

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament

Position statement from the Executive Committee of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand

Executive summary

The Executive Committee of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) has published this position statement as a contribution to the national conversation about the Referendum proposing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to the Australian federal parliament. The statement is written primarily for Christian leaders in order to encourage deeper theological reflection about the Referendum and our responses to it.

The statement is a structured theological argument arising from discussions within the AAANZ membership and its broader support network. It reflects a desire to stand in solidarity with First Nations peoples, but does not claim to represent the opinion of all Anabaptists nor First Nations peoples.

The outcomes of our deliberations are that:

- We commit to bearing witness, by the actions within our own communities, to a society in which First Nations peoples are fully included and honoured. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.
- We commit to listening to First Nations leaders, expecting to find wisdom there that helps us to reconnect to each other, to God, and to this land. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.
- We commit to speaking boldly for justice in relation to First Nations peoples. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.
- The majority of AAANZ supporters commit to supporting the Referendum and to doing what we can to make the Constitutional change succeed. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.
- We commit to continued solidarity after the Referendum with First Nations peoples in general and personal protection and care for those First Nations people we know. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Some context

In 1770, Britain claimed possession of the east coast of the Australian continent. Now, more than 250 years later, and 123 years after the proclamation establishing the Commonwealth of Australia, the indigenous or First Nations peoples account for only 3.2% of the population¹. In 2023, the Commonwealth parliament called a Referendum “To alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.”

At the time of publishing this position statement, the outcome of the Referendum is a month away. This document is a contribution to the public conversation about the Referendum, written from an Anabaptist perspective.

Anabaptism

The Anabaptist tradition started in the 16th century as a response to the Reformation in Europe. At the heart of this tradition lies a commitment to following the way of Jesus as revealed in his life, death, and resurrection. Empowered by God's radical love, we seek to embody Jesus' teachings through building community, active peacemaking, and working for reconciliation with God, others, and all creation. Anabaptism is less about making creedal statements, which can divide and separate people, and more about a life of discipleship together where belief inspires and shapes conviction and provokes mission.

Anabaptism is a movement within the Christian tradition rather than a church denomination. It encompasses multiple denominations and groups such as the Mennonites, Amish, and Bruderhof. The movement emphasises local worshipping communities who demonstrate the message of the Gospel as a witness to the surrounding world, the separation of church and state, and non-violence as a key element of God's mission of reconciliation. Anabaptists tend to promote a restorative view of justice, often engage in conflict resolution, non-violent direct action, and peacemaking activities.

Western culture has emerged from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over society. Abuses of power have distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus and left the church ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. The frequent associations of the church with empire, status, and wealth has been inappropriate for followers of Jesus and has damaged their witness. We should neither be co-opted by the mentality of empire, with its imposition of control over its citizens, nor should we use coercive force to overthrow that empire. Instead, Anabaptism promotes a **third way** that is more in line with the example and teaching of Jesus. In this alternative vision of faith and life, Anabaptists seek to demonstrate, or enact, or incarnate, the message of Jesus rather than simply giving cognitive assent to a so-called "Christian" ideology. Contemporary Anabaptism is committed to bringing and being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, as well as to our neighbours. We show what it means to live in God's kingdom in active anticipation of its coming in full.

This is not the way of traditional politics that seeks to enforce an ideology through law and government policies. Nor is it the way of ignorance and withdrawal that accepts the *status quo*. The Anabaptist third way rejects tribalism and the misuse of one group's power over others, including the use of coercive force to impose justice. Instead, through faithful witness to what we see in Jesus, we affirm the equality and dignity of all people. Through humility, we seek to let go of personal power in order to empower others. This subversive form of politics invites all people into the embrace of a loving community under the gaze of a loving God.

Following this "third way", Anabaptists emphasise right living (orthopraxy) and right relationships over right doctrine/belief (orthodoxy) and are more likely to stand back from state structures and traditional political processes. This alternative approach to power is nevertheless politically subversive and Anabaptists have often stood up against injustices and spoken prophetically to the state.

