

# Welcome to and acknowledgement of Country

## GiST team, July 2022

### Alignment with Assembly motion

While the report from the Gospel in Society Today (GiST) team was before the PCQ Assembly at the Assembly's meeting of 28<sup>th</sup> July 2021, Rev. Nathan Campbell moved the following motion (Notice of Motion 54):

That the Assembly:

1. Note the PCNSW Gospel and Culture Committee published a paper on Cultural Marxism, and Critical Race Theory, paying particular attention to issues around First Nations people in Australia. See:  
[https://gsandc.org.au/wpcontent/uploads2021/07/FINAL-Cultural-Marxism-\\_BLM-GSC-FINALVERSION.pdf](https://gsandc.org.au/wpcontent/uploads2021/07/FINAL-Cultural-Marxism-_BLM-GSC-FINALVERSION.pdf)
2. Note that the next GAA will involve a debate about the place of acknowledgments of country in Presbyterian Church institutions and gatherings.
3. Request GiST produce a paper outlining an approach to these matters, and ways for our denomination to engage our First Nations people with the Gospel through our congregations.

As a procedural motion, Rev. Lesleigh Hall moved that the above motion be referred to the GiST team for its consideration, and this procedural motion was carried. This paper responds to the request outlined in Notice of Motion 54, seeking to provide information on the background to Welcomes to/Acknowledgements of Country, as well as engaging with relevant theological issues, and seeking to set these in the context of ministry to and with Indigenous people.

The GiST team thought it most useful to ministers, sessions and congregations members to focus on the following issues in this paper:

- Appropriateness and usefulness of using Welcomes and Acknowledgements in Presbyterian church services and related gatherings
- A theological framework that is helpful to equip Christians to reflect more generally in a gospel-centred way on the value and/or concerns relating to participation in Welcomes and Acknowledgments of Country in various other settings in wider society (i.e. government, schools, universities, etc.).

**The GiST team wishes to thank Mrs Jocelyn Williams for her detailed background research which provided the basis for this paper.**

## Definitions, history, origins, and usage of Acknowledgement of and Welcome to Country

### *Welcome to Country*

A Welcome to Country is said by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elder (or an approved delegate) who is a Traditional Owner/Custodian of the Country on which the event takes place. A Welcome usually includes a speech, often in both the Indigenous language of the Elder and English. It may also include a song, dance, or a smoking ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

### *Acknowledgement of Country*

An Acknowledgement of Country is said by either an Indigenous<sup>2</sup> person from a different Country from that on which the event is taking place, or by a non-Indigenous person. It is usually said by a leader at the event. An Acknowledgement is a speech recognising the Traditional Owners/Custodians of the land on which the event takes place and respecting the Elders of that land, past, present and future/emerging.<sup>3</sup>

The most commonly accepted form of wording for an Acknowledgement of Country, suggested by Reconciliation Australia, is as follows: 'I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of (appropriate group) people, and pay my respects to Elders both past and present'. If there is a variation, it often centres on the choice of words used to describe the relationship local Indigenous people have with their land. For example, some say 'Aboriginal owners of the land', while others prefer 'Traditional Owners' or, more commonly, 'Traditional Custodians of the land'. The section acknowledging 'Elders past and present' rarely varies.<sup>4</sup> The more recent practice of acknowledging 'emerging leaders' or 'Elders past, present, and emerging' is generally not accepted practice in the Indigenous community.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australians Together, *Welcome To And Acknowledgement Of Country*, 2022, [www.australianstogether.org.au](http://www.australianstogether.org.au);  
Larissa Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, John Wiley & Sons, 2021.  
Department of Education Qld, *Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country: An Overview of Protocols for Department of Education Employees and State Schools*, [www.indigenousportal.education.qld.gov.au](http://www.indigenousportal.education.qld.gov.au)

<sup>2</sup> GiST has adopted the phrase "Indigeneous" person/people in this paper as a term that we understand to be respectful and acceptable to Indigenous Australians. Other such terms include, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples" or "First Nations Peoples".

<sup>3</sup> Australians Together, *Welcome To And Acknowledgement Of Country*.  
Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*.  
Department of Education Qld, *Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country: An Overview of Protocols for Department of Education Employees and State Schools*.

<sup>4</sup> Mark MacKenna, 'Tokenism or elated recognition? Welcome 2014 Australia to Country and the emergence of Indigenous protocol in Australia, 1991-2014', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4, (2014) p485.

<sup>5</sup> UNSW Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor Indigenous, 'Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country', [www.indigenous.unsw.edu.au/strategy/](http://www.indigenous.unsw.edu.au/strategy/)

### ***Debate about the History of Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country protocols***

There is much debate as to the history of the modern Welcome Statements and Ceremonies and Acknowledgement Statements. One school of thought is that Welcome ceremonies are based upon and a continuation of Aboriginal Welcome protocols that have been performed for thousands of years.<sup>6</sup> Proponents say that all Aboriginal peoples followed Welcome protocols when requesting permission to travel onto neighbouring clans' or people groups' land. However there seem to be at least some particular land/people groups for whom this was not the case (e.g. the peoples from Collonabri in western NSW, and the Larrikia people of Darwin; it is also not a custom of Torres Strait Islanders)<sup>7</sup>.

The opposing school of thought is that the Welcome ceremony has no link or ongoing tradition with past ceremonies. Within this school, some locate its origin in the mid-1970s at a Cultural Arts festival where, in response to some Maori Dancers and Cook Islander Dancers, it is said to have been designed in its modern form by Ernie Dingo and Richard Walley.<sup>8</sup> Others date it from the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation recommending Welcomes be performed in 1998 for the first National Sorry Day, and say it only became popular from 2008 when Aboriginal Elder Matilda House-Williams said a Welcome to Country at the first opening of Parliament that year.<sup>9</sup>

### ***What does Welcome to/Acknowledgement of Country mean in the current practice of Australia today?***

The adoption of the practice of Welcomes and Acknowledgements is seen as a recognition of the value of Indigenous culture and acknowledgement of their past history prior to colonisation and the effects colonisation has had upon their land and culture and people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see it as a recognition of their special connection with the Country. Some view Welcomes as a 'gift' to the people who are now living, working

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<sup>6</sup> G. Bodkin-Andrews, F. Bodkin, G. Andrews,, A. Whittaker, 'Mudjil'dya'djurali Dabuwa'wurrata (How the White Waratah Became Red): D'harawal Storytelling and Welcome to Country "Controversies"', *Alternative*, Vol 12, Issue 5. 2016, p480-497.

MacKenna, 'Tokenism or elated recognition?

<sup>7</sup> Aunty Rose Elu, *Church Warden at The Valley Anglican Church, Brisbane. From Saibai Island, Torres Strait*, private phone conversation, 2021 (by permission).

