

# A Guide for Aboriginal Community Engagement and Building Trust Relationships



**Uniting Church**  
SYNOD OF NSW & ACT

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## 1. Foreword

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide! I hope it will be useful in your future engagement with Aboriginal people and communities, and lead to the development of long-lasting trust-based relationships.

In my work for the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT, I have been fortunate to meet many Congregations and individuals who are very interested in building relationships with their local Aboriginal community. There is a lot of goodwill and good intention across the Uniting Church. I also regularly hear that while Congregations from across the Synod really want to engage with Aboriginal people and communities, they are unsure of how to go about this process, or even where to start.

This publication is designed to help non-Aboriginal people understand a range of things that are required to engage effectively, and respectfully, with Aboriginal peoples and communities. It is based on my own experience as an Aboriginal person who has worked in Aboriginal community engagement related roles in the government, corporate and community sectors for over 20 years.

Community engagement can often be challenging, depending on the nature of the community, the purpose of the engagement, and the skills and experience of the person/people involved in the engagement. Undertaking community engagement for the purpose of building trust relationships with wary or distrusting communities can be particularly challenging, as it requires sustained and genuine engagement, being able to break through existing barriers, and a willingness to be honest and transparent about your intentions. It is as much about forming friendships and trust alliances as it is about whatever other outcome you may be hoping to achieve. You need to be seen to be genuine, and to have “skin in the game”.

Whatever the challenges may be, I firmly believe members of the Uniting Church should make the effort to engage respectfully with Aboriginal people and communities, and should work to build strong and lasting trust relationships. I believe that both our Christian faith and the Church’s commitments to Australia’s First Peoples (in documents such as the Covenant Statement 1994 and the Preamble to the UCA Constitution) require us to love our neighbour and to seek justice for First Peoples.

While what I write may at times seem confronting, or as though I’m trying to convince you it’s all too hard, I am just being honest about the challenges and offering the benefit of my many years of experience and learnings. I offer this advice in the hope it will help lead to the development of many positive and ongoing relationships between the Uniting Church and Aboriginal communities across NSW and the ACT.

Thank you again for your time and commitment. I hope you find this guide helpful.

Nathan Tyson  
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## 2. Background

The Uniting Church in Australia has been intentionally engaged in a process of building relationships with Australia's First Peoples since at least the early 1980's. The documents and statements below demonstrate that the Church has made some powerful statements in relation to First Peoples. The Synod of NSW and the ACT recognises that there is much more to be done to achieve justice for Aboriginal peoples and Communities in NSW and the ACT, and across the country.

### **The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)**

In 1985 the Uniting Church in Australia supported the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). For more information about the UAICC and contact details for the National UAICC, please see the links below:

<https://uaicc.org.au/>

<https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/3060-a-destiny-is-born-uaicc-beginnings>

### **The Covenant Statement 1994**

In 1994 the then President of the Uniting Church in Australia, Dr Jill Tabart issued a Covenant Statement to the UAICC.. The Covenant Statement can be viewed here:

<https://assembly.uca.org.au/component/k2/item/135-covenanting-statement-1994?Itemid=135>

### **Revised Preamble to the Uniting Church in Australia's Constitution**

In 2009 the 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia approved a revised the Preamble to its Constitution to include an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of Australia's First peoples, an affirmation of their culture and knowledge of God, and a number of "truth telling" statements. The revised Preamble can be found here:

<https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/covenanting/PreamblePoster-web.pdf>

### **The Makarrata Proposal**

In 2019 the Synod of NSW and the ACT approved the "Makarrata Proposal", which included that the Synod supported the principles of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Learn more about the Statement from the Heart, and the 2019 Makarrata Proposal here:

<https://www.insights.uca.org.au/what-synod-support-for-the-statement-from-the-heart-means/>

### **The Walking Together Action Plan 2021-2023**

In 2021 the Synod of NSW and the ACT approved the Walking Together Action Plan 2021-2023, that includes a range of practical actions that can be taken by the Synod, Presbyteries and Congregations to bring the broad commitments of the Covenant Statement to life. The Walking Together Action Plan 2021-2023 can be found here:

<https://nswact.uca.org.au/media/10626/walking-together-action-plan-2021-final-updated-version-v2-050821.pdf>

### 3. Introduction

In any community engagement activity, it is important to know as much as you can about the particular community you seek to build a relationship with, and to understand the history of any prior engagement (For example: What was previously said, done, promised and/or denied?). It is also important to understand the nature of your audience (For example: Who are they, what have been their experiences, what are their perspectives, and what are their concerns?).