The AAANZ and its response to the Referendum

The Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) was founded in 1998, with the dual aims of supporting those who already have an interest in Anabaptism, and promoting an Anabaptist understanding of the Christian faith within Australia and New Zealand. We have not sought to establish separate churches but to encourage the members of our network in whatever faith community they choose.

Details of the AAANZ can be found on our website—<http://aaanz.au>—but a helpful summary is captured by the threefold declaration that provides the core structure for this position statement ...

- **Jesus** in the centre of our Faith
- **Community** is the centre of our Life
- **Reconciliation** is the centre of our Work.

In the Anabaptist tradition, God’s will is discerned neither by obeying leaders in a hierarchy nor as individuals, but in the context of the local worshipping community. God speaks to us as we value each other, and often through the lone voice of dissent. In line with that tradition, when the AAANZ considered its response to the Referendum, we canvassed our members and supporters to gauge whether or not a consensus position was likely. After collective input was gathered, a position statement was drafted and circulated. All interested parties were invited to an online gathering to pray and to discuss the draft. That gathering unanimously supported the position statement, but acknowledged dissenting concerns from several members and supporters who were not able to be present. The meeting agreed to various modifications to the draft and delegated the approval of final wording to the Executive Committee.

Given that the AAANZ membership does not include any First Nations people, this position statement does not claim to express First Nation’s sentiment but rather reflects a non-indigenous desire to stand in solidarity with First Nations peoples. Like other non-indigenous supporters, we are still learning about the best ways to enact our support and remain open to the advice of our First Nations neighbours.

Acknowledging First Nations patience

Since the first sightings of Europeans on this continent, the newcomers have experienced the patience and kindness of First Nations people. From the early days when the local people showed Europeans where to find good drinking water, First Nations people have been clear about their connection to this land, as well as their willingness to share it. Many of us have experienced hospitality and been welcomed through smoking ceremonies at the initiation of First Nations people.

After extensive consultation, *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* was signed by over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates in May 2017.² We acknowledge with deep appreciation the continuing stance of patience, respect, and hope shown in that statement. We respond in kind: with humility, with thanks, and with an open and listening heart.

On 26 January 2019, the AAANZ signed a covenant³ in which we acknowledged past injustices against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and committed to “seek substantive constitutional reform and structural reform, to empower Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples to take a rightful place in their own country.” In line with that covenant, this

position statement reflects our continuing support for the aspirations of First Nations people. With wish to stand with First Nations peoples in their call for justice. We share a common yearning for *shalom*: that is, for a state of true peace, justice, wholeness and rightness.

We do not naively assume that there is a single indigenous opinion about this Referendum. First Nations inhabitants of this continent are not one person, or even one nation, but multiple nations, multiple peoples. Unsurprisingly, those people and peoples express diverse views, including a majority who support the Referendum and a significant minority who do not.⁴ We side with all First Nations people in their desire for a fair and prosperous life alongside those of us who are Second Nations immigrants. In particular, we acknowledge the “call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution” that is part of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

JESUS: the centre of our faith

An Anabaptist faith emphasises that the life and teaching of Jesus is normative for the life of his followers. That is, when we ask ethical questions about how we should act, the norm—the plumb line—comes from what we see in Jesus. Although many ethical issues today did not exist in Jesus’ time, and the recorded biographies of Jesus do not show his direct stance on such issues, we can nevertheless infer his likely stance on many modern issues from what we know of his character. We seek to mould our character on Jesus, forming habits that mirror his approach to truth, relationships, authority, etc.

- Rather than grasp on to power, Jesus showed humility and acted as a servant so that those around him could be empowered.
- Rather than seeking a place among the rich and famous, Jesus honoured the marginalised, frequently choosing the company of lepers, beggars, the demon-possessed and outcast, as well as those of other races and religions beliefs, and even exploiters like Zacchaeus.
- Rather than seek the fall of his enemies, Jesus showed love to them. In fact, Jesus elevated love of neighbour above all other relational principles, even when his own neighbours sought his death. Love of God, to Jesus, is accompanied inevitably with love of each other.
- Rather than be restricted by earthly authority, Jesus asserted that his authority came from God, and that his mission was to invite people into a “kingdom” the likes of which had never before been experienced. He called his followers to pray that God’s will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven”—not by the imposition of some greater force or threat but by the subversive politics of love.

