

PROTOCOL FOR WELCOME TO/ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY



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What is 'country' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

'Country' encompasses the lands, seas, waterways and skylines of this continent. The First Peoples of this continent may be grouped into over 300 nations, each of which have a sovereign and unceded responsibility to care for a particular part of the continent. Naarm (Melbourne), for example, belongs to the Kulin nations known as the Wurundjeri and the Bunurong.¹ It is their responsibility to care for the lands, seas and waterways of Naarm and to ensure (insofar as it is possible in a colonised country) that any who live or visit there will respect the lore and traditions of the ancestor-creators who made, and continue to inhabit, this country.

What is a 'Welcome to country'?

Before the arrival of colonists, strict protocols governed expeditions or visits into the country of another nation or clan. Before heading out, permission to enter that country had to be obtained from its elders. One had to make the purpose of the visit clear and agree to carefully abide by the lore of that country for as long as the visit lasted. Once an agreement had been negotiated, the visitors would be welcomed to country by participating in a ritual which made real and active those privileges and responsibilities. On Kulin country this was known as the ceremony of 'Tanderrum'. Modern 'Welcome to Country' ceremonies are derived from these more ancient practices but are now offered in a decidedly colonial context where the capacity of elders to care for their country is greatly diminished because of unresolved issues around access, ownership and the capacity to keep knowledge systems alive.

A modern 'Welcome to Country' ceremony must be presided over by an elder or authorised representative of the clan or nation on whose country the ceremony is to be held. In Naarm, for example, this must be an elder or authorised representative of the Wurundjeri or Bunurong. In Adelaide, it would be an elder or authorised representative of the Kurna people. Members of the University of Divinity are encouraged to arrange for a Welcome to Country whenever a major event is to take place. Such events may include the opening of a new building or the launch of a new programme or initiative. To reduce the tendency toward tokenism, University members are encouraged to consult with local Indigenous nations at the beginning of any planning towards such initiatives. The Indigenous staff of the University are available to assist with this if required. If local people have been valued and involved from the beginning, a welcome to country will obviously be far more meaningful and offered far more enthusiastically. The form and content of a Welcome to Country ceremony should be left entirely in the hands of those who will offer it. In any case, it should be the very first thing that happens at any such opening or launch and you should be prepared to negotiate appropriate remuneration to those presiding at the ceremony.

¹ The other Kulin nations of central Victoria are the Wudjerrung, Tungarung and Djadjarwung. Please note that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribal names have multiple spellings when rendered in English.

What is an 'Acknowledgment of Country'?

An 'Acknowledgment of Country' should be offered by anyone who is running an event or gathering on the sovereign and unceded lands of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nations. You do not need to be Indigenous yourself to offer such an acknowledgment. Nevertheless, for the sake of integrity, it is best offered within the context of an existing relationship with a local Indigenous group or organisation. Obviously, an acknowledgment should still happen even if such a relationship has not been established. Your preparedness to do so can sometimes be a first step in establishing such relations.

An Acknowledgment of Country happens at the beginning of any such event or gathering, and should include (at least) the following elements:

1. An acknowledgment that the land (or waterway) on which the event is being held is the sovereign and unceded territory of the local Aboriginal nation. That nation should be named explicitly.
2. An acknowledgment of the elders of that nation as the primary custodians of country.
3. A commitment to work for a society in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may again be able to care for their country as they did of old.

A simple example might be:

Today we acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the sovereign and unceded country of the Kulin nations. We pay our respects to their elders, those who have cared for this country since its creation. We commit ourselves to work toward a more just settlement for all Indigenous people.

In the University of Divinity context, a prayed form of the acknowledgment may also be appropriate. For example:

God of many names, we acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the sovereign and unceded country of the Kulin nations. We give thanks for their elders, who have cared for this country since its creation. Give us courage to work toward a more just settlement for all Indigenous people. Amen.

These forms might also be adapted for use in stationery and email signatures. For example:

St Paschal Campus is located on the sovereign and unceded country of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to their elders, who have cared for this country since its creation, and commit ourselves to work towards a more just settlement for all Indigenous people.

Resources

The internet can be a great resource if you are unsure about who the custodians are in your particular part of the continent. You are encouraged to cross-reference the information you find with several sources to make sure that your information is accurate and up to date.

Here is a list of University of Divinity sites along with the appropriate Indigenous custodians pertaining to that area.

College/Site	Location	Nation
Australian Lutheran College	North Adelaide	Kurna nation
Catholic Theological College	East Melbourne	Wurundjeri nation
Eva Burrows College	Ringwood	Wurundjeri nation
Eva Burrows College	Bexley North	Eora nation
Pilgrim Theological College	Parkville	Wurundjeri nation
St Athanasius College	Melbourne	Wurundjeri nation
St Athanasius College	Donvale	Wurundjeri nation
St Francis College	Milton	Turrbal nation
St Paschal Campus, University of Divinity	Box Hill	Wurundjeri nation
Trinity College Theological School	Parkville	Wurundjeri nation
Uniting College for Leadership and Theology	Brooklyn Park	Kurna nation
Whitley College	Parkville	Wurundjeri nation
Wollaston Theological College	Mount Claremont	Whadjuk Noongyar nation
Yarra Theological Union	Box Hill	Wurundjeri nation

A more detailed discussion of these matters may be found on Garry Deverell's blog: <https://uncommonprayers.blogspot.com/2022/03/acknowledgement-of-country-for-dummies.html>

If you require further advice or input, please contact the School of Indigenous Studies.