

POLICY STATEMENT

NATSICA SUMMIT, Alice Springs

18 & 19 July 2007

A summit on preventing Indigenous child abuse convened by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance (NATSICA) has detailed alternatives to the Federal Government's emergency response plan.

The summit was held on the 18-19th July and attended by Indigenous members of the nation's major Christian denominations. People worked together on innovative and alternative programs grounded in traditional Aboriginal and Islander spirituality and knowledge.

The summit affirmed the 'Little Children are Sacred' report and its recommendations, but disagrees strongly with the current approach undertaken by the Federal Government.

Overarching Policy – Indigenous Christian Spirituality

Indigenous Christian spirituality emanates from its' biblical and cultural understanding and interpreting it's biblical understanding from it's own world view.

We call for engaging alternative approaches grounded in this Indigenous Christian spirituality.

Indigenous spirituality has proven to be a very powerful force for empowering Aboriginal people to take responsibility in exercising their right to address the dysfunctional nature of some communities.

The problem of child sexual abuse is an abhorrent criminal act emanating from aberrant human behavior and is related to a breakdown in psychological and relational understandings which in turn has removed barriers that give understanding for appropriate relationships with children and we believe that this behavior is associated with a diminished spirituality. The thought processes in an individual that perpetrates a devastating, hurtful and damaging behavior on children needs to be understood. The perpetrators have experienced a breakdown in their cultural, social and indigenous spiritual understandings that would in normal circumstances serve to prevent them from perpetrating such acts. Alternative interventions are needed to respond in these critical areas of their makeup.

Indigenous Spirituality is a holistic view of life. It is interconnected, not separated like the western thinking. Laws for living, cultural and social understandings of life, indigenous biblical understandings all permeate Indigenous spirituality.

This holistic approach is what we are advocating in relation to alternative responses to child sexual abuse. Underpinning these alternatives, Indigenous people must be part of resolving what is essentially their problem, for the outcomes to be sustainable and effective.

This requires a two pronged approach – economic development and rehabilitation.

Economic development is the process of developing a set of skills that are saleable in the market, in return for which an income is derived. These skills are both intrinsic and technical. Intrinsic skills include the ability to believe in ones resilience, to have a sense of purpose and believe that one's gifts are valuable to society. Technical skill are work skills. These are the ability to work in a productive and meaningful way.

NATSICA support positive and practical actions to enhance the economic development of Indigenous people in communities in the NT. This includes support for capacity building and vocational training which will provide Indigenous people with a set of skills to engage in meaningful economic and social development.

The second prong in the approach is rehabilitation. At some stage offenders will seek to re-enter the communities from which they were removed. Appropriate rehabilitation for the offender and holistic support for the victim and their family are needed. However, any rehabilitation intervention which fails to embody indigenous spiritual healing, will fail. This is because Indigenous spiritual healing will serve as a mechanism to go beyond the physical and mental trauma and bring the perpetrator to the ultimate realisation of his wrongs and its impact on the victim.

This alternative counters the western approach of government - compartmentalizing responses to problems not a holistic response.

For example, the Federal Government Emergency Task force is undertaking health screening in the NT of children. There are masses of interrelated issues in community and family life that are impacting upon these children's health. There are broader issues of material poverty and overcrowded housing that play their part also. We need to work upon resolving these structural injustices, as well as situations within families. Barriers exist that prevent better child and family health. What are they, why are they there? These must be understood, before responding.

A lifting of people's worth and self belief through programs grounded in Indigenous Christian spirituality, would, we believe, lead to building people up, empowering them and give them a strong intrinsic sense of self worth and strong understanding of the devastating and destructive negative impact of their actions on others, especially children. Developing their spirituality gives a conscience and a sense of self worth. It also serves to give them a stronger understanding of the human worth of others. This requires taking the perpetrators world view of others, which is often negative, and turning it into a positive understanding of those around him.

The Government's current approach serves to demonize, stereotype and further break the spirits of individuals, families and communities.

The Government needs to engage Indigenous leaders who have a demonstrated capability in this area of concern especially in the implementation of long-sighted programs that affirm people, lifts their spirits and inspire them to change the future direction of their communities.

This initially translates into responding to what is impacting upon people's spirits. Provision of adequate long-term interventions working with people in overcoming deep rooted community problems such as alcohol supply, overcrowding and inadequate housing, the high cost of nutritious foods, the loss of dignity and self worth and access to quality education as just some pressing examples.

Engaging in community development with the Indigenous people in the 73 NT communities is therefore essential. Community development includes building the capacity of communities to ensure the appropriate level of self-government and self-determination. This requires a commitment to improving the lives of the most underprivileged in communities. This is closely linked with the idea of economic development – that individuals should have equal opportunity to progress onto a meaningful economic life, that is both fulfilling in a spiritual and economic sense. This is underpinned by a long-term approach of transforming people's lives and community life. People of goodwill are required that exercise their gifts, insights and ideas, but that work mutually with the community members gifts, insights, ideas and aspiration.