Jesus is the source and central reference point for faith and lifestyle, and for an understanding of church that is engaged with society. Jesus’ early follower Paul called us ambassadors of this new kingdom. We are to be firmly rooted in this earth, walking in the way that Jesus demonstrated. We are to enact the truth revealed in Jesus rather than to simply pronounce our cognitive assent: to shine with good works so that others may give glory to God.

To live in the kingdom of God is to value, listen to, and care for all, so that all people have opportunities to flourish. We cannot imagine that in the kingdom Jesus envisaged, certain

people would be side-lined, nor that some would flourish at the cost of others. How might we let go of our grasp on power, to be servants of the marginalised First Nations people who are our neighbours? How might we honour them, show love to them, and build the kingdom of heaven here in Australia along with them?

Jesus stands within a tradition that promotes a particular type of relationship with land. Of fundamental importance in that relationship was God's expectation that humans would act as custodians, stewards, or guardians of creation. Any claim to personal or corporate ownership of land is secondary to the recognition that all the world is God's. This aligns closely with the traditional view of First Nations peoples on this continent, who have founded a culture on shared responsibility to care for the land.

In the history of the Israelites, the importance of land is a central theme: Abraham followed a calling to a new land; land was home; the loss of land meant exile. Given the importance of land to our sense of belonging, the act of dispossession that the First Nations peoples have experienced on this continent inevitably and fundamentally disempowers them. The resulting up-rooted-ness is seen in symptoms like despair, suicide, substance abuse, crime, violence: all euphemistically referred to in Australia as "the gap" which, supposedly, our politicians have sought to "close".

First Nations peoples are effectively exiled on their own homeland. But non-indigenous people are also disconnected from this land. We seek to own and control it, mining its resources unsustainably to its destruction and ours.

Part of the good news of Jesus is that God's mercy enables us *all* to find a way home, in fact to co-create the kingdom of heaven so that this world becomes the home God intended for us. All humanity is on a journey from exile to home.

Indigenous custodianship of this continent across many millennia has produced a culture rich in insight about the land which non-indigenous people can listen to and learn from. This is, or should be, a natural out-working of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

COMMUNITY: the centre of our life

The Anabaptist tradition places the local worshipping community of faith at the centre of our shared life. From the beginning, God planned to bless all the nations on earth by creating a new community. The central feature of this community is *shalom*: a persistent experience of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity. *Shalom* implies wholeness, equity, and good relations between individuals, groups, and nations. Followers of Jesus seek to embody this vision and to work towards creating God's new community: not so much to preach the Good News, but to demonstrate what it looks like. As such, the primary approach of the church in Australia in relation to First Nations peoples has to be the enactment within our own communities of the inclusive orthopraxy of love.

We encourage neither slavish adherence to institutional control nor the free-for-all of individualism, but the voluntary commitment to people with whom we live and work, worship and witness. We cannot exist as individuals. We need each other. We need a place of belonging in which we are personally known and nurtured. It is within that context that we jointly discern God's will: not from within ourselves individually, nor from some person in

authority above us, but through listening to each other in faithful witnessing and worshipping communities.

A communal discernment process starts with listening. Deep listening. Listening to multiple voices rather than just the ones we already agree with. Anabaptism has always fostered the ideal of consensus. We listen to the majority view but pay special attention to the minority view because God often speaks through those on the margins. Although 100% agreement is not always possible, the 1% dissenting view has often led to rich insights and revelations that inspire real change.

Shared communal discernment can and should be evident in grassroots engagement with each other: within religious communities as well as within civic communities. How can we include, care for, and co-operate with our First Nations brothers and sisters unless we listen to them?

