



Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship
FAMILY & YOUTH SERVICES INC.

CAPACITY BUILDING INQUIRY
Submission No.S.....

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21/8/02

The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Committee on
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Cornish,

re: Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities

On behalf of the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship, I am pleased to forward the attached submission, for consideration by the committee.

If you desire further information or have any queries, I would appreciate speaking with the Committee when it meets near Melbourne, or you may contact me as indicated on page 5 of the submission.

Thankyou for the invitation to submit comments to your Committee. I look forward to reading its final report.

Yours faithfully,

Neville Lilley
Administrator



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Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Capacity Building In Indigenous Communities

Introduction

The interaction between Indigenous Australians and Western Colonists is the greatest and longest critical incident in Australian history. Because this incident has continued for over 200 years, every Australian, black or white, experiences some degree of critical incident stress and grief. While some have worked through their grief to achieve acceptance and adjustment, many others are still experiencing denial, anger or depression.

Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship (AEF) wishes to highlight a significant issue which, it believes, seldom receives adequate consideration in the planning and implementation of policies and programs to address the impacts of marginalisation, experienced by Indigenous Australians. **Indigenous Aboriginal culture is spiritual. Introduced Western culture is secular.**

Without adequately addressing this conflict of cultures, reconciliation will be just a comforting vision, and programs to alleviate various material disadvantages will not achieve their full potential. The process of developing effective policies and programs must include an acknowledgment of past events, and different interpretations must be seen in the light of the particular world views on which they are based.

Background

The motivating world view which drove colonial settlement was secular. The new settlers were seeking new lands and resources which they could exploit to expand their industrial and commercial enterprises. The desire to increase material assets at the expense of the interests of other people was a major motivator of many actions which led to the dispersal of Aboriginal people and the decimation of many tribal groups.

The world view which had sustained Indigenous people in Australia for thousands of years was spiritual. Aboriginal spirituality was an integral part of their daily lives. They believed that the Creator Spirit who formed the land, created its unique flora and fauna, and provided the sunshine and rain which sustained life, had entrusted it to their care and management. As part of this stewardship, they harvested only what they needed.

From the start, there was little attempt to understand the Indigenous world view or to negotiate an accommodating view, which would permit both groups to coexist. The initial opportunity for reconciliation was lost, and the marginalising forces which have resulted in the disadvantages and trauma experienced by Indigenous people today were set in train. The sequence of events which followed, forced a dominant western culture on the Aboriginal people of Australia.

The resulting loss of contact with support networks and training, provided by families and communities, underlies many of the negative emotions and activities which have destroyed Aboriginal people and communities for over 200 years. The physical outcomes of marginalisation - poor health, difficulty in concentrating and learning, unemployment, homelessness, substance addiction, abuse, suicide, and anti-social behaviour - occur as a result of the dominance of secularism over spirituality, which creates lack of purpose for living, depression, low self-esteem and lack of motivation.

Because the loss of spirituality and emotional identity resulting from dispossession of lands has contributed significantly to the process of marginalisation, and is a major factor in the disadvantages of Indigenous people today, the process of reconciliation must include a significant and intentional spiritual component. Lack of appropriate spiritual content is one of the reasons why welfare and "practical reconciliation" produce limited results, despite the urgency of alleviating physical needs and the expenditure of large sums of money.

Spiritual and Emotional Considerations

In the resolution of any emotional or spiritual trauma, time must be allowed for parties involved to grieve, and achieve a healthy and satisfying closure, before the process of rehabilitation and building for a positive future can begin. For Indigenous people a "sorry time" must precede the grieving process. It would help the reconciliation and healing process if non-Indigenous people can understand the significance of "sorry time" and experience it in ways which are appropriate for them.

Resolution of spiritual and emotional traumas requires confronting and acknowledging fundamental facts and feelings. Because this can be very stressful, it is often approached superficially. Unfortunately, this can lead to acute problems becoming chronic or systemic. Many attempts to improve the circumstances and life experience of Aboriginal people have followed this path, by focusing on material outcomes, which has resulted in welfare, provided by powerful benefactors to disempowered recipients. The challenge for this inquiry is to find ways in which the chronic disadvantages, resulting from marginalisation experienced by Indigenous people, can be addressed.

Because the cause of these disadvantages includes a strong spiritual component, a satisfying solution cannot be achieved without including an adequate spiritual response. Many well intentioned programs lack this spiritual component and have been introduced before the process of grieving has been completed.

This observation is not a criticism of those who have spent much time and energy attempting to address material disadvantages. It is presented to highlight the

surprising lack of spiritual and emotional emphasis or content in many of the programs designed to help people whose culture is very spiritual.

Indigenous Community Chaplains

Programs and practical activities, designed to help people adjust to changed circumstances, are of little benefit until the intense post traumatic emotions have been resolved. As the stresses of competition increase, chaplains are being invited into businesses, sporting associations, educational institutions and emergency services to walk with people through the grief they experience as a result of change and critical incidents.