What we are seeing instead is the Federal Government's superficial military laced approach to the complex issue of child abuse.

We believe that child abuse can be stopped with the right measures. While intervention from the Government is welcome, it is just one part of a complex solution that needs to be undergirded by an Indigenous spiritual element.

NATSICA call upon the Government to be mindful and embrace the below (NATSICA) Summit's recommendations and alternatives" said Rev Blackman.

"Only then will people take ownership and responsibility for their actions and this is what the (NATSICA) Summit policy recommendations have reflected.

NATSICAs overarching policy approach permeates, underpins and guides these following policy positions.

Suggested policy statement on Alcohol and other Drugs (AOD)

NATSICA endorses the Federal Government's policy on AOD control. These measures are a first step in AOD control. However, it is necessary to expand policy to ensure that

a range of other measures are in place to complement Introduction of legislation on alcohol control.

- NATSICA believe that Indigenous Christian spirituality is life changing. It is more than just passing feel good experience, but is about identity and our place in the world. When people are clear about these they have a greater sense of purpose for themselves, families and communities.

A good sense of one's own identity and worth, and security about their place in the world, can feed a desire to involve oneself with others in meaningful ways, such as sport, community initiatives, training and employment, leadership.

Ultimately we are interested in empowering people to have greater control over their circumstances, and ability to make positive life choices.

- There is a need for an intervention with people abusing alcohol and drugs. Indigenous Christian Spirituality is one. NATSICA promotes this approach. This requires the provision of viable and attractive alternatives to alcohol and drug consumption. NATSICA advocate the use of Indigenous Christian spirituality within communities to provide diversionary activities. This could involve Indigenous Christian faith meetings, culturally based recreational activities, relational team building sporting activities, and provision of practical vocational education.
- Initiatives that encourage Communications skills. People need to be able to communicate what they are feeling or thinking, so as to be able to share with others and breakdown isolation within their circumstances and life. Drug and alcohol abuse is usually taken up when people have other personal issues or preoccupations. Skills such as communication are needed for people to adequately share and deal with issues.
- Focus on implementing supporting programs that enable men to rediscover their role in relation to family and community responsibilities;
- Allow for properly resourced local support services for rehabilitation and learn from other successful rehabilitation services and;
- Allow building of capacity within indigenous people and the removal of blockages to the management of their communities.
- Reduce availability of alcohol. This requires a reduction in the number of liquor outlets, the opening hours of outlets and liquor availability in general. Action must also focus on the illegal trade in alcohol. There needs to be more severe penalties for apprehended sly grog runners and vendors in breach of the law, especially where communities have elected to be dry.

Suggested policy statement on welfare

NATSICA acknowledges welfare is a contributing factor to the cycle of poverty in communities. Accordingly, NATSICA propose the following policy actions with regard to welfare:

- NATSICA cannot support the proposal that Centerlink will decide who will and will not receive welfare without knowing what criteria will be applied in making these value judgments. However, if this proposal is enacted, it should be applied equally to all Australians in receipt of welfare. The selective application of this policy is discriminatory and;
- There is a need to empower individuals in receipt of welfare in the area of money management. NATSICA can participate in the development and implementation of money management programs in partnership with other agencies.

Suggested Policy Statement for School Attendance

NATSICA firmly believe that the Federal Government's approach to link the receipt of Federal Government's income support and family assistance to school attendance is wrong. This is a negative approach. NATSICA advocate a positive approach of empowerment and encouragement. This includes:

- promotion of cultural, social and educational values in school attendance. This includes allowing other family members, in particular grandmothers, mothers and elders, to participate in their own education and that of their family members (in accordance with Aboriginal family structures). There is also a need to promote cross cultural education (education of Indigenous people about non-indigenous ways and the education of non-Indigenous people about indigenous ways);
- ensuring health and nutrition issues are properly dealt with, including monitoring hearing and eyesight of school children and;
- ensuring longer teacher tenure and adequate facilities are available. This should include cultural preparation as well as the training of Indigenous teachers and support staff.

Acquisition of Townships and Town Camps

NATSICA strongly object to the link that the Federal Government has made between the protection of children from abuse and the acquisition of leases of townships. Removing permits from major communities could provide easy access for the entry of alcohol, drugs, pornography and further mental and physical harm to children. The permit system provided a mechanism to allow members of the community to enquire what someone was doing. If they suspected somebody of trafficking banned substances or items, they could ask them to leave instead of waiting for a very long period of time for police to obtain evidence, which is often extremely hard to do.

NATSICA advocate that:

- under no circumstance should the tenure of Aboriginal land be changed;
- there is no link between child abuse and acquisition of leases of townships and;
- it is an immoral act to use Indigenous money to compensate Indigenous people for the proposed acquisition of their land.