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STUDIES



UNIVERSITY  
OF DIVINITY

# The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network Report

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90 Albion Road, Box Hill VIC 3128

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funded by



Glenburnie Program  
Towards a Just, Participatory  
and Sustainable Society

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## Acknowledgement

On behalf of the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network (NIEN), we extend our deepest gratitude to the Glenburnie Program for their invaluable support as the sponsor of our inaugural forum. The generous sponsorship provided by the Glenburnie Program played a pivotal role in facilitating the participation of esteemed Indigenous Church leaders and delegates in addressing critical issues facing Indigenous communities. Their contribution enabled participants to attend and actively contribute to the meeting by covering essential expenses such as travel, accommodation, meals, and stationery.

The Glenburnie Program's commitment to supporting initiatives aimed at advancing justice, reconciliation, and ecological well-being within Indigenous communities is commendable. We are truly grateful for their partnership and dedication to empowering Indigenous Church leaders to advocate for meaningful change.

## List of Abbreviations

CCIA	Commission of the Churches on International Affairs
CWME	Commission for World Mission and Evangelism
NATSIAC	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council
NATISCC	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council
NCCA	National Council of Churches in Australia
NIEN	National Indigenous Ecumenical Network
SATATSIT	Salvation Army Territorial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Team
SIS	School of Indigenous Studies
PCR	Programme to Combat Racism
UAICC	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
UCA	Uniting Church in Australia
UD	University of Divinity
URM	Urban Rural Mission
WCC	World Council of Churches

# Christ's Love

*Christ's love, as taught by Jesus of Nazareth, is radical. It heals and restores and confronts and transforms. It calls us to love our enemies, restore justice, and make community with those pushed to the margins by the dominant systems and traditions.*

*It indicts systems and cultures that discriminate and dehumanize. It empowers the disempowered and re-members the dis-membered. As such, Christ's love is subversive and offensive to the systems and cultures that dominate, discriminate, and dehumanize. Such love alone can make reconciliation lasting and unity real.*



## Executive Summary

The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network (NIEN) meeting, held from February 9–12, 2024, at the University of Divinity (UD) in Box Hill Melbourne, marked the inaugural gathering of Indigenous Church leaders to address critical issues facing their communities. With a focus on justice, reconciliation, and ecological well-being, the meeting convened esteemed participants from various church affiliations and backgrounds.

The meeting began with reflections on the recent 'Raising the Tribal Voice' conference, where attendees engaged in profound discussions on the intersection of culture, faith, theology, and social justice. Insights from the conference underscored the importance of Indigenous theological reflections, storytelling, systemic oppression, unity among Indigenous communities, and the imperative for meaningful change.

### **Key outcomes of the meeting included:**

- ▶ Defining the vision, purpose, mission, and objectives of the Indigenous Ecumenical Network, aimed at empowering Indigenous Church leaders to advocate for justice and reconciliation.
- ▶ Emphases on stakeholder relationships and partnerships with organisations such as National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and various denominations to advance Indigenous aspirations.
- ▶ Addressing key concerns including learning pathways to tertiary theological education, building skills, and equipping Indigenous ministries, systemic injustice, financial independence, and prioritising Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices within Indigenous ministries and communities.

### **The meeting concluded with actionable recommendations for future initiatives, including:**

- ▶ Exploring collaborative opportunities with church agencies to leverage resources for the benefit of Indigenous communities.
- ▶ Recommendations and advice to guide theological educational initiatives by identifying the gaps and skills required for ministry of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministers and candidates.
- ▶ The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network will provide leadership to advocate for Indigenous issues within churches and developing support systems that will contribute to building ongoing relationships.

Overall, the meeting served as a platform for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and advocacy, laying the groundwork for future endeavours to advance Indigenous interests and promote social justice.

## Introduction

### **What is National Indigenous Ecumenical Network?**

The Indigenous Ecumenical Network emerges as a pivotal platform, striving to empower the Indigenous Church to shape its trajectory with a unified voice across the realms of church, society, and politics. With a vision set on fostering unity and agency within the Indigenous Church, the network's mission is to mobilise Indigenous Church leaders to confront historical injustices and influence theological education through collective action. At its core, the purpose of the Indigenous Ecumenical Network is to equip and enable the Indigenous Church to champion justice, reconciliation, and ecological well-being through profound engagement and theological enlightenment.

With a strategic focus, the network aims to advocate for justice, promote ecological harmony, influence theological discourse, empower Indigenous Church leaders for pivotal roles, and establish accessible pathways for Indigenous peoples to engage in theological education. Governed by a set of terms of reference, the network operates under the leadership of the Head of the School of Indigenous Studies (SIS), with membership appointed by the same authority in collaboration with Church denominations, ensuring gender balance to respect cultural protocols. Meetings, held both in person and online, provide spaces for deliberation, strategizing, and collaboration among network members, reinforcing its commitment to collective advancement and empowerment within the Indigenous Church.