As a result of prior negative experiences with the wider Church, many Aboriginal people and communities are very wary of the Church, and anyone associated with the Church. Historically, the application of a Eurocentric colonial theology often saw Christian Churches and their representatives treat Aboriginal peoples as people who were both “less than” the European colonists, and also as savage and uncivilised people who needed “to be saved”.

In general, Australian colonial society considered that the only way to salvation for an Aboriginal person was for them to learn to live and act like a white person. However, the reality was that even Aboriginal people who perfectly mimicked white society in their dress and behaviour were still not considered the equals of their white peers. While in some ways Australian society, and our Churches, have become more enlightened, inclusive, and respectful, the reality is that colonial ideology and related assumptions of cultural superiority remain prevalent in many areas of Australian society, including the Church.

Reading the Uniting Church’s 1994 Covenant Statement, and the Preamble to the Uniting Church’s Constitution, gives a glimpse into the ways the Church either did the wrong thing by Aboriginal people and communities, or sat silently by while others engaged in wrongdoing against Aboriginal people and communities. One thing the Uniting Church has become better at in recent decades is “truth telling” about the negative impacts of the Church on First Peoples. This is a certainly a good start, as in order to fix a problem you first need to acknowledge that a problem exists.

For Aboriginal Peoples, the direct and/or indirect actions of the Church resulted in many Aboriginal people dying, being dispossessed of their ancestral lands, being forcibly separated from their families, and being subjected to many forms of abuse. Many of these injustices are still in the living memory of older Aboriginal people. These lived experiences have also been passed down in stories told to younger generations, and there is significant evidence of “inter-generational trauma” continuing to negatively impact Aboriginal peoples and communities (A great video explaining intergenerational trauma, produced by The Healing Foundation, is accessible via the First Nations Resources page on the Synod website – see link below). There is also a wealth of information available in records held by museums and other institutions that have helped inform current generations of Aboriginal people about the history of treatment of Aboriginal people by colonial society (including religious organisations and institutions) since 1770.

As much as many of us would like to be able to change this history, the reality is that we can’t. We don’t have the luxury of a time-machine to be able to undo all of the terrible and tragic things that have been done to Aboriginal people in this country. Australian history is

something we need to learn about, speak truth about, and seek ways that we can address past injustice and promote healing and reconciliation. While we can't change the past, we can take steps right now, and every day moving forward, to acknowledge and address past wrongs, and to support the self-determined aspirations of Aboriginal Peoples and communities.

#### **4. Aboriginal Peoples are the First Peoples of NSW and the ACT**

The First Peoples of Australia include Aboriginal Peoples, Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and other Islander Peoples (e.g., People from the Tiwi Islands).

In NSW and the ACT, the First Peoples are Aboriginal Peoples, represented through many distinct Nations and communities. This Guide will usually refer to Aboriginal Peoples due to the NSW/ACT context, however where appropriate the term First Peoples will be used to include all of Australia's First Peoples.

#### **5. How do we put the Covenanting with First Peoples into practice?"**

It is appropriate to consider the following paragraph from the Covenant Statement of 1994, issued on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia:

"It is our desire to work in solidarity with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for the advancement of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness in this land, and we reaffirm the commitment made at the 1985 Assembly to do so. We want to bring discrimination to an end, so that your people are no longer gaoled in disproportionate numbers, and so that equal housing, health, education and employment opportunities are available for your people as for ours. To that end we commit ourselves to work with you towards national and state policy changes. We commit ourselves to build understanding between your people and ours in every locality, and to build relationships which respect the right of your people to self-determination in the church and in the wider society."

(Dr Jill Tabart, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1994)

Members of the Uniting Church must always remember that the onus on extending the hand of friendship, and of doing the "heavy lifting" in gaining trust and developing trust-based relationships with Aboriginal people and communities, is on the Church and its members.

#### **The First Step: Learning**

The first step towards effective community engagement for non-Aboriginal people is to improve your knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal peoples, cultures and perspectives, and in particular the history of colonisation in Australia and its impacts on First Peoples.

There is a range of information available on the First Nations Resources page of the Synod website: <https://nswact.uca.org.au/about-us/first-nations-resources/>

There is also a wealth of information available via the internet – simply do a google search of “Aboriginal [insert topic]” and view the results.

Remember that Aboriginal Peoples and cultures are diverse, and the issues that impact Aboriginal peoples and communities are also many and complex. Learning is an ongoing process and people should never assume that after reading a few things that they now “know it all”.