George Ferguson, *Indigenous Minister at Wallgett-Collarenabri Anglican Church*, private email (by permission). Ben Van Gelderen, *Principal of Nungalinga College, NT*.

<sup>8</sup> Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 'Mudjil'dya'djurali Dabuwa'wurrata (How the White Waratah Became Red). Presbyterian Church of New South Wales, Gospel, Society and Culture Committee, 'Report for 2019 General Assembly', 2019

Mark Powell, 'Welcome to Country: Bogus But Preferable', 2021, [www.quadrant.org.au/opinion/bennelong-papers/2021/02/](http://www.quadrant.org.au/opinion/bennelong-papers/2021/02/)

<sup>9</sup> MacKenna, 'Tokenism or elated recognition?

A. Pelizzon and J. Kennedy, 'Welcome to Country: Legal Meanings and Cultural Implications', *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, Vol.16, No.2, 2012, p.58-69.

and visiting on those lands and as a sign of respect. McKenna argues that ‘the majority of Indigenous Australians perceive the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country protocols as a valuable, albeit belated, recognition of Indigenous culture and history.’<sup>10</sup>

### ***Cultural currents influencing the practice of Welcomes and Acknowledgements***

There has for some time been a collective movement in Australia to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of this land, living here for thousands of years. There has also been, in recent decades, a national recognition of the many wrongs committed in the past against Indigenous Australians, and the effects of past and present wrongs still felt today (e.g. in incarceration rates, poor education, health, and housing, and low life expectancy). There is an increasingly common view amongst Indigenous people that sovereignty of Australian Lands was never relinquished but was forcibly taken by the invasion of white people. Therefore Indigenous people are still, in some sense, the Traditional Owners or Custodians of the Country(ies). All these cultural currents encourage or support Welcomes and Acknowledgements being made.

However, for other people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Welcomes and Acknowledgements seem simply to be tokenism: empty statements, void of meaning or action, that distract people from more meaningful forms of recognition or are meant merely to placate political correctness.<sup>11</sup>

This paper will address the appropriateness and usefulness of using Welcomes and Acknowledgements in PCQ church gatherings and related events by addressing the following points/questions:

- 1. The Priority of Gospel Proclamation**
- 2. Communicating the Gospel of Reconciliation**
- 3. Adapting Acknowledgements of Country (and WTC) for Gospel Purposes + The Dangers of Syncretism and Relativism**
- 4. The Place of Acknowledgements of Country in Church Gatherings**

Given that most Presbyterian churches in Queensland are not in a position to consider a Welcome to Country, we will focus mainly on evaluating Acknowledgements of Country while giving some limited evaluation of the other.

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<sup>10</sup> Behrendt, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*.

Bodkin-Andrews, et al., ‘Mudjil’dya’djurali Dabuwa’wurrata (How the White Waratah Became Red).

MacKenna, ‘Tokenism or elated recognition?’

<sup>11</sup> MacKenna, ‘Tokenism or elated recognition?’

Mark Powell, ‘The Piece Eternity Refused to Publish: A Response to Fr. McCullough’, 2019,

[www.caldronpool.com](http://www.caldronpool.com)

UNSW Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor Indigenous, ‘Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country’,

## Evaluating the Use of Welcomes to Country and Acknowledgements of Country in Church and Related Contexts

In this section we seek to specifically evaluate the use of Welcomes to Country and Acknowledgements of Country in church and related contexts. We will do this by exploring four important points.

### **1. *The Priority of Gospel Proclamation***

The first consideration in evaluating whether or how we may use an Acknowledgement of Country in any given church or related context is how it may help or hinder our churches' gospel witness and proclamation generally. Our world has one overwhelming problem – it is desperately lost in sin. Self-worship and all that flows from it dwells in the hearts of people from every culture. This is all too evident in the history of relations between white settlers and Indigenous people. Our present life is but a tiny island in the awful depths of eternity under the right judgement of our Creator. Therefore, our mission as God's church in the world is to go into the world, humbly reaching out and making disciples of people from all nations by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do this in the power of the Spirit, that others might also worship and obey Jesus Christ now and in eternity, to the glory of God the Father (Matt 28:18). While there are many ways Christians can seek the good of our Indigenous Christian family and neighbours, helping one another find new relationship with God must be of utmost importance to us as churches.<sup>12</sup> Hence our words and actions must clearly serve that aim.

Keeping gospel proclamation and discipleship central seems all too obvious to most of us. But as we consider whether or how we use Acknowledgements of Country, we need to be awake to often subtle ways gospel proclamation may be helped and hindered.

We swim in a culture of secularism — a perspective on reality that is human-centred and has little place for God and his revelation. Nevertheless, through God's common grace, many people working from a secularistic perspective can shed some light on the history and situation of our Indigenous neighbours and raise important concerns. We ought to listen carefully.

For example, humbly seeking the truth about the past and the present, listening carefully to Indigenous peoples' experiences, expressing sorrow about past wrongs, and desiring fair and respectful relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people are expressions of walking in step with God's Spirit that are aided by insights gained from others in our broader community (Lev 19; Jer 22; Luke 10; Gal 6:10 — see below). These are desires we share in some measure with many who hold a secularistic perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> K. DeYoung and G. Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom and the Great Commission*, Crossway, 2011, 241-8.

However, as churches we have much more of utmost importance that must be said and from an entirely different worldview. We only truly understand ourselves, others' needs, right relationships and the big picture of reality when we grasp God's word about us. It is only when we stand before the Lord Jesus that we learn to fear rightly, understand sin, experience grace and find renewal. Motivated by God's grace, our unique priority is to encourage our neighbours from every nation, each with their own history and burdens, to together know Christ as Lord and have life, restored relationships and eternal inheritance in his name. Therefore, in church and related contexts in which our first responsibility is to explicitly proclaim Christ, we need to ensure the gospel is not diluted, distorted or shifted to the background in the words we speak to and about our Indigenous family and neighbours. It must shape everything we say.

## **2. Communicating the Gospel of Reconciliation**

In contemporary dialogue, one of the key phrases used to promote positive relations and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is 'reconciliation'. Therefore, in considering whether the use of Welcomes or Acknowledgements to Country are an appropriate cultural form for gospel contextualisation, it is relevant to explore biblical teaching about reconciliation and the nature of genuine repentance.