## 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network

The inaugural meeting of the Ecumenical Network took place at the University of Divinity in Box Hill, Melbourne, spanning from February 9th to 12th, 2024. This gathering marked a significant milestone as Indigenous Church leaders convened to address critical issues facing their communities. Reflecting on the recent 'Raising the Tribal Voice' conference, participants engaged in deep dialogues regarding the interplay of culture, faith, theology, and social justice. Insights gleaned from the conference emphasised the significance of Indigenous theological reflections, storytelling, the systemic oppression faced by Indigenous peoples, the necessity of unity among Indigenous communities, and the urgent call for meaningful change.

**Representatives invited to attend the inaugural meeting are listed below.**

No:	Names	Church Affiliation
1.	Shirli Congoo	Salvation Army - General Manager Territorial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Team (SATATSIT)
2.	Rev Canon Dr Garry Deverell	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC)
3.	Dr Josephine Bourne	Torres Strait Islander representative -Anglican
4.	Brooke Prentis	Uniting Church in Australia (UCA)
5.	Nathan Tyson	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
6.	Aunty Jean Phillips	Uniting Church in Australia
7.	Bianca Manning	Pentecostal
8.	Professor Dr Anne Pattel-Gray	Uniting Church in Australia (UCA)
9.	Rev Canon A/Prof Glenn Loughrey	Chair - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC)
10.	Apostle Gloria Dyer-Miller	Arrowhead International - Independent Aboriginal Church
11.	Rev Mark Kickett	Chair - Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
12.	Ravina Waldren	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC)
13.	Mikenzie Ling	Pentecostal
14.	Dawn Gilchrist	Church of Christ
15.	Pastor Brad Henaway	Uniting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
16.	Sherry Balcombe	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC)
17.	Dean Chisholm	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) and the Academic Dean of Nungalinga College
18.	Elverina Johnson	Anglican Church
19.	Marlon Riley	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC)

## Reflections in the Indigenous Ecumenical Network Meeting

Indigenous church leaders acknowledged the importance of the conference and the need for the establishment of the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network and how this will benefit and equip our ministries in communities with tools to address Indigenous issues. They highlighted the significance of storytelling and the integration of theology into everyday life. Some members expressed the newfound clarity on systemic oppression and the transformative potential of the Indigenous Ecumenical Network, and they emphasised the need for spaces that allow for Indigenous expression and observation.

Participants recognised that the conference and the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network have the potential to act as a catalyst for social justice efforts and emphasised the need for healing among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and to advocate for empowering individuals to effect meaningful change.

The discussions underlined the need for unity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and emphasised the role of spirituality in shaping collective action. This underscored the importance of language in fostering understanding and advocated for a revolution grounded in Indigenous culture and spirituality. Highlighted in the discussions was the significance of reciprocal learning and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. As a diverse collective, we must acknowledge the need for gender-specific discussions and activities. Are there specific skills that require further development? The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network is confident that a transformative shift is on the horizon, as we delve into the intersection of our cultural heritage and theological perspectives, which ultimately lead us to a deeper understanding of Jesus.

Participants highlighted that we are at a critical juncture facing the country and we need to affirm the value of Indigenous leadership in driving societal change. It is necessary that we advocate for collaboration between Indigenous ministries and mainstream organisations, citing the need for broader representation and support, and emphasising the importance of Indigenous leadership and voices in shaping current and future policy and practice.





## The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network – Way Forward

A detailed discussion was held to define the vision, purpose, mission, and objectives of the Indigenous Ecumenical Network. Participants consented on the following description of the vision, mission, purpose and objectives of the forum.

### Vision

*To provide a platform for the Indigenous Church to develop, define and lead our destiny with a unified voice across church, society and politics.*

### Mission

*Through presenting a united voice, Indigenous Church leaders will call for action to address historical injustices and shape theological education.*

### Purpose

*The Indigenous Ecumenical Network equips and empowers the Indigenous Church to pursue justice, reconciliation and ecological well-being through deep listening and theological education.*



## Objectives of the Network

Advocate for justice and reconciliation.

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Promote ecological well-being.

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Influence theological education.

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Equip Indigenous Church leaders for leadership roles.

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Develop learning pathways for Indigenous peoples to access theological education.

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## Terms of Reference

The meeting participants agreed on the following terms of reference for the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network.

1. The Network is chaired by the Head of the School of Indigenous Studies.
2. Members of the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network are appointed by the Head of the School of Indigenous Studies on the recommendation of the Church denomination.
3. The Network membership must have gender balance to adhere to cultural protocols.
4. Members may nominate a proxy for meetings.
5. The Network meets at least once in person and twice online annually.