Even with significant learning and extensive experience living and working very closely with Aboriginal peoples and communities it will be difficult for any non-Aboriginal person to fully comprehend the life experiences, values and perspectives of Aboriginal people and communities. For this reason, it is essential that, during any engagement with Aboriginal people and/or communities, non-Aboriginal people should listen deeply to the views, perspectives and aspirations of Aboriginal people/communities and never assume to know what is best for Aboriginal people and/or communities.

Consider learning about Aboriginal Peoples and cultures as a journey that will be life-long. Nobody ever “knows it all”, and that is OK. In fact, it is important to realise how much we don’t know, and how much we still have to learn, as this enables learning to occur with humility and with respect for knowledge holders.

### **Develop Understanding, Empathy and Compassion**

As a result of past experiences and legacies of colonisation, (e.g., dispossession, discriminatory policies and practices, the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, the role of Churches in dispossession and forced relocation, etc) many Aboriginal people, communities and organisations are quite wary of non-Aboriginal people and organisations approaching them and/or “wanting something” from them. There may be an initial element of distrust that might need to be accommodated, and a trust relationship built, before an Elder, Community Leader or Organisation may feel comfortable working with you.

As you gain knowledge, make an effort to look at Australian history from an Aboriginal perspective – try to place yourself in the shoes of those who have been dispossessed, massacred, rounded up and placed on missions and reserves, punished for speaking language or trying to engage in cultural practices, had their children stolen, been a child who was forcibly removed from their parents, and so on.

Hopefully as you undertake your learning journey you will have some “lightbulb” moments, and some moments where you think “I had no idea!” or “I can’t believe this happened!”. You may be shocked, upset or left in some disbelief that such things could have happened. Let these experiences affect you, and reflect deeply on their implications. Consider how you would feel if these things happened to you or members of your family.

## Consider Aboriginal perspectives on colonisation

The first step towards understanding an Aboriginal perspective on Australian history is to gain an understanding of what colonisation looks like. For most Australians, it will simply look like your everyday, normal way of living in Australia.

Think about colonisation from an Aboriginal perspective... The current laws, systems, policies and processes in Australia have been developed and implemented by the majority, for the majority, based essentially on a European/colonial cultural foundation and world view.

For Aboriginal peoples, the impacts of colonisation can include:

- Loss of country – the ancestral lands of Aboriginal peoples were effectively stolen by British Colonial Governments under the guise of the Doctrine of Terra Nullius and through the use of force, and then given or sold to colonists (i.e. convicts and “free-settlers” from England and Europe).
- Loss of, or difficulty in recovering and re-learning, traditional language.
- Inability to access country to engage in cultural practice and ceremony.
- Constantly being in fear, and feeling like the “other”, in our own land.
- Having been taken from your family and raised in institutions or foster care.
- Facing racism and discrimination, often on a daily basis.
- Being constantly impacted by negative stereotypes and/or unconscious bias.
- Seeing a constant stream of racism towards, and racial vilification of, Aboriginal people on many social media platforms, with this escalating significantly around the 26<sup>th</sup> January each year on “Australia Day”.
- Seeing, and often living with, the impacts of current and intergenerational trauma arising from physical, sexual and psychological abuse.
- Being over-policed and at least 20 times more likely to be arrested by police and incarcerated compared to non-Aboriginal people.
- Being watched and followed by store security as you do your shopping.
- Being served after non-Aboriginal people in shops.
- Being called racist names like “Abo”, “Boong”, “Coon” and “Nigger”, or worse (yes, sadly this still happens, both directly towards Aboriginal people, and in conversations between non-Aboriginal people who feel “safe” in using such racist terminology amongst their peers).
- Aboriginal young people being taunted in the playground, on the sporting field, and on the school bus with racist names like the ones mentioned above.
- Being told by non-Aboriginal people things like: “You’re really pretty for an Abo!”, “You’re really smart for an Abo!”, “You don’t look like an Abo” and “You could get away with saying you aren’t an Abo if you wanted.” (This may sound unlikely to some people, but I’ve heard these things said many times over the years and sadly some people still say things like this today).
- Education systems that have low expectations of Aboriginal young people, simply because they are Aboriginal.