### **a. The Gospel of Reconciliation**

The gospel story begins with God as Creator of the world, making the heavens and the earth, and filling them with various forms of life. God created human beings in His image, to rule over the earth, enjoying life in right relationship with Him and one another. However Genesis provides the tragic account of humanity's rebellion against our Maker that brought a curse upon the entire creation, and fractured relationships at every level, most significantly with God. The early chapters of Genesis illustrate how sin ruptured God's good creation, and its relational implications become quickly visible in a downward spiral of blame, deception, violence and murder, which ultimately provoke this reaction from God:

*The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. (Genesis 6:5-6)*

And yet right from the outset, God's merciful heart for reconciliation with the very people who had spurned His love is astounding. Even as human sin alienates us from God and leaves us accursed as his enemies, throughout the Old Testament God plants seeds of grace that gradually reveal His unfolding plan of salvation. Despite Israel's ongoing rebellion, God remains relentlessly committed to pursuing reconciliation with his chosen people, culminating in the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus came as God's saving king, the 'Prince of Peace' sent to bring God's blessing of forgiveness to the accursed, not only for Israel but to

all nations, as promised. As Romans 5:1-11 teaches, Jesus' death and resurrection marks history's most climactic act of reconciliation where God demonstrates his breathtaking love for us as his enemies, guaranteeing peace, life and salvation to all sinners who put their trust in Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes in Colossians of the cosmic implications of Jesus' death, because through Christ, God was pleased to *'...reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross'* (Col 1:20). The incredible result is that we who were once alienated from God as his enemies are now reconciled back into restored relationship with our Creator, given our sins are no longer counted against us through the Cross.<sup>13</sup> The initiative in this act of relational healing all comes from God and He invites us to enjoy reconciliation as His gift to be received by faith. Then as those who've been reconciled, Christians have the privilege of sharing the gospel message with our broken world as Christ's ambassadors imploring people on His behalf, to *'Be reconciled to God'*.<sup>14</sup>

Since Jesus himself *'is our peace'*, He calls on his people to actively pursue peace in our personal relationships. This goal of peace must especially be embraced within the church such that we become unified across cultural and ethnic divisions, beginning with the original dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile that Christ has destroyed to *'create in himself one new humanity'* (Ephesians 2:14-16). We look forward to the future heavenly gathering of all God's reconciled people from every tribe, nation and tongue gathered around the throne of our glorified Saviour.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly in our present earthly reality, the church should seek to reflect the unifying power of the gospel of reconciliation as we live out Jesus' vision of our new corporate identity: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28).

When Christ's church embodies gospel-shaped reconciliation in our earthly relationships, we point our unbelieving neighbours towards the ultimate offer of reconciliation available through our Saviour. Such a commitment to pursuing peace and unity in human relationships is also consistent with the life of repentance which is the fitting response to Christ's forgiveness of all our failures to rightly love God and one another. We see such an example of genuine repentance in the example of Zacchaeus who responds to Christ's welcome with a willingness to make restitution to those he has previously cheated (Luke 19:4). As part of living a new life empowered by God's Spirit, followers of Jesus will seek to identify sinful attitudes and behaviour that require repentance, both individually and corporately. However this becomes a more complex process of repentance and pursuing reconciliation as it relates to Christian believers working out how best to respond to wider cultural and societal wrongdoing and its long-term effects.

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<sup>13</sup> Colossians 1:19-22; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the vision of the heavenly gathering of God's people from all nations in Revelation 7:1-12.

## **b. Reconciliation, Repentance & Acknowledgments to Country**

When we view the question of whether Christians should embrace Acknowledgements to Country through this gospel lens of reconciliation and repentance, we can see a number of reasons to affirm their value more generally.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary Australian society, an Acknowledgement of Country is widely viewed as a means of recognising the grave injustices suffered by Indigenous Australians and the deep hurt they have suffered through displacement of their lands by European settlers. For Christians to then not support what has become such a common statement of affirming cultural reconciliation, runs the risk of compromising our gospel witness to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal Christians are often confused as to why governments and schools acknowledge Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Landowners but the Church does not.<sup>17</sup>

Of course if our goal as Christians is genuine biblical reconciliation, we'll be interested to go beyond 'tokenism' to embrace concrete actions (i.e. Reconciliation Actions Plans) that help improve the lives of Indigenous people and heal cultural divides. However, as a starting point, a public statement recognising Aboriginal people as the first inhabitants of this land through an Acknowledgment of Country seems at least a positive step towards the goal of reconciliation and peace.

Some have objected that to participate in an Acknowledgement of Country, Christians are unfairly forced to take responsibility for sins they did not commit, since they relate to the actions of past generations.<sup>18</sup> However the Bible seems to include examples where the consequences of sin run across generations, most significantly the far-reaching and universal impacts of the Fall.<sup>19</sup> In this context, Christian participation in a common cultural ritual for acknowledging the real sins of colonisation seems entirely appropriate because: *'Complicity takes the form of solidarity in sin with our ancestors. We may not be guilty of their particular sins, but we reap the fruits of their deeds and almost inevitably perpetuate the culture which their sins brought into being'*.<sup>20</sup>

With this reality in mind, Northern Territory Bishop Greg Anderson (former missionary amongst Indigenous Australians) speaks of how it encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including Christians) when, '...receivers of stolen/conquered land

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<sup>16</sup> That is, separately from the specific questions of whether they are appropriate for church worship services and the precise wording which is to be used.

<sup>17</sup> Tanya Riches, 'Acknowledgement of Country: Intersecting Australian Pentecostalism's Re-embedding Spirit in Place' Religions, Vol 9, Issue 287, 2018, p8.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Powell, '10 Reasons Why Christians Shouldn't Use Indigenous Protocols', Blog – The Daily Declaration (2<sup>nd</sup> December 2019), URL: <https://blog.canberradeclaration.org.au/2019/12/02/ten-reasons-why-christians-shouldnt-use-indigenous-protocols/>

<sup>19</sup> For example, Exodus 34:7; Romans 5:12-14.

<sup>20</sup> *A Theological Framework of Reconciliation, With Special Reference to The Indigenous Peoples of Australia - A Resource Paper for the Indigenous Ministry Task Force*, Sydney Anglican Diocesan Doctrine Commission, paragraph 29.

acknowledg[e] the sin of stealing and murder that were corollaries of colonisation'.<sup>21</sup> Anderson continues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are grateful when churches and Christians demonstrate respect and positive attitudes towards Aboriginal people – even if it is just a gesture, like saying an Acknowledgement.

Whilst there are many other issues to consider when it comes to the appropriateness of Christian participation in Acknowledgments of Country, it seems that a primary argument in their favour is the Bible's encouragement for Christ's reconciled people to be proactive in the pursuit of peace in human relationships. One such opportunity for Australian believers is to support community reconciliation initiatives taking place in the sphere of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, like (but certainly not limited to) the growing practice of Acknowledgements of Country. Nevertheless, as we do so, we remember that this is simply one part of our core purpose to be ambassadors for the ultimate reconciliation which God himself offers to all people through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **c. Christlike Relationships**

An Acknowledgement of Country may be one way to seek reconciliation and nurture welcoming relationships with Indigenous neighbours. However, an Acknowledgement of Country can be all too easily spoken perfunctorily, to cultivate an image or ward off criticism. Acknowledgements of Country and the relational purposes driving them can also be too readily dismissed due to cynicism about Indigenous people and issues. Lacking in both cases is a genuine desire to love and encourage Indigenous brothers, sisters and neighbours in the gospel. Grant Paulson, Indigenous Baptist Pastor says:

*You need to know what your purpose and mission is in the community: what is your audience? What's the purpose of using such a greeting as an Acknowledgement? Are you just ticking a box to appease Indigenous sentiment without taking any real actions? Or is the purpose of using such a greeting relationship building? Is it about your relationship with God and with each other?*<sup>22</sup>

The National Church Life Survey 2018 shows the majority of Australian churches have no connection with local Indigenous people, even where there is support for reconciliation.<sup>23</sup> In our highly connected world, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of possible relationships and resort to diffuse statements about loving Indigenous people generally.