## Background of Stakeholder Relationships and Key Concerns

The forum highlighted the importance of securing partnerships with the National Council of Churches in Australia, the World Council of Churches, and various denominations to advance Indigenous interests. This is critical to ensure Indigenous participation in the ecumenical discourse and representation at both the national and international levels. We have a very long history of relationship, and this must continue and grow as we strive for truth telling, justice, equity, reparation, and reconciliation. Let's take the time to reflect on this history.

The history of Indigenous Peoples and the Australia Council of Churches/National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches goes back to the 1970s when the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) picked up the issue of the suffering of Indigenous Peoples. There are two events that PCR refers to: Barbados I and II.

Barbados I, held in 1971, was a meeting of anthropologists only. At Barbados II, in 1977, Indigenous Peoples were invited to attend. Since then, through various symposiums, conferences, studies, and team visits, the WCC governing bodies have called on its member churches to pay attention to the situation of Indigenous Peoples in North, Central and South America, Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, Pacific, Asia, Africa, and Europe.

In response to this call the Australian Council of Churches/National Council of Churches under the leadership of the then General Secretary – Rev David Gill appointed Dr Anne Pattel-Gray as Executive Secretary to establish and head up the Aboriginal and Islander Commission in 1989. The first priority was to work collaboratively with the Programme to Combat Racism team of the WCC to host the significant international Indigenous consultation. This would be life changing for the ACC/NCCA and its relationship with WCC. Also, in the same year we participated in the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) gathering in San Antonio 1989 and we had representation on the Urban Rural Mission (URM).

This work with Australia's Indigenous peoples received its first significant impetus from a WCC international consultation titled 'Land is our Life', held in Darwin in 1990. The Darwin consultation set new priorities for churches' solidarity with Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous participants demanded that the churches take specific actions in sharing resources with Indigenous communities, increasing Indigenous participation in church structures and congregations and challenged those retaining Indigenous lands.

In 1990, the WCC General Secretary – Rev Dr Emilio Castro invited Dr Pattel-Gray to make a presentation to the WCC Central Committee on the plight of Indigenous peoples. The presentation was warmly received although it was confronting for the Australian delegates who had failed to bring to the attention of the WCC the oppression and marginalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the fourth world living conditions they were confined to as a result of colonisation.

The next significant event to take place in Australia hosted by the NCCA and with significant participation of Indigenous people led by Dr Anne Pattel-Gray was the WCC 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly held in Canberra in 1991. The NCCA Aboriginal and Islander Commission played a critical role in preparing for this conference and had representations on the WCC 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly Planning Committee. The 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly paved the way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share the history of colonisation and missionisation and their spirituality, theology, and aspirations.

After the Canberra Assembly, its statement on "Land and Indigenous Peoples: Move Beyond Words" became a significant WCC document quoted in many churches and United Nations fora. It included a commitment to work towards the goal of justice through Indigenous sovereignty, repossession of their lands and a renewed call for a greater Indigenous participation in the life of the member churches and the WCC itself. In 1989, Dr Pattel-Gray was appointed to the PCR, and she worked diligently on the Indigenous issues. Since 1995, there have been Indigenous persons working on Indigenous issues within the PCR/Unit III.

The 47<sup>th</sup> session of the WCC Central Committee, held in September 1996, acknowledged the report of the Indigenous Peoples Programme, highlighting a notable concern. It emphasised the persistent demand from Indigenous Peoples for decolonisation processes, aiming to instigate transformation among both non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities within churches. It suggested that member churches should actively initiate dialogues with Indigenous Peoples within their communities, critically examining the historical interactions between churches and Indigenous Peoples. Furthermore, it advocated for embracing the Jubilee challenge, either by restoring lands historically belonging to Indigenous Peoples or by offering reparations for those currently possessed by churches. Following the efforts of the NCCA Aboriginal and Islander Commission at the WCC 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly, the establishment of the Indigenous Peoples Programme was approved. This program is dedicated to addressing the challenges and status of Indigenous Peoples globally. The programme attempts to clarify the past and present issues of denial, destruction, and denigration of Indigenous spiritualities and ancestral values that were exercised by colonisation and continued by dominant cultures. Of utmost significance is the dispossession of the land on which Indigenous Peoples build and develop their lives and their spiritualities. Indigenous Peoples are among the (if not the) most oppressed peoples in the world.

The Indigenous Peoples Programme called on the WCC to be proactive in its support for Indigenous Peoples and their struggles by:

- ▶ Ensuring that the issues and concerns of Indigenous Peoples are continuing to be addressed throughout the programmatic work of the WCC and by doing so;
- ▶ Engage and encouraging its member churches to work in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples.
- ▶ Challenge wider society which continues imposing oppressive actions.