- Health systems that aren't welcoming and don't feel safe, and that often send Aboriginal people away improperly diagnosed.
- An employment context where racism, negative stereotypes and unconscious bias, not to mention cultural biases in interview techniques and psychometric testing, can make it challenging to gain meaningful employment.
- Having to wait years for a place in public housing, and, if you happen to be able to afford private rental, being constantly told there are no private rental properties available, or "it's already been leased" (... but when a fair skinned friend goes in 5 minutes later they are told there are several properties available to rent!).

If that list sounds like an exaggeration, let me assure you it isn't... it is, broadly speaking, "a day in the life of" many if not most Aboriginal people. Facing these things every day can be very frustrating, upsetting and cause a lot of anger and grief.

Once you have learned more, and have hopefully developed a sense of understanding and empathy, you might consider how Aboriginal peoples, cultures and/or perspectives are incorporated into your life... for example:

- Do you know any Aboriginal people?
- If you know some Aboriginal people, do you socialise with them? Do you invite them to social events? Do you attend community events with them?
- Does your organisation employ any Aboriginal people?
- Does your workplace have a good understanding of Aboriginal peoples/perspectives?
- Does your workplace take Aboriginal peoples/perspectives into account when making decisions about resource allocation and/or service delivery practices?
- Is there an Aboriginal person (or group) who offers a senior leadership voice into organisational decision making?
- How does the organisation you work for incorporate diversity, and in particular First Peoples' voices and needs, into organisational decision making?

Often the answer to these questions may be "No", or you may be unsure of the answer. If so, these are potentially areas where you can influence positive change.

### **Walking in Two Worlds**

Every day, most Aboriginal people have to walk in two worlds – an Aboriginal cultural and community world, where world views and perspectives are informed via Aboriginal culture, teachings and experiences, and the non-Aboriginal world where views and perspectives are largely informed by European/colonial cultures and teachings.

If you've ever been in a non-English speaking country and found it stressful because you don't know the language, can't read the signs, and nobody seems to have any interest in helping you, then this might give you an idea of what walking in two worlds can be like for many Aboriginal people in Australia.

Many non-Aboriginal people wouldn't give much thought as to how Aboriginal people have to live in, and navigate, a semi post-colonial Australia. I say "semi" because Australia remains distinctly a product of its colonial heritage, and unfortunately this includes elements of remnant colonial racism and discriminatory attitudes towards Aboriginal people.

Imagine if for half the time, for example when at work, you felt pressure to act differently, talk differently, and do things differently to try and "fit in", and that you couldn't just relax and be yourself in a cultural sense. This is what it is like for many Aboriginal people who walk in two worlds every day.

In mainstream Australian society there remains an unspoken (and I think largely unacknowledged) expectation that Aboriginal people should assimilate into the colonial/western social framework and live according to the cultural norms and values of white Australia. Aboriginal people are often expected to act like, talk like, and dress like white Australians in order to "fit in" in the workplace and in the wider community. It can be frustrating, exhausting and depressing, particularly when you consider that Aboriginal people who do put their cultural selves second for part of the time in order to meet the western cultural expectations are still often discriminated against, subject to derogatory comments, and/or made to feel like the "other", simply because they are Aboriginal.

Most non-Aboriginal Australians rarely need to think about how they might walk in two worlds, except for when they travel overseas to a country with a different language, laws and cultural practices. In this case people usually try to do a bit of research, learn at least a few words of the local language, try to abide by local custom and cultural practices, and try to comply with the local law. How many Australians make an effort to learn any local Aboriginal language, or try to learn about local Aboriginal custom and cultural practices, or make an effort to ensure they comply with local Aboriginal cultural protocols?

People from CALD communities in Australia can probably most closely relate to what it is like for Aboriginal people to have to walk in two worlds. For example, having to live and work in mainstream Australian society while also needing to meet important cultural obligations to family and community. People from CALD backgrounds might also relate to the experience of being subjected to racism and negative stereotypes, and/or the expectation they will assimilate and start doing things the 'white way'. Hopefully people from CALD communities can bring that experience to these conversations while also recognising that their experiences are similar but not exactly the same as Aboriginal peoples, as Aboriginal peoples are dispossessed and marginalised peoples in their own ancestral country.

## 6. Planning Community Engagement

Once you have done some reasonable learning about Aboriginal Peoples, cultures, history and perspectives, you will be in a position to start thinking about planning some community engagement.

### Preliminary questions and considerations

When considering any form of community engagement, there are some preliminary questions and considerations that you need to ask yourself:

- a. “Why do I want to undertake the engagement?”. What are you hoping to achieve?
- b. “What am I willing to contribute to help facilitate the engagement?” What do you have to offer that will make it worthwhile for others to engage with you?
- c. “How long am I willing to commit to an engagement process?”. Are you willing to commit to a week, a month, a year, or longer?
- d. “What are the consequences if I fail in my efforts to engage?”