During the past 30 years AEF pastors have been invited by Indigenous families and communities to conduct hundreds of funerals to minister to people as they grieve the loss of loved ones and friends. In the light of these experiences, AEF believes that Indigenous Community Chaplains can contribute positively to helping Aboriginal people work through their grief and heal the trauma of marginalisation and dispossession.

If included as active contributors to planning, designing and implementing various programs, Aboriginal Community Chaplains can make a very positive contribution to *building the capacities of community members to better support families, community organisations and representative councils, so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities.*

AEF has a wealth of trained leaders, both men and women, who would fit into chaplaincy roles. These men and women have been trained in pastoral care at the AEF Training Colleges over the past twenty years. Many of these graduates are currently working in government and community organisations because of the lack of funds to place them in pastoral roles. While this is a short-term solution to enable them to financially support their families, it is providing practical experience of networks and processes which facilitate living effectively in Australian society. At least four men have indicated that they are awaiting the opportunity to minister more fully, in strategic roles such as Aboriginal Community Chaplains, and the first appointments are currently being implemented.

Spirituality and Reconciliation

Seeing and doing, following the example and leadership of Elders are fundamental ways of gaining knowledge and wisdom for Aboriginal people. Relationships are important in Indigenous culture because they tie families and communities together. The land and all that derives from it, are a common resource, not to be owned or exploited, but to be cared for, to benefit all who may pass through.

Reconciliation of, people with people, people with God, and people with the land, is central to the Christian message. While Jesus walked this earth, He modelled His message as He spent time listening, and sharing experiences with poor and marginalised people. He committed the ministry of reconciliation to His followers.

The first Christians who came in contact with Aboriginal people seldom stopped to listen and learn about the Indigenous culture. Many tried to explain their message in

words, and rather than modelling their message, their actions frequently reflected or supported the actions and policies of government institutions and commercial enterprises which were dispossessing and dispersing Aboriginal people.

This inadequate attempt at cross-cultural communication meant that many Aboriginal people missed the spiritual message of reconciliation, and saw the Church as a colonial institution promoting or supporting the western secular culture, which was so devastating for them. It would be unfortunate if these misconceptions and distressing experiences from the past were to limit positive possibilities for the future.

Building Positive Communities

The Aboriginal heritage of Indigenous Chaplains will separate them from institutions of the dominant culture, enabling them to communicate, as a friend, with those in the communities they serve. As they help Indigenous people understand their feelings of spiritual loss and dispossession, Chaplains will share a message of hope for reconciliation and a positive new future. Because the need is so great, Aboriginal Community Chaplains will require assistance to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of all the Indigenous people in their communities.

The AEF vision for Indigenous Community Chaplains seeks to meet this challenge and to encourage Elders, and train family and community leaders to support the chaplains and to extend and reinforce their ministry. Helping Indigenous people, especially children and young people, understand and develop positive responses to their spiritual and emotional feelings of loss and dispossession can lead to a reduction in anti-social and destructive behaviour. This will result in less people in custody and help develop positive outcomes from education, health promotion and other programs.

Aboriginal Community Chaplains would help people build on their strengths, and avoid the traps of hopelessness, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse and other destructive behaviours. Just by walking with Indigenous people in hospitals, schools, prisons and as they face the issues of daily life, whether rejoicing at the birth of a child or grieving the loss of a loved one, these chaplains will play a major role in improving Indigenous health, education and positive attitudes to life.

Many Aboriginal people have difficulty integrating with the dominant individualistic Australian culture, because it is highly competitive and focused on individual rights. Chaplains could help their people understand and participate in this culture, by assisting them to reconnect with support networks and training, traditionally provided by families and communities. Through this process, many of the negative emotions and activities which are destroying individuals and communities could be minimised.

Indigenous Chaplains available to, and working with, their people in communities of interest and places where they gather, can help,

- heal past traumas and hurts,
- motivate people to learn and become positive productive members of society,
- develop support networks for individuals and groups.

Chaplains can assist Aboriginal people participate in the dominant culture without losing their identity, through understanding that the most effective results are not achieved by pursuing personal goals at the expense of all others, but through pursuing goals which benefit both the individual and the community.

Conclusion

The proposals in this submission will contribute specifically to the first term of reference - *Building the capacities of community members to better support families, community organisations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities.*

However, as Indigenous Community Chaplains become active contributors in planning, designing and implementing various programs and policies, they will contribute positively to the second and third terms of reference -

- *Building the capacities of Indigenous organisations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way, and*
- *Building the capacities of government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.*

Reconciliation will not be possible until both, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, are able to face and effectively debrief, the critical incident stresses and grief, which they experience as they realise the magnitude and implications of marginalisation and dispossession.

In the spirit of 2 Chronicles 7:14, AEF invites all Australians to “humble [ourselves]” (acknowledge past and present realities), “pray and seek [God’s] face and turn from [our] wicked ways” (recognise the significance of spiritual issues), so that we may see God “forgive [our] sin and heal [our] land.

For the ministry of Indigenous Community Chaplains to be effective, they need the support and encouragement of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Recognition of their potential in the Report of this Inquiry will provide a base from which to move forward as individuals, families, communities and government and commercial enterprises cooperate to face the challenge.

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