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<sup>21</sup> G. Anderson, private email, 2020 (by permission).

<sup>22</sup> Grant Paulson, Indigenous Baptist Pastor, Faith and Development Advisor for World Vision Australia, phone conversation, 2021 (by permission).

<sup>23</sup> S. Bevis, M. Pepper and R. Powell, 'Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Relations in Churches', *NCLS Research Occasional Paper* 33. Sydney: NCLS Research, 2018, figure 12.

The Bible, however, emphasises concrete love towards those who are proximate in some sense, whether in space, familiarity, shared history etc (Luke 16, 2 Cor 8-9, 1 Tim 5:8). Therefore, showing gospel love to Indigenous members in our own or neighbouring churches, or families and communities living nearby, is important.

Rev. Nathaniel (Jum) Naden, Minister at St Peter's Anglican Church South Tamworth, says:

*Go and meet Aboriginal people and make relationships. It is easy to make decisions about something in abstraction away from people, relationships and culture. God is relational and wants us to be too. Cross-cultural relationships are hard and in Australia we have centuries of rocky relationships with colonisation and racism.*<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, churches should consider how they may overcome any historical estrangement with nearby Indigenous neighbours, replacing any 'us' and 'them' mentality with a desire to reach out as fellow sinners in the need of Christ. By God's grace, there may be much mutual encouragement to be found with Indigenous Christian brothers and sisters, or doors opened for gospel witness to unbelievers. How we speak about doing this may also help churches build an honourable reputation with outsiders more generally, smoothing the way for gospel opportunities (Col 4:5, 1 Peter 2:12).

Whether or not Acknowledgements of Country are used, we should feel the challenge they present to reach out to our Indigenous neighbours with Christlike love and to speak with integrity.

### **3. Adapting Acknowledgements of Country (and WTC) for Gospel Purposes + The Dangers of Syncretism and Relativism**

While some argue Acknowledgements of Country — and sometimes Welcomes to Country — can be adapted to communicate gospel meaning in various contexts, others express concerns about the dangers of syncretism. If our priority as churches is to have a Christocentric perspective in our relationships with Indigenous neighbours, and if everything we say and do when we gather must be glorifying to God and in accordance with his Word, then we must carefully consider whether (a) Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country can be used to faithfully build a bridge to the gospel, and (b) what dangers of syncretism and relativism might present.

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<sup>24</sup> Rev. Nathaniel (Jum) Naden, Minister at St Peter's Anglican Church South Tamworth, phone conversation, 2021 (by permission).

**a. *Build Bridges to the Gospel Wisely***

The Bible was written to people in a variety of ancient cultural settings but also to people across the full breadth of time and space within their own cultures, challenging all with the Lordship of Christ. Contextualisation is the practice of reading the Bible in its context then communicating and applying the Bible in a way that is meaningful to a particular cultural context without diluting or compromising the Bible's message. This involves humble sensitivity to the way our culture shapes us as well as the way different cultures influence others.

One clear biblical example of contextualisation is Paul's address to the Athenians, mainly Stoics and Epicureans committed to religious and philosophical pluralism<sup>25</sup>, at the Areopagus in Acts 17:22-34. Here Paul draws upon Greek sources to communicate his gospel message. Firstly, he refers to an altar with the inscription 'To the Unknown God' (v23) to reveal that the divine being of which they are ignorant is the personal, sovereign and providential Lord of heaven and earth (v24). Secondly, he quotes two hymns to Zeus (v28), the supreme being of the pagan Greek world-view: 'In him we live and move and have our being' and 'For we are indeed his offspring'. Here Paul detects some recognition of the true God's nature in Athenian poetry. This illustrates his point that, although human beings have been beguiled by false worship (v24-25. 29), God is nevertheless not far from those who truly seek him (v27).<sup>26</sup> He then proceeds to challenge the Athenians regarding God's judgement through the man he has raised from the dead (v31).

It is of great help to our evaluation of whether or how Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country may be adapted for gospel purposes in church or related contexts to note six observations about the way Paul engages with these Greek sources:

1. Paul knows and engages with the worldview of the Athenians, using ideas they can relate to, because of a desire to draw them to Christ.
2. He does draw upon Greek sources to point them to Christ. However, we should observe the way he does this. He does not identify the Lord with Greek deities or simply detach Greek phrases from their context and pragmatically incorporate them into a Christian presentation. He uses these sources to point the Athenians to their (albeit dim) recognition of the true God's nature before revealing the true God himself.
3. While he begins by recognising some confluence between Athenian religious ideas and biblical truth, he clearly challenges their false beliefs with biblical truth. He makes no room for false belief. Neither does he dampen down the demand to repent from false worship and worship only Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce W. Winter, 'Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul's Failed Apologetics in Acts 17?' *Themelios* Vol. 31 Issue 1, October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Eerdmans, 1988, p338.

4. He uses his sources to serve clear communication of core gospel truth: God's nature and character, human dependence on God, guilt and need for repentance, God's judgement through his one appointed man, the resurrected Christ. Christ is presented as the new hermeneutical key to spiritual life.<sup>27</sup>
5. It is notable that some Athenians were intrigued and wanted to hear more. Others reacted negatively (v32).
6. It is also worth noting Paul's speech took place in the Areopagus before a non-Christian, Athenian audience, not as part of a church gathering. There is clear evidence that Paul's way of preaching varies according to the purpose of the occasion and the needs and backgrounds of hearers (Acts 13:13-52; 20:17-38).

We therefore venture the following points to remember when working out whether to use Acknowledgements of Country or Welcomes to Country to build bridges to the gospel.