## The call of Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples continue to call on governments, states, churches and the wider society, to respect their rights, to be in solidarity with their struggles, spiritualities and traditions and to work in partnership with them by re-examining the history of absolutism, verticalism and intolerance.

Indigenous Peoples seek:

- ▶ Self-determination and autonomy
- ▶ Recognition of their rights to their lands and resources
- ▶ The right to practice their culture without limitations and/or impositions.
- ▶ Religious rights to develop their spiritual life.
- ▶ Solidarity in the struggle against colonisation, assimilation, and integration which facilitate their cultural genocide.
- ▶ Support in the processes of decolonisation.
- ▶ The full recognition of their human rights

## Current Commitments of WCC Indigenous Peoples Activities:

### Ecumenical Indigenous People Network Reference Group

#### Preamble

1. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has a longstanding commitment to solidarity with Indigenous Peoples and to promoting their concerns, especially the need to respect and uphold their inherent rights and dignity. Indigenous participants in past assemblies decided to continue their ecumenical engagement through the formation of a formal structure, which has taken the form of an Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network at the global level represented by a reference group.
2. Listening to past pre-assemblies of Indigenous peoples, the WCC committed itself to support the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network and the reference group by including in its programmatic work an Indigenous Peoples Ecumenical Initiative.
3. In general, an ecumenical initiative is a collaborative effort initiated by various stakeholders within the broader ecumenical movement. These stakeholders agree to jointly plan, execute, and fund projects under the guidance of the WCC leadership, focusing on specific subjects or issues. It is a form of ecumenical cooperation in which a balance is respected between the agenda-setting role and ownership of a network and the programmatic and institutional commitment of the Council.



## The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network: Action Points Prioritised

The following action items were reached upon by the meeting:

Develop public-facing documents summarising conference outcomes.

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Facilitate local ecumenical meetings to develop and nurture relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christian Communities.

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Conduct online webinars to engage Indigenous communities in theological discourse.

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Explore partnerships with educational institutions to expand learning pathways for Indigenous leaders.

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Leading and driving the Truth-Telling process with the ecumenical church bodies.

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Strengthen relationships with stakeholders to amplify the Indigenous representation and voice in policy and practice.

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Emphasise the importance of Indigenous representation, reclaiming Indigenous positions in society and church, seeking autonomy, and activating sovereign spaces.

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Highlight the necessity for capability development and training within Indigenous ministries.

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Address terminology and communication challenges, acknowledging the complexity of language and the need for clear communication, particularly concerning the term "authority" across various church contexts.

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Discuss power structure and financial independence, including the transition process for ministries to achieve financial autonomy and the significance of equitable power distribution.

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Focus on allyship and support, recognizing the need for allies to aid Indigenous ministries and communities, and defining and providing meaningful support.

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Explore mentorship and technology, including mentoring younger generations and leveraging technology for data sovereignty and community empowerment.

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Advocate for action, addressing the imperative to dismantle unjust structures and establish accountability mechanisms.

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Foster collaboration and direction, expressing appreciation for the opportunity to share experiences and stressing the importance of Indigenous voices in shaping future guidelines and initiatives.

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Discuss financial support, addressing the need for adequate financial arrangements and independence.

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The National Indigenous Ecumenical Network’s membership will be comprised of the following representatives moving forward.

No:	Names	Church Affiliation
1.	<b>Shirli Congoo</b>	Salvation Army – General Manager Territorial Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Team (SATATSIT)
2.	<b>Rev Canon Dr Garry Deverell</b>	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC)
3.	<b>Dr Josephine Bourne</b>	Torres Strait Islander representative –Anglican
4.	<b>Nathan Tyson</b>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
5.	<b>Professor Dr Anne Pattel-Gray</b>	Uniting Church in Australia (UCA)
6.	<b>Rev Canon A/Prof Glenn Loughrey</b>	Chair – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC)
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11.	<b>Dean Chisholm</b>	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) and the Academic Dean of Nungalinga College
12.	<b>Elverina Johnson</b>	Anglican Church
13.	<b>Marlon Riley</b>	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC)
14.	<b>Pastor Don Haywood</b>	Baptist Church
15.	<b>Rev Dr Rex Rigby</b>	Wesleyan Methodist Church
16.	<b>Nomination TBA</b>	Lutheran Church of Australia

## CONCLUSION

The inaugural meeting of the National Indigenous Ecumenical Network marked a pivotal moment for Indigenous Church leaders to unite and address pressing issues. Discussions emphasised the importance of justice, reconciliation, and ecological well-being, highlighting the role of Indigenous theological reflections and storytelling. Moving forward, the Network aims to empower leaders, advocate for justice, and influence theological education. Action points were established, including developing public-facing documents and fostering collaboration with stakeholders. The Network stands poised to drive meaningful change guided by Indigenous wisdom and leadership.