of people of many cultures and races, both Aboriginal and migrant, we rejoice in the vision of a multicultural society where these peoples may live together in unity and diversity, maintaining different cultural traditions, yet forging a common destiny based on commitment to the ideals of equality of opportunity, tolerance, justice and compassion.

At the same time, those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are the descendants of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who were Aboriginal people. In varying degrees, we all contribute to, and perpetuate those injustices. We recognise the violence which has been done to the Aboriginal people in the colonisation of this continent and the injustice by which Aborigines have been deprived of the land. We recognise the continuing Aboriginal experience of violence and injustice.

The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularised in the media, must cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what was done to them in colonisation, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation.

The integrity of our nation will be measured by action; by legislative action which honours the Aboriginal plea for justice, and by popular action by which the Australian people express their willingness to support Aboriginal Australians in the quest for justice and their struggle to reconstruct their society.

As for the Uniting Church in Australia, in obedience to God, in concern for the integrity of our nation, and in co-operation with all citizens of goodwill, we Aboriginal and newer Australians have determined to stand together."

The journey to walk together as brothers and sisters, is an ongoing one. The call today is for a deepening commitment.

The vision of building a church based on justice and respect has also led the church to make clear its commitment to embracing cultural diversity. In 1985 The UCA declared "We are a multicultural church".⁵ Many steps have been made towards building a church that celebrates diversity. The mandate of Assembly Multicultural Ministry is "to educate the Church in living as

⁴ Additional Resources includes key statements the Uniting Church has made on Covenanting.

⁵ The 1985 statement "We are a multicultural church" in Additional Resources

people from different cultures in worship, witness and service." This involves ongoing reflection on implications of our cross-cultural Australian society for the ordering of the Church's life. Building a church where we all belong is an ongoing challenge.

We have been involved in ministry alongside migrants and refugees and spoken out on behalf of asylum seekers.⁶

Australia is not only a multicultural society it is also a multi-faith society and in recent years we have recognised how important it is to build relationships with other faith communities. At times this has meant us speaking up for the rights of religious minorities in Australia.⁷ The 1999 report to the Assembly "*Living Alongside the Neighbour who is Different*", has been produced as a study guide to help congregations and groups reflect further on the reality of living in a multi-faith Australia.

As the people of God we pray that God will constantly renew and correct the church through the gift of the Spirit. (Basis of Union Paragraph 3 and 18) On the way to the promised goal we meet each other and learn to embrace one another. This means racial superiority, a failure to understand other cultures and exclusiveness must not have a place in the life of the Uniting church.⁸ Our diversity is not a problem to be solved, but a gift and a blessing.

As we reflect on the journey we have made there have been significant ways the Uniting Church has sought to live as a community that celebrates the rich diversity of God's creation. In different ways we have been seeking to live out the Gospel's call to transcend cultural and other barriers. This struggle continues and this educational process is offered as part of the ongoing journey to build communities of justice and reconciliation.

⁶ See Uniting Church in Australia Policy Paper *Asylum Seekers*, 2001

⁷ In the "War Against Terrorism" the Uniting Church spoke against any targeting of the Muslim and Arab community in Australia.

⁸ *The Vision of a Multicultural Church*, 1997, page 21