1. It is important to know and engage with the worldview of Indigenous neighbours if we are to faithfully build bridges to the gospel.
2. Engaging with local Indigenous people and culture could involve recognising some confluence between Indigenous ideas/traditions and truth about God or his world.
3. While we might begin by quoting non-Christian Indigenous sources, it is imperative we go on to reveal the true God with utmost clarity, communicating core gospel truth and a Christocentric worldview. For example, as more than one Indigenous Christian leader we interviewed pointed out, while it may serve apologetic purposes to recognise some confluence between the truth about God and concepts of a creator and redeemer in the Dreaming, the true Creator God of the Bible and his Son, through and for whom all things have been created and through whom we have redemption, must be clearly communicated so as to avoid any confusion of the two.
4. The gospel challenges false beliefs and calls people to repentance and exclusive worship of Christ.
5. Clear gospel proclamation may draw some to Christ but others may well respond with different degrees of negativity (Matt 13:1-23).
6. We are under no obligation to use certain cultural forms or words as we reach out to our neighbours. What might be fitting in the context of relating with Indigenous neighbours may also not best fit another situation with a different purpose and involving different people.
7. We may also consider adapting traditional Indigenous forms and practices such as Welcomes and Acknowledgements. Indeed, since the Bible was written by people planted within different cultures and times through God's ultimate authorship, we find many different instances of Ancient Near Eastern cultural forms and practices being adapted to convey biblical truth e.g. the genre of Genesis 1-2, the practice of

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew J. Prince, 'Contextualisation of the Gospel: Towards An Evangelical Approach in Light of Scripture and the Church Fathers', *Australian Catholic University Thesis*, 2015, p113.

circumcision, covenant forms and practices. However, we must do so with considerable care and humility. We are not inspired writers nor apostles. We need the wisdom of God's broader church to do this faithfully.

Several Christian churches and ministries have attempted to adapt Acknowledgements of Country to communicate gospel truth (see Appendix for examples).

**b. *Beware Syncretism and Relativism***

We must also consider the dangers of syncretism and relativism in our use of Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country. Syncretism is the practice of blending together irreconcilable religions, ideologies or cultural ideas, often with the pretence of preserving the purity of one or both. Relativism is the belief that truth is not preserved fully by any one religion. Each religion must make way for the claims of other religions, ideologies, cultural beliefs etc, allowing them each an equal hearing, side by side.<sup>28</sup> If we are rightly self-aware, we should see there is always a danger of unknowingly mingling our own cultural assumptions with gospel truth or allowing them to sit together. There is also a danger of syncretism or relativism when we try to communicate the gospel into different cultures.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul is enormously concerned about the way the Colossians, who lived in an environment of religious and philosophical pluralism and syncretism, were combining belief in the apostle's teaching about Christ with Jewish folk belief. The worship of angels, a desire for ecstatic visions (Col 2:16) and numerous rules and regulations (2:21) were blinding them to the liberating power of the indwelling Christ, supreme Creator and Lord over all spiritual powers (2:8-15).<sup>29</sup> Paul's response was to both expose this syncretism and preach the truth of Christ, toiling and struggling to present them mature in Christ (1:28-29).

In a similar way, we must ensure the full truth of Christ is communicated in church and related gatherings, and false belief countered with much wisdom, out of love for God and his church. Christians can certainly observe and learn about the full breadth of Indigenous belief and practice in many different contexts. But Christ only must be proclaimed in Christian gatherings.

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<sup>28</sup> Sunand, Sumithra, 'Syncretism, Secularisation and Renewal' in Carson, D.A. ed., *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, Paternoster Press, 1987, p260-263.

Zamgias, Philip, 'A Clash of Kingdoms: Unique Challenges for Indigenous Leaders', Feb 2016, [www.au.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.au.thegospelcoalition.org)

<sup>29</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*, Baker, 1996.

Syncretism and relativism may be overt or inadvertent due to misunderstandings and different assumptions, even accompanied by the best intentions of sharing Christ. GiST's research indicates that the value and meaning of Acknowledgements of Country, Welcomes to Country and the various terms and phrases commonly used can vary considerably between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and even between Indigenous people themselves. As Rev. Jum Naden said:

*Aboriginal culture isn't uniform, different symbols and ceremonies mean different things to different Aboriginal people groups. Church leaders need to be clear what the symbols mean before deciding whether or not to participate in Welcomes and Acknowledgements.*<sup>30</sup>

Christians are in dangerous territory when we accept and use cultural practices and terms without really understanding them. In fact some faithful, theologically discerning Indigenous Christian leaders whose judgements are more informed than ours have decided against using Acknowledgements of and Welcomes to Country in their context. We must consider the danger of unwittingly undermining the ministry of these leaders who have paid a high price for identifying with Christ in their communities.<sup>31</sup>

For example, a Welcome to Country is done by a Traditional Owner or Elder and may involve speech, dance, song, exchanging of gifts and smoking ceremonies. While these are increasingly commonly used for the purposes of cultural recognition in many contexts, Pelizzon and Kennedy argue their legal, political and spiritual meanings (as well as those of Acknowledgements of Country) are often ignored:

*Welcome to Country ceremonies [...] are intrinsically political acts. They are performative acts, not mere performances. They represent intersections of contemporary political acts of resistance to the ongoing process of colonisation with traditional normative and spiritual meanings.*<sup>32</sup>

Here is a brief overview of ways in which understood meanings of Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country may vary, entailing a risk of syncretism and relativism:

**Smoking ceremonies** are sometimes performed as part of a Welcome to Country. For some people, their purpose is to ward off bad spirits from the people and land and make way for a brighter future.<sup>33</sup> For others, smoking ceremonies are simply about physical cleansing

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<sup>30</sup> Rev. Nathaniel (Jum) Naden, Minister at St Peter's Anglican Church South Tamworth, phone conversation, 2021 (by permission).

<sup>31</sup> Zamgias, Philip, 'A Clash of Kingdoms: Unique Challenges for Indigenous Leaders', Feb 2016, [www.au.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.au.thegospelcoalition.org)

<sup>32</sup> A. Pelizzon and J. Kennedy, 'Welcome to Country: Legal Meanings and Cultural Implications', *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, Vol.16, No.2, 2012, p.58-69.

<sup>33</sup> <https://aboriginalincursions.com.au/special-aboriginal-ceremonial-events/smoking-ceremony>

(disinfecting), not about evil spirits.<sup>34</sup> Some Indigenous Christians have adapted the ceremony to symbolise the cleansing and healing Jesus' death and resurrection brings.<sup>35</sup> Nathanael Edwards, an Indigenous Christian leader in Innisfail, said his school will do a Welcome to Country ceremony with traditional dancing in, for example, NAIDOC week but without a smoking ceremony because 'we don't believe in smoking ceremonies to shoo away or welcome other spirits in. We believe everything is expelled by Christ, the Light himself, in whom we find salvation'.<sup>36</sup>

Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country generally refer to local land as the **traditional lands of a particular people group/s**. According to 'Australians Together', the relationship of Indigenous people to the land is not so much one of individual ownership, as Westerners understand it, but a more profound sense of shared belonging and connection to a living entity entailing stories, songlines and knowledge. 'The Land' is considered fundamental to Indigenous identity, law, language, kinship, culture and spirituality. Indigenous people know themselves, each other and their Creator through the Land.<sup>37</sup> They also regard their relationship with the Land as a reciprocal and respectful relationship, maintaining it through culture and ceremony. Their wellbeing is affected when the land is disrespected, damaged or destroyed.<sup>38</sup> This understanding of the Land presents Christians with some important challenges.

