

Gospel ministry among Aboriginal people in Australia – a historical overview

From first fleet

The penal colonisation of Australia in 1788 and subsequent free settlement brought indigenous Australians into permanent, increasing and ongoing contact with western culture and government.

The gospel came with the fleet chaplain Richard Johnson, an evangelical supported by William Wilberforce (among others), who stressed personal salvation through faith in Christ. “He supported Governor Phillip's policy of befriending the Aboriginals, and adopted an orphaned native girl, Abaroo (Boo-ron), into his family, and once remained as a hostage while Bennelong [a noted indigenous tribal leader] visited the governor” (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*, ‘Johnson, Richard (1753-1827)’).

Evangelical Anglicans consistently reached out from the earliest days right up to the present. Men like the nineteenth-century Bishop Matthew Blagden Hale operating in Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia established outreach, trained and ordained aboriginal ministers and obtained Crown land for settled local indigenous communities to build upon and manage, for example at Poonindi Mission.

Aboriginal clergy regularly ministered to mixed-race congregations, but as key personnel – such as Bishop Hale - moved on, situations declined and works came to an end, often in what was essentially a land grab by the colonists. There was an increasing subordination and relocation of indigenous peoples by state governments. This became a recurring cycle.

It is noteworthy that in New South Wales today, Anglican Aboriginal ministers and chaplains are emerging again, especially through the Ministry Training Scheme and Bush Church Aid initiatives.

Other Protestant evangelicals reached out from early days, forming mission associations, and churches were planted by Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Church of Christ and Plymouth Brethren, as well as Assemblies of God and other Pentecostals.

Very few perpetuated, and they often failed to pass on key responsibilities to indigenous believers and the next generation. A relatively small number of churches with aboriginal leadership continue from these roots today.

From settlement, there followed over 175 years of increasing marginalisation, exploitation and restriction of freedom; many aboriginals were moved on to reserves and denied

residence inside towns, having neither the vote at the ballot box nor the right to join a labour union, and even excluded from marching on Anzac Day as veterans.

Change from the ground up

But from the 1960's a general movement across the country and through the majority population began an agenda of emancipation and equal rights for all indigenous peoples.

In the 1970's two key things occurred. Firstly, the Aboriginals Evangelical Fellowship was born in order to allow freedom to govern their churches for indigenous Christians as well as a gospel platform together. Congregations within this fellowship often have a diverse racial mix but also they are a doctrinal mix though non-charismatic; their college in Western Australia is strongly dispensational but in New South Wales they are more aligned with a biblical theology.

Secondly, there was also a general falling away among evangelical aboriginal churches from this time, purportedly as the political climate of secular reconciliation came to the fore. Aged believers from that period testify to a whole generation leaving the churches to fight for societal equality and national reconciliation and the restoration of traditional lands.

"Western" materialism gained significant influence, and the increasing educational opportunity that came with new freedoms allowed an emerging generation to engage positively in the wider nation and take on professional callings; conversely social welfare dependence and deep-seated challenges grew among youth and community. Incarceration rates, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence, suicide and mental health struggles are a troubling reality and much higher than national averages.

The desire to regain lost culture and identity have led on the part of some to an antipathy toward Christianity, defining it as part of the colonial oppression and a problem, rather than a worldwide salvation for those from every race and culture.

Today's needs and realities

The current popular Australian aboriginal claims to 40,000 to 80,000 years of continuous culture, and to be the oldest continuing culture in the history of the world, would appear to stand in direct opposition to Genesis 1-11. A belief in a sort of utopian cultural ideal present before settlement, and that regaining this lost culture will restore them as a people, abounds. This is certainly the case for the younger adult generation and a number now accept this chronology as fact, as does a wider Australian community. Redemption by return to precolonial beliefs and community would not be an unfair summary.

This all means simmering tensions both in the aboriginal and wider community in the present; it is a real challenge to hold the middle ground together for both black and white believers in good will and the grace of our Lord Jesus. But it is essential and so worthwhile.

A Wiradjuri elder in his 70's, who had invested heavily in politics and culture and held political office for at least a quarter of a century, recently testified: "culture tends to divide peoples and I am not so heavily involved now, I want to support the ministry of my church and Pastor's bible teaching, as only the Gospel unites all peoples". The change in him has been evident to many: wearing his culture positively, but in the name of Christ reaching out to all.

There are just under 800,000 aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders remaining across the country today (with a significant 10% increase in the past 30 years). They amount to about 3.5% of the national population of Australia. Two-thirds live outside the major cities and at the last census 60% of indigenous peoples claimed some sort of Christian heritage or belief [National Census 2016]. Much of this may be nominal or traditional, as with any people group.

The doctrines of grace are only consistently present in a handful of churches that have high aboriginal membership; instead there is a man-centred Arminian and Dispensational teaching that abounds, with much modern charismatic influence and an ever growing appetite for conspiracy theories. The latest (distressingly evident) is the belief that COVID vaccination equates with the "mark of the beast" or a renewed attempt at genocide.

The blending of animistic beliefs with Christian teaching – syncretism - incorporating everything from smoking ceremonies to rainbow serpent myths into theological practices and belief is growing popular. An accompanying belief that you can lose your salvation and regain it any number of times creates a brittle and fragile faith.

The historically consistent effort in regard to the doctrines of grace has been through the evangelical or "Sydney" Anglican group, but they are a minority in a much larger deeply compromised denomination. The Anglicans also more easily accommodated claims of 40, 000 – 80, 000 years of continuing aboriginal culture, possibly due to a more ready acceptance of a theistic evolutionary framework of creation.

Reformed non-conformist churches are greatly needed and little present. Where such exist, they are worthy of real support, prayerfully and practically. More need to be planted. One example of such is the Dubbo Christian Family Church, which has an extensive teaching and pastoral ministry and provides conference occasions and regional encouragement to a wider group of believers and enquirers. The backbone of the church is made up of the consistently committed indigenous believers, yet the local congregation is a healthy and united mix of culture and race.

Cross-cultural gospel cooperation and witness to the community is critically important. With my family, we have been privileged to take part in this co-operative communion and been embraced in love by many aboriginal brethren. The doctrines of grace and the sovereignty of God at the heart of the Biblical gospel are desperately needed, to build upon the rock and

not the sand, to see believers grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. The Gaius Trust seeks to support and equip gospel workers and churches in this context.

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