Let’s have a think about each of these questions from an Aboriginal community engagement perspective.

### Why do you want to engage with the Aboriginal Community?

It is important that we understand the purpose and intent of our community engagement. If you don’t have a good reason for the engagement, and can’t define what the benefit to the community will be, then you probably aren’t ready to engage.

For example, if you are wanting to “help” Aboriginal people, but are not really interested in making friends with Aboriginal people and understanding their perspectives, needs and aspirations, or in wanting to stand in solidarity with Aboriginal people, then you will likely find engaging with Aboriginal people and communities difficult.

If you are genuinely wanting to build relationships with your local Aboriginal community then you need to be ready and prepared to:

- Do your own self-directed learning about Aboriginal perspectives on Australian History.
- Invest time, on a regular basis, to meet with Aboriginal community members and attend relevant community events, for a period of at least 12 months.
- Listen deeply to the views and perspectives of Aboriginal community members.
- Support the aspirations and related needs of the Aboriginal community as best you can, through providing whatever assistance you can.
- Stand in solidarity with the community on issues such as the call for a Treaty, stopping Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and issues relating to Aboriginal Land Rights.

### **What are you willing to contribute to help facilitate the engagement?**

In general, Aboriginal people and communities do not see engaging with non-Aboriginal people or organisations as a priority. Aboriginal communities (and particularly the Elders and community leaders who support them) are regularly dealing with a range of serious and significant community issues, and these tend to take priority. For example, Aboriginal communities have one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world, Aboriginal peoples are one of the most incarcerated peoples on the planet, and our people are still regularly dying in custody from preventable causes. To highlight just one example of the issues impacting our communities, in Australia in June 2021, Aboriginal young people (aged 10-17) represented 48% of all young people in custody, and were 17 times more likely than non-Aboriginal young people to be in custody.<sup>1</sup>

With Aboriginal Elders and community leaders often being “on-call” 24/7 to deal with crisis situations and other urgent needs of the community, it’s important to think about why these Elders and/or community leaders would see spending time with somebody from the Uniting Church as important. How will spending time with you help their community? What do you have to offer that would make a positive and practical difference to the lives of those living in their community?

The best way to think about this challenge is to assess what possible support or assistance the Church may be able to offer – is it perhaps the use of a Church Hall, assistance with fundraising for a community need, or helping community members connect to local Uniting Services? Whatever it is, once you have worked out what you can potentially offer, the next step is to organise a yarn with somebody from the local community to seek their advice on what they actually need... it may be different than what you’ve already thought of, but at least if you turn up knowing what you can already offer it will show you are genuine in your intentions to support the community.

### **How long are you willing to commit to an engagement process?**

Establishing and building trust relationships take time, especially in situations where there is a perception of previous breaches of trust or poor behaviour by one party. In this case, a reading of the Covenant Statement and/or the Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution will help explain why the “heavy lifting” in establishing and building trust is the responsibility of the Church.

In short, unless you have some form of introduction through a trusted mutual connection, it will take several months, if not years of consistent engagement to build a trust relationship between a local Congregation and an Aboriginal community. If you are genuine in your desire to build relationships with a local Aboriginal community then you need to be able and willing to commit to developing a long-term relationship over a number of years.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2020/contents/summary>

### **What are the consequences if I fail in my efforts to engage?**

When planning your engagement, it is very important to consider what might go wrong. For example, if things go pear-shaped, what are the risks? What damage may be caused? What can you do to mitigate these risks?

The obvious risk is that if local engagement is done poorly then this will reflect badly on both the local Congregation and the wider Uniting Church. The range of negative impacts might be anything from the community thinking “They were a waste of time”, or “The Church hasn’t changed”, to a community making a formal complaint and/or contacting the media.

Other risks include physical and emotional safety. Many, if not most Aboriginal communities continue to deal with issues of grief, trauma and loss. Many individuals in communities have experienced significant trauma, and this can cause people to express anger, frustration and even hatred towards non-Aboriginal people. (For example, if you were taken from your family by a Church representative and then put in a place where you were physically and sexually abused, and then later in your life somebody from a Church turns up wanting to engage with you... how would you feel?)