1. There are aspects of Indigenous culture in relation to 'the Land' that should be enjoyed without hesitation in Christ. For example, we should respect kinship and linguistic connections to the land as well as many forms of cultural expression. We can thank God for Indigenous peoples' communal care for the land from ancient times through his common grace.
2. We should be careful not to depict either traditional Indigenous culture or western culture as either idyllic or entirely bad, whether in relation to land or more broadly. There is no sense in the Bible that some cultures are intrinsically superior or inferior to others. God has made all the people of the world from one man (Acts 17:26) and will gather people from every tribe, nation, people and language in his new creation in fulfilment of his Abrahamic promises (Rev 7:9). All people of every culture stand on level ground before the cross, needing to repent from their sins and turn to Christ (Acts 17:30).

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<sup>34</sup> Julia Baird, 'Sydney Anglican Back Down On Proposal to Ban Indigenous Smoking Ceremonies', 2018, [www.abc.net.au/news](http://www.abc.net.au/news)

<sup>35</sup> Anna S., 'Welcome to Country Ceremonies – Welcome to Country Ceremonies – What is their Place in Christian Contexts?', Research Project for Bible College of South Australia, 2018, and phone call.

<sup>36</sup> Nathanael Edwards, School Principal of Radiant Life College, Innisfail, and former chairperson of Mamu Aboriginal Corporation, 2021, phone conversation (by permission).

<sup>37</sup> Ray Minniecon, 'Aboriginal Spirituality and Christianity: An Indigeneous Perspective' in CASE Magazine, No. 40, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Australians Together, *Welcome To And Acknowledgement Of Country*, 2022, [www.australianstogether.org.au](http://www.australianstogether.org.au)

3. Indeed, God's purpose in allotting periods and dwelling places to people groups is that they might reach out for him and find him (Acts 17:27). We must be careful to communicate that it is the Lord of heaven and earth and no other spiritual force who has made and sustains the land and everything in it (Ps 24:1; Acts 17:24). Only he is worthy of our honour and trust, and to sit at the very heart of a person or group's self-knowledge, not the Land or kinship, as important as these are to self understanding.
4. We must remember that, in his sovereignty, God has made people of '...every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...' (Acts 17:26). We thank God for his sovereign determination of peoples and lands, and honour Indigenous peoples' ongoing connection to the Land God has and continues to provide for them. God also clearly condemns oppression, violence and the unfair dispossessing of others of their land among both the Israelites and the Gentile nations (Dt.19:14,27:17; Pr.22:28; Am.1-2).
5. However, we should also be careful regarding what biblical conclusions we can make with regards to identification with land and land ownership. We should be careful not to imply the Bible endorses any one people having a special, intrinsic right to a particular land. God did give the Old Testament nation of Israel a special identification with her land as part of his salvation purposes at that time (Gen 12; Lev 25:10, 13). But he did not promise a similar identification or inheritance to any other people group in the same way. Neither does the Bible endorse any one governing authority (and its policies) even if all authorities are ultimately appointed by God (Rom 13). Paul's point in Acts 17:22-34 is to underline God's ultimate ownership of all land and his coming judgement on all through his resurrected Son. Our desire for a place of secure belonging is important in our earthly life but can only be truly met in our inheritance of God's new creation through Christ (Hebrews 10:8-16)

Acknowledgements of Country and Welcomes to Country also often pay respects to '**Elders both past and present**', '**Traditional Custodians of the land**' or, less commonly '**Traditional Owners**'. In our interviews, we found some understand 'Elders' or 'Custodians' as those who simply have past or present care of the Land and local people, as direct descendants of the original Custodians. Others see them as also having a spiritual role, protecting the deep secrets, stories, law and knowledge of their tribes.<sup>39</sup> This may include the idea that Elders from past generations continue to have a spiritual presence now. While we should foster an attitude of respect towards Indigenous leaders (1 Peter 2:17), including showing thankfulness for past leaders as appropriate, we should take care to do it in a way that acknowledges only the spiritual presence and authority of Christ. It is also worth noting that, while the concept of 'Custodianship' or 'Ownership' is not understood in the same way as the Western concept of ownership but rather in terms of deep care of and connection with 'the Land', the legal ramifications of traditional 'Eldership' and 'Custodianship' have also not been fully explored.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See also Zamgias, Philip, 'A Clash of Kingdoms: Unique Challenges for Indigenous Leaders'.

<sup>40</sup> A. Pelizzon and J. Kennedy, 'Welcome to Country: Legal Meanings and Cultural Implications', *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, Vol.16, No.2, 2012, p.58-69.

These examples show the misunderstandings and different assumptions that can confuse our sharing of Christ with our Indigenous neighbours and each other, posing a risk of syncretism and relativism. They highlight the importance of constructive and clarifying conversations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous hearers; careful word choices and explanations; and seeking the advice of God's church, especially faithful, theologically discerning Indigenous Christian leaders. Even when mature Christians might agree on a way forward, they should allow time and space for God to work in the consciences of fellow Christians who may not have yet grasped the freedoms and warnings of his Word.<sup>41</sup> We should always consider a variety of ways to accomplish the goals we seek. Most of all, we need to pray God will work his gospel truth into both our own hearts and those of our Indigenous neighbours.

#### ***4. The Place of Acknowledgments of Country in Church Gatherings***

If, having worked through the above issues, a church sees the value of a Welcome/Acknowledgement of Country, a further question arises. Is it appropriate to include such an Acknowledgement within a Christian worship service? In this section we will consider how the Bible's teaching on church gatherings helps us determine what are the appropriate occasions for their use.

##### ***a. The Gathering of God's People***

The Bible teaches that the gathering of God's people is a special occasion where Christ our Saviour is especially present, by His Spirit who dwells amongst us (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 3:16). While for the believer who has been rescued by God's grace, all of life is now meant to be lived to the honour and glory of God as an act of worship (Rom 12:1-2; 1 Cor 10:31); the assembly of God's people is significant because of the unique opportunity it affords for *corporate worship*. In a broad sense then, authentic Christian gatherings will involve both a *vertical* dimension as God's people hear from Him in the Scriptures and respond to Him in worship and prayer; and a *horizontal* dimension as we minister to one another using God's word to evangelise and build Christ's church to maturity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See The GiST Team, '*Conscience and Freedom of Conscience: Parts 1-4*,' [www.gist.org.au](http://www.gist.org.au) for further exploration on conscience in the Bible and in modern times.

<sup>42</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God – A biblical theology of worship* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 220.