In contrast to the recent public discourse about the Referendum, which exemplifies our modern propensity for polarised and binary positioning, an Anabaptist approach encourages real dialog. The art of conversation, with respectful hearts that listen because of a desire to learn and to nurture, opens a space for honesty and progress. For too long the public and governmental approach to First Nations peoples has shut down their voice and stifled informed conversation. The intention of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to Parliament is precisely to enable such conversation.

The most important locus of action is with our neighbour—those we encounter—rather than a nebulous “nation”. Nevertheless, given that decisions at a national level impact local communities, federal and state political processes will also benefit from these same principles. If our political leaders treated this nation as a society rather than as an economy, they would stop fear-mongering and instead build trust. As a society we should value co-operation and avoid “us v’s them” thinking. The process of wise discernment at the national level also requires deep listening and respect, and that is not possible when there is no structure for listening to First Nations peoples, or if that structure is at the whim of the current government.

RECONCILIATION: the centre of our work

The Anabaptist tradition emphasises the importance of non-violent peacemaking. This stance is derived from a fundamental understanding that reconciliation is the goal of the Gospel. As ambassadors of the new society inaugurated by Jesus—what he termed the “kingdom of heaven” or “kingdom of God”—our primary task is reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a process that aims towards *shalom*, a process of both justice and mercy that focusses on establishing and maintaining right relationships: with each other, with God, and with creation. To reconcile is to remove enmity; to bring together in wholeness and peace. In Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of heaven, everything is made right and everyone has the opportunity to flourish.

The word “reconciliation” implies there was a relationship that has been broken and that we seek to repair. In Australia, however, the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people has always been broken. Consequently, the process of reconciliation is not about returning to a prior state of togetherness. Rather, reconciliation must both deconstruct an

historically broken and abusive relationship and construct a new relationship based on mutual respect.

Reconciliation depends on preconditions such as the mutual recognition of each party, listening, and truth telling. Reconciliation requires more than that, but those three are essential. Making progress on reconciliation in Australia is difficult precisely because we have not yet met those preconditions. Recognition was partially achieved by earlier changes to the Constitution that removed First Nations peoples from the category of “flora and fauna” and allowed voting rights. But attempts to formally recognise their pre-existing presence on this continent prior to European settlement have failed to eventuate.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart calls for the establishment of a voice to parliament, for truth telling, and for some form of treaty (or treaties since there are more than two groups involved). Those three elements provide the skeleton of a reconciliation process, the first of which is the focus of the Referendum. Establishing an enduring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to parliament ensures a formal mechanism for collective listening and provides First Nations peoples a platform for truth telling. On its own, that does not constitute reconciliation, but it is difficult to imagine how reconciliation can occur without a truth-telling platform something like what is envisaged by the Referendum.

A significant minority of First Nations leaders speak against the Referendum. Some believe the Referendum is a distraction from more important issues that will only be resolved through treaties. Others fear that supporting the Referendum tacitly accepts the Commonwealth’s denial of the unceded sovereignty of the original inhabitants. Such concerns call for continued open, honest, and painful engagement regardless of the outcome of this Referendum. We suggest, however, from a non-indigenous point of view, that those who claim Australian citizenship will not be moved towards those deeper truths unless they first learn to listen, and that the proposed voice to parliament ensures a forum for such listening.

We noted above that God often speaks through the outsider and marginalised: not through the wise but the foolish, and even in one biblical incident through a donkey! Social change rarely happens in response to a voice from inside the system. Power dynamics within any social system ensure that the voices that are heard are those supporting the *status quo*. If we seek progress, we must listen to those outside or on the margins of the system.

An important posture of those seeking to be peacemakers, or ambassadors of reconciliation, is to stand with the marginalised, not to speak for them but to enable them to speak for themselves. The current system of racial politics in Australia needs to be disrupted, and that will only happen if the voices of the marginalised First Nations peoples are unmuted.