## **7. Community Engagement: Other considerations**

### **Relationship Management**

Aboriginal community engagement, and resulting relationships, needs to be well managed. You may spend many months or years developing a trust relationship with a community and then have one person from your church say something offensive in a meeting, or while in the community, that can cause significant damage to a relationship. Things such as disrespect shown to an Elder, racism/racist terminology, and/or a blatant disregard for community/cultural protocol can cause significant offence and derail all the good work that has been achieved to develop a relationship.

If there is any risk that somebody connected with your church may have inappropriate or offensive views about Aboriginal people/communities then this concern should ideally be addressed before commencing any significant community engagement. It may be a pastoral conversation is required to try to help the person change their views – for example a conversation about “Who is your neighbour?” and/or “Whatever you do to the least...”. If this doesn’t work you will need to consider how to mitigate the risk of a rogue congregation member (or members) derailing your efforts to build trust relationships. This may be through ensuring meetings are held in the appropriate settings, or perhaps even having a discrete conversation with the Elder(s)/Community Leader(s) to explain that one person (or perhaps small group of people) connected to the Congregation may have some unhelpful views, but that the majority of the Congregation are strongly committed to building the relationship.

### **Consistency in Church Representation (Succession Planning)**

One of the quickest ways to set back a trust relationship is through a change of church representation. If the church representative(s) changes, and the new representative(s) are not known/trusted, then any prior trust that may have been developed cannot be assumed to continue. To avoid this situation, it is recommended that at least 2-3 church representatives are consistently involved in the community engagement, so that if one church representative has to relocate or is otherwise unable to continue, there remains 1-2 people to maintain the existing connection and continue to build the trust relationship.

### **Are you worried about offending Aboriginal peoples/communities?**

Interestingly, being worried about the risk of causing offence or upset when engaging with Aboriginal Peoples/Communities is a commonly held concern by many non-Aboriginal people. In my experience, this fear is usually because of one of, or a combination of, the following things:

- a) Having great respect for First Peoples and not wanting to “make a mistake” or inadvertently cause offense; and/or
- b) Prior negative experiences in attempts at engagement; and/or
- c) Having been told by somebody that non-Aboriginal people should stay out of First Peoples’ business.

I’ll address each of these. First, if you have respect for First Peoples, and are willing to learn, and to employ humility, compassion, and empathy, then any mistake you may inadvertently make, or offence you may inadvertently cause, is usually easily fixed. A prompt and genuine apology, and willingness to learn from your mistake, will overcome most “foot in mouth” moments. As long as you understand the concept of “self-determination”, and are willing listen deeply and to stand in solidarity with First Peoples on issues that are important to First Peoples, then you are a very important and much needed ally for First Peoples.

Second, if you have had previous negative experiences, you might perhaps consider this a learning opportunity. What happened? What went wrong? What was the reason you were trying to engage? Were your expectations reasonable? In hindsight, what could you have done differently? If you genuinely want to help support Aboriginal peoples and communities then you need to be resilient, learn as you go, and keep turning up.

Third, it is important to always keep the principle of “self-determination” in mind. It is never OK to just turn up and tell Aboriginal people or communities what you think they need, or what their priorities should be. It is very important to listen first, and listen deeply, to the perspectives and views of the Aboriginal community. Once you are aware of what the community needs/priorities are, and you have built a good relationship with the community, it is OK to ask how you might be able to help support the community, or to offer support you think might be helpful. Always keep in mind that tact and discretion are important, because the last thing you want to do is “shame” a member of the community publicly. For example, if you turn up to a community meeting and say “Oh, I know how to fix that, it’s easy...” and there are community leaders present who have been struggling to find

a solution, this might embarrass them. Nobody likes to be publicly embarrassed, shown-up, or “shamed”. Better to approach a community leader for a discrete chat afterwards and say “Hi, I was thinking about that thing you were talking about and wondering if [insert suggested solution] might help?” Be prepared to let the community leader consider the idea, to have time to talk to others in the community, and perhaps at the next meeting the idea might be proposed by the community leaders. They might ask you to talk about the idea, or to help them with the idea, or they might not... if you genuinely want to help then always keep in mind that a good community outcome is a good community outcome no matter who gets the credit.

It is also important to remember that Aboriginal people are not all the same – we have a range of views and perspectives on all manner of issues. Just because one Aboriginal person has a particular view or perspective doesn’t mean all Aboriginal people feel the same way. Similarly, if one community doesn’t need or want your support, then that’s OK, there will likely be another community who will welcome it – if you really want to help then it is just about doing the necessary learning, undertaking effective engagement, and developing trust relationships with the right people.

### **Key Points to remember**

- Always be respectful, compassionate, and humble in your engagement.
- Always respect the right of Aboriginal Peoples and Communities to self-determine their affairs (this is a recognised fundamental Human Right of all First Peoples).
- If you make a mistake or are taken to task by an Elder or Community Leader, apologise promptly and in a genuine way. Saying “Sorry”, and meaning it, will go a long way to keeping relationships intact.
- There may be wariness, scepticism, or even initial anger or frustration from the community – remember that there is often a legitimate historical basis for these feelings. Acknowledging these feelings and appropriately expressing your understanding of the legitimacy of these feelings, can help to break down barriers.

As a general rule, if anything happens that negatively impacts the relationship between the Congregation/Church and the Aboriginal community, apologise quickly and meaningfully, and do all you can to make amends for any transgressions. Trying to defend or justify any inappropriate conduct will only further damage the relationship and make it harder to reconcile any differences.

### **Some Things to Avoid**

Here’s a list of things not to do when engaging with Aboriginal communities:

- Do not make promises you might not be able to keep.
  - Always manage expectations. It is always better to “under-promise and over-deliver” that to promise a lot and then let people down.
- Do not assume you know what a communities needs/priorities/challenges are.

- The community knows what its needs/priorities/challenges are.
- Do not assume you know what is best for a community.
  - The community knows what is best for the community.
- Do not assume that your way is the best way.
  - The best way is one that the community understands, supports and will engage with.
- Do not rush engagement or set unrealistic timeframes.
  - Building relationships takes time, listening takes time, and as the saying goes: “all good things take time”.
- Do not use complex language, jargon, or lots of acronyms in presentations or discussions.
  - While this may be appropriate in a business or academic setting, in a community setting it can cause people to “switch off” and/or become frustrated. Use plain English and pause regularly to provide a chance for people to ask questions.
- Do not “big note” (tell people how good you are or how much you have done/achieved).
  - If you are genuine in your intent, honest and humble, this is enough. The community will see your knowledge through your ability to listen, understand, and offer helpful thoughts and ideas. The reputation you earn will be based on your actions not the letters after your name or the awards you may have.

### **8. Community Engagement – Where to start?**

There are a number of ways that you can start to engage with your local Aboriginal community, including:

- Inviting local Elders and/or community leaders to talk to your Congregation, Presbytery, Social Justice Group or interest group.
- Organising to attend a “Cultural Tour” or “Cultural Education” session (or similar) offered by a local Aboriginal community organisation.
- Organising to attend a local cultural activity or program offered by an Aboriginal organisation or Traditional Owner group.
- Attending local NAIDOC activities.
- Attending events where local Aboriginal Elders or community leaders are speaking about local issues (e.g. Universities often have events/panels).
- Where invited/appropriate, participate in Aboriginal Interagency meetings.
- See if there is a local Reconciliation Group in your area – this may help to make some good connections.
- See if there are any other Organisations or Groups in your area who are already engaging with the local Aboriginal community and explore opportunities for partnering/collaboration.



## Payment for services

Always assume you will have to pay a fee for service for any activity or engagement/learning opportunity, and if no fee is mentioned, politely enquire as to what the person/group/organisation might charge for the particular event/activity.

It is logical to consider available budgets when deciding whether to proceed with a booking or arrangement, but organisers should take into account the “supply/demand” context, and also the quality of the event/activity... For example, consider what would you pay per person for a cultural learning activity if you were travelling overseas? Can you access a similar learning opportunity elsewhere via another legitimate local cultural supplier?

## Community engagement: Who do I contact?

This will vary depending on your location. But some options include:

- Making contact with UAICC NSW/ACT (for example, UAICC Ministry Centres are currently operating in Wellington, Condobolin and Broken Hill).
- If any members of your Presbytery or Congregation have an existing relationship with a member or members of the local Aboriginal community, seek advice from member(s) of the local community as to the best way to engage with their community.
- Visit the NSW Aboriginal Land Council website for contact details of your nearest Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC): [https://alc.org.au/land\\_council/](https://alc.org.au/land_council/). You can contact a Local Aboriginal Land Council to see if they are running any programs or initiatives that you could get involved in or otherwise support. The LALC may also offer local cultural tours or cultural awareness training.
- Reaching out to introduce yourself to local Aboriginal Organisations, for example Aboriginal Medical Services, Aboriginal Health Services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Traditional Owner Groups, etc. You will usually be able to find Aboriginal organisations in your area by doing a google search of: “Aboriginal Organisations in [insert location]”
- The Supply Nation website allows you to search for Aboriginal Cultural Education providers and/or other Aboriginal businesses located in your local area: <https://supplynation.org.au/>
- If all of the above doesn't result in identifying local Aboriginal groups or organisations to engage with, contact the Manager, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement (Synod of NSW and the ACT) for advice – see contact details below.

## **What else can I do to support Aboriginal Peoples and Communities?**

### **Advocacy: Speaking out against Injustice**

As Christians, and particularly as members of the Uniting Church, we recognise that the pursuit of justice, and particularly social justice, is a fundamental part of our faith. We must stand up for what is right, seek to free the oppressed, protect the weak, and assist the poor.

*“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).*

*“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and please the widow’s cause,” (Isaiah 1:17).*

*Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute,” (Psalm 82:3).*

Keep an eye out for First Peoples’ advocacy and social justice campaigns and add your support where possible.

Also keep an eye out for rallies and marches, contact the organisers and see if they would mind if you join in to express your solidarity and support for their cause. Get a group together. If you attend rallies/marches, use the opportunity to introduce yourself (in a gentle way) to some of the Aboriginal people you meet - you never know what possibilities can arise just from having a yarn with somebody!

### **Challenge racism, myths and stereotypes**

Racism towards Aboriginal people, often fuelled by ignorance and based on myths and negative stereotypes, continues to exist in Australia. In the conversations you have with your family, friends and colleagues, try to point out any myths and negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people that may come up in conversation, and provide information to counter incorrect claims and assertions. The more learning you do about Aboriginal history, issues and perspectives, the more effectively you will be able to share your knowledge others. This type of conversation can be difficult and challenging, so please “pick your battles” and look after your wellbeing as a priority. If you do happen to have some challenging or difficult conversations around racism, use it as an opportunity to reflect on what it must be like for Aboriginal people who often have to make daily decisions as to whether they challenge racism or walk away - sometimes racism happens so frequently that avoiding regular conflict on such issues is an important and understandable aspect of self-care.

### **Think about who you vote for**

Our State and Federal Governments are responsible for creating legislation that often has significant impacts on First Peoples. Consider what the position of each Party is in relation to issues impacting on First Peoples, consider their track record, and consider voting for the Party you think is most likely to deliver positive outcomes for First Peoples. For example, do

they support the establishment of Treaties with First Peoples? What is their commitment to funding for First Nations programs and projects? Do they have any First Nations candidates?

### **The Koori Mail - An easy way to keep up to date**

If you would like to keep up to date on issues that are important to First Peoples, and to read about First Peoples perspectives, consider ordering a subscription of the Koori Mail fortnightly newspaper for your Church or office. This publication offers a wealth of knowledge around current affairs and issues of importance for Aboriginal peoples and communities. Visit: <https://koorimail.com/>

### **Other resources**

Visit the Synod's First Nations Resources website for access to a range of resources: <https://nswact.uca.org.au/first-nations-resources/>

The links below provide a range of information that may assist in the planning of place based Aboriginal engagement and learning. These are third party resources and the Synod of NSW and the ACT does not control their content. Please respect the copyright of any information acquired from these sources.

NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs – Facts and Figures:

<https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/new-knowledge/facts-and-figures/>

Map of Indigenous Australia

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

Aboriginal Languages in NSW

<https://indigenous-services-slsw.tumblr.com/post/141124712404/nsw-aboriginal-language-map-language-means>

NSW Aboriginal Land Council Contact List (for LALC contact details)

[https://alc.org.au/land\\_council/](https://alc.org.au/land_council/)

Engaging with Indigenous Australia— exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/7d54eac8-4c95-4de1-91bb-0d6b1cf348e2/ctgc-ip05.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

Engaging with Aboriginal Communities

[https://www.idfm.org.au/WWW\\_IDFM/media/Media/ICH-Engaging-with-Aboriginal-Communities.pdf](https://www.idfm.org.au/WWW_IDFM/media/Media/ICH-Engaging-with-Aboriginal-Communities.pdf)

Working with Aboriginal Communities

[http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/321308/working\\_with\\_aboriginal.pdf](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/321308/working_with_aboriginal.pdf)

## Synod Support

If you have any questions in relation to this Guide, or would like any additional advice in relation to Aboriginal Community Engagement, please contact:

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# A Guide for Aboriginal Community Engagement and Building Trust Relationships

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