This dual purpose of church services can be seen in the Spirit-filled, Word-saturated, God-focused, “one another” ministry of speech and song among believers, which the Apostle Paul exhorts Christ’s church towards in Ephesians 5:18-20 and Colossians 3:16-17. Such a church gathering will not just be edifying for believers, but also a welcoming and clear witness to the visiting unbeliever. The Scriptures exhort us to make our services intelligible to the outsider, with a prayerful expectation that God might powerfully use their church experience of God’s presence amongst his people in such a profound way as to convict them of sin, judgement and lead them to worship Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 14:24-25).

Our common life together, including what we do in church services, is to be “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). That is, hearing the word of God should be the central priority when we gather for worship, and the Bible’s teaching must also shape what other activities are included in our services. This “regulative” principle regarding acceptable worship is captured well by Chapter 21 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF):

- I. *“...the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.”*

Ch 21 of the WCF goes on to list activities which the Bible specifically encourages, including prayer and thanksgiving, Bible reading and preaching, singing psalms “with grace in the heart”, and “due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ”. Examples of the early church engaging in such practices can be seen in the book of Acts and other New Testament teaching to the church.<sup>43</sup>

However it should also be noted that not all activities described in Acts are commonly practised in today’s Reformed evangelical church, such as miracles, wonders and signs, prophecy, sharing of land, houses and sale proceeds, and choosing leaders by casting lots.<sup>44</sup> Correspondingly, contemporary church services often include elements like news & announcements, greetings, interviews, videos, prayers for cultural and community occasions/needs, and kids talks. Such activities may not be specifically mentioned in the Scriptures, but depending on their content, can still be utilised to great benefit for God’s people in church, provided they are intentionally aligned with the broader biblical purposes of church gatherings discussed in this section.

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<sup>43</sup> See for example Acts 2:42-47, Colossians 4:2-6; 2 Timothy 3:15-4:5.

<sup>44</sup> This demonstrates the need for a certain interpretive principle when reading narrative sections of the Bible (like Acts), as *descriptive* of what happened at one point in time and not necessarily *prescriptive* for what Christians should always do (although that prescriptive conclusion can sometimes be drawn when warranted by that text and other passages).

***b. Acknowledgments of Country in Worship Services***

Based on the biblical principles outlined above, we believe caution should be exercised in including an Acknowledgement to Country as a regular component to a PCQ Sunday worship service. Whilst there may be some value of Acknowledgements in promoting reconciliation and helping our gospel witness (both to Indigenous and non-Indigeneous Australians), one danger is the potential for a secular ritual to distract from the distinct purpose of Christian gatherings as corporate worship before our God. The decision as to whether to include an Acknowledgement of Country in a church service should therefore be framed in terms of how and whether this will help our congregation and the potential unbelievers who visit engage with God and be encouraged to maturity in Christ? We must ensure that our answer will not diminish our focus on Christ and His biblical priorities for the church.

One answer to this question may be that an occasional inclusion of an Acknowledgement of Country could be really helpful for a congregation to engage with a gospel mindset about issues of Indigenous/non-Indigenous reconciliation during certain key times of the year. For example, when that is either part of the wider national conversation (i.e. Australia Day, NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week), or relevant to something taking place in the life of your own congregation (i.e. a sermon series on gospel reconciliation, partnership with Indigenous missionaries, or a specific focus on Indigenous churches or ministries). In this case, care should be taken (preferably with the assistance of Indigenous Christian leaders) to design wording for the Acknowledgment that is truthful and distinctively Christian, bearing in mind some of the other principles discussed in this paper.

To maintain a Godward focus to our gatherings, the Acknowledgement could even take the form of a prayer, which involves thanksgiving, prayer and confession of sin before Almighty God in relation to the historical realities and injustices experienced by Indigenous people in our nation, and prayers for gospel ministry in Indigenous communities. This approach would have similarities to how many PCQ churches currently deal with other cultural occasions such as ANZAC Day, Mother's Day and Father's Day, and also significant ad hoc events like natural disasters and elections. On these occasions, we might choose to include a special interview, encouragement, prayer, or even cultural ritual (i.e. silent reflection for "The Last Post") in our worship services, which helps our congregations engage with that issue through a gospel lens, without distracting from the main biblical priorities for our gathering.

Another answer to the question of including Acknowledgments of Country in church may be that they are only tangential to our core purposes, and therefore should not be included in an actual worship service. But nevertheless given Acknowledgements could still be an indirect means of our churches being faithful gospel ambassadors, we will carve out another appropriate occasion to utilise them in our congregational life. For example, we are aware of some PCQ churches which have made an Acknowledgment of Country statement at church events, such as a training day, instead of a Sunday worship service. Similarly, PCNSW and other evangelical denominations have included Acknowledgements of Country at denominational events, such as school and theological college graduations, and Assemblies (or their equivalents).

Finally, in some contexts, churches (or Christian organisations) may make the decision that it is not wise for their gospel witness and may compromise their faithfulness to God to make a formal Acknowledgement of Country as part of their activities. They will nevertheless seek other active opportunities to love their Indigenous neighbours and support mission to Indigenous communities. Despite this approach, it is quite possible that individual Christians in those churches are willing to participate in an Acknowledgement said in another secular setting. For example, a Christian teenager asked to read an Acknowledgement at their school assembly, might see that as a good opportunity to express their gospel-hearted love for Indigenous neighbours made in God's image, even where they supported their church's decision not to include a secular ritual as part of their Sunday worship.

These different approaches will vary according to context, and require the prayerful wisdom of God's people considering carefully how the clear teaching of the Scriptures should shape the priorities and activities of our precious gatherings together.

## Conclusion

As PCQ ministers, elders and congregation members seek to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness of using Welcomes and Acknowledgements in Presbyterian church services and/or related gatherings, we hope the following concluding questions might prove useful discussion starters.

**a. *Speaking the Gospel Clearly***

A key question for Sessions and leadership within PCQ, raised earlier in this paper is, how may the practice of Acknowledgment of Country, help or hinder our churches' gospel witness and proclamation generally? Would the practice serve our mission of reaching out with the good news of forgiveness of sins and making disciples?

As mentioned a number of times throughout this paper, the practice of Acknowledgement of Country is widely regarded as recognition of the value of Indigenous culture and history, and a recognition of the effects of colonisation, along with the special connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with their land. Does that practice serve gospel ends? Could it distract people from our core message and the mission of the church?

Positively however, does it help people in our church communities come to terms with the history of our nation, and the sad realities flowing in an ongoing way from European colonisation? Does it help us come to terms with our complicity in the sins of our ancestors? Might it move us to repentance which is real and relational? Could the practice, used at appropriate times, move our church communities towards desiring of and praying for indigenous people to come to know the grace and mercy we've experienced in Christ?

When we consider our mission, there is a need to ask questions about our motives in adopting the practice. Is the use of Acknowledgment of Country an opportunity for virtue signalling? Is it a practice that we hope might commend our church to the culture as being culturally sensitive or "in touch"? Certainly, that's not our mission. But more positively could adopting this practice in an appropriate form be a small step towards moving beyond talk of reconciliation. Could it be part of a broader strategy for a congregation developing a reconciliation action plan? Have we given any thought at all to ways that we can effectively engage Indigenous people in our local communities or partner with or support ministries (eg. Bush Church Aid, APWM) to Indigenous communities?

**b. *Loving our Neighbour***

In considering whether and/or how to use Acknowledgements in our churches, loving our neighbour is a key priority as followers of Jesus. However, love is not a simple issue, but complex in that it is centred not upon what one or another group might want, but what is for their good. Specifically, we love our neighbour by always seeking to speak the gospel of the Lord Jesus to them in gentleness, truth and wisdom. (1 Peter 3:15-16, Matthew 10:16)

How would Acknowledgements love our neighbour in our context? As we think about the people most affected by this, how can we turn our concern for them into committed prayer for them and their spiritual needs? How might we seek to meet their material needs, if we are aware of practical difficulties they may be facing?

Are there ways our decision to use or not use an Acknowledgement of Country may have an impact on our neighbour? Specifically, who are we seeking to love? Are there others who will be overlooked or bear a cost for this decision? How might we love those on the margins of this decision in practical and prayerful ways?

How does our decision serve the cause of Jesus' message of good news to all people? Who may mishear the gospel in this context and in what ways may they mishear it? Are there ways we can change this outcome?

Are there ways we can deliberately seek to build relationships with and learn to love Indigenous people in our community? Are there people in our congregations already doing this? Are there people in our congregations who would like to do this? In what practical ways can we encourage and energise these endeavours?

**c. *Being Honest, Speaking Truth***

It would be possible to dishonestly or disingenuously read Acknowledgements or other such statements, bending to the whim of one or another political perspective. However, as Christians, we want to be steadfastly looking to Jesus for objective truth and humbly submitting ourselves to this. Therefore, as we make these decisions, we need to be examining our own hearts and actively seeking to know and apply truth to our situations.

How has listening to others helped change and shape our thinking and attitudes as we consider whether and/or how to do an Acknowledgement of Country? Are there others we need to listen to or other research we need to undertake?

How is our thinking shaped by the freedom we have in Christ: as we think through this issue, how are we conscious of having been freed from different cultural or socio-political values that may be tangential or oppose Jesus' gospel? How do we live out that freedom by being prepared to be challenged in our thinking by our brothers and sisters in this matter?

Do we feel safe in Jesus' love and able to face the unpleasant aspects of our history we may need to encounter? How can we practically encourage and support each other as we reflect on these things?

If we use an Acknowledgement of Country, how could we ensure our words are distinctly Christian? How can our words communicate genuine respect and honour, demonstrating Jesus' priority of reconciliation?

Given our accountability to Jesus on the final day, how do our words on this matter communicate truth about this issue faithfully, clearly and fairly?

**d.     *Using Scripture Faithfully***

Research conducted for GiST noted a range of Scripture passages used by Christians both to affirm or to proscribe the practice of Acknowledgement of Country.

Paul's speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17 as considered earlier in this paper, is often used to affirm the practice, given that it is a prime example of contextualisation or cultural engagement within Scripture. But is that the purpose of the passage? While Acts 17 affirms the God ordained appointment of peoples and lands and it demonstrates a way to adapt cultural forms to build bridges to the gospel, the passage's bigger purpose in context, is to show how the resurrection of the dead is a divisive message (cf. Acts 17:18, 32).

We need to give careful consideration to the way various passages are used to justify the practice. How are we using Scripture in our words and thinking in this matter? Does one Scripture passage so dominate as to obscure a faithful, Christ-centred reading of the Scriptures as a whole? Can someone understand how to read Scripture faithfully from our use of Scripture in this matter? Are we avoiding any unpalatable parts of Scripture?

Would a more fruitful way to consider the practice flow from a broader biblical-theological approach to Scripture, without proof texting? Do passages that speak about reconciliation, the way we speak to people outside of the community of believers, and the need for Christians to show Christlike love in words and action, provide more compelling reasons to adopt the practice?

**e.     *Being Wise***

In addition to the questions posed above, we need to give thought to the wisdom of the practice within regular church gatherings. Does the practice fit with the purpose of our gatherings? Already this paper has flagged that caution should be exercised in including Acknowledgement of Country as a regular component of public worship.

Could a secular ritual be not only be a distraction from the gospel but the broad purposes of the gathering? However, have we reflected carefully about the inclusion and appropriation of other cultural rituals in our gatherings (such as ANZAC, Father's Day, Mother's Day etc)? Have we thought through the effect of acknowledging these cultural artefacts? But on the other hand, could this practice be useful for helping any unbelievers visiting to engage with God? Could it be helpful for encouraging believers towards maturity in Christ?

Any Session or leadership group will need to be aware of the significance of terminology used in Acknowledgements of Country. As mentioned earlier, Christians are in dangerous territory when we accept or use cultural practices and terms without really understanding them. Obviously then, have we reflected on how these terms of significance ('The Land', or 'paying respects to elders both past and present' etc.) are heard by people in our congregations or gatherings where we might propose to use them? How would the practice be received by any Indigenous peoples potentially in our gathering? Have we talked with them beforehand? Once again there is the possibility that this could be the catalyst for a clarifying and constructive conversation that builds relationships with indigenous groups within our community.

Having clarified issues in our own minds and having resolved to adopt the practice of Acknowledgment of Country, have we considered how we might communicate with our church community the rationale for doing it? Are we prepared for disagreement? Are we giving time for God to work in the conscience of others while still seeking to help them think through the freedom we argue that Scriptures afford us to adopt the practice?

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## Interviews via Phone, Zoom and Email

Anderson, Greg, *Anglican Bishop of the Northern Territory*

Campbell, Nathan, *Minister at City South Presbyterian Church*

Edwards, Nathanael, *School Principal of Radiant Life College, Innisfail, and former chairperson of Mamu Aboriginal Corporation. Belongs to the Dyibarra, Bagirbarra and Dugulbarra people.*

Elu, Aunty Rose, *Church Warden at The Valley Anglican Church, Brisbane. From Saibai Island, Torres Strait.*

Ferguson, George, *Indigenous Minister at Wallgett-Collarenabri Anglican Church.*

Hunt, Stephanie, *Member (and wife of minister Neil Hunt) of Wee Waa Anglican Church*

Naden, Nathaniel (Jum), *Anglican Minister at St Peter's Anglican Church, South Tamworth. Belongs to the Wiradjuni (Dubbo) and Arabunna People (SA).*

Paulson, Grant, *Baptist Pastor, Faith and Development Advisor for World Vision Australia. Belongs to the Birri-Gubba and Bundjalung People (SE