Implications for contemporary Australia

In the Anabaptist vision, the truths of our faith are first of all enacted and demonstrated in local worshipping communities. Thus, showing love, humility, servanthood, and sharing power with the marginalised First Nations people in our midst is of primary importance. Through that lived example we might draw others into the mission of God, rather than imposing those behaviours on others through laws or public policies.

Consequently, we commit to bearing witness by the actions within our own communities, to a society in which First Nations peoples are fully included and

honoured. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Second, recognition, listening, and truth telling are essential preconditions to reconciliation. The character of God as revealed in Jesus impels us to love and respect those whom others have marginalised. We give dignity to those whose dignity has been taken away. We turn towards those whom others have turned away from. We listen to those whom others have muted. In our context that must mean listening to the people God first entrusted with the custodianship of this continent.

Consequently, we commit to listening to First Nations leaders, expecting to find wisdom there that helps us to reconnect to each other, to God, and to this land. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Third, though our primary mechanism for change is the demonstration of this new “kingdom”, the Bible and Anabaptist history also encourages the prophetic stance that calls earthly rulers to account. The concept of a “commonwealth” is that all should share in the bounty of the land. All should benefit rather than some at the expense of others. That is patently not the case within the Commonwealth of Australia. We have not created here a society anything like the “kingdom of heaven” espoused by Jesus in which all people have the opportunity to flourish. Indigenous peoples today are dispossessed and disempowered, and disproportionately affected by poverty, violence, and crime.

As followers of Jesus, we are fundamentally committed to the pursuit of *shalom*. Not power for some over others, but for the good of all. Our voices should be the first and loudest when it comes to unjust laws and public policies. We stand with God on the side of the marginalised and in the historical context of Australia that means we stand on the side of the First Nations peoples. When we have heard the First Nations voice ourselves, we should amplify that voice within the larger political context.

Consequently, we commit to speaking boldly for justice in relation to First Nations peoples. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Fourth, we did not reach full consensus as an Association about the Referendum itself. Some AAANZ members and supporters believe that the communal demonstration of Jesus’ vision is not just our *primary* response but our *only* response. The majority, however, believe their commitment to the Anabaptist “third way” leads inevitably to support of the First Nations position in *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, which includes a call for “a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.”

As ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven, in which all things are reconciled through Christ, we ought to actively build a new relationship between First and Second Nations people in Australia. That requires honesty about the past and present abusive relationship. It requires a willingness by those with the power to listen to those whose power has been undermined and whose voice has been muted. Since that process is inherently relational, it must start with neighbours and local communities. But to the extent that the broken relationship is enabled and sustained through national political, policy, and legal processes, changes to those processes are also required.

Australia should actively seek to unmute First Nations peoples, and heartfelt personal listening is central to that goal. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to parliament ensures a national forum for doing so. The voice to parliament is not in itself reconciliation, but it is step towards it. Recognising that there are problems with the wording of the constitutional change and that there will be on-going challenges in implementing an effective structure for that voice, we nevertheless conclude that the Referendum should be supported.

Consequently, we commit to supporting the Referendum and to doing what we can to make the Constitutional change succeed. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Lastly, regardless of the success or failure of the Referendum, we recognise the huge scale of work ahead. We recognise the immense emotional cost to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the likelihood that the nation's tribal insecurities and race-based abuse will increase substantially as a result of the Referendum.

Consequently, we commit to continued solidarity with First Nations peoples in general and personal protection and care for those First Nations people we know. We call on the churches of Australia and the broader Australian community to do likewise.

Notes

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/australia-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary>, retrieved 28 July 2023

² See <https://ulurustatement.org/>

³ For the full covenant statement, see <https://anabaptist.asn.au/reconciliation-statement/>

⁴ See the results of early polling of Indigenous people, reported in <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/not-going-to-chuck-the-towel-in-voice-champion-pat-anderson-undaunted-by-criticism-at-invasion-day-rallies-20230126-p5cfqm.html> and <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-02/fact-check-indigenous-australians-support-for-the-voice/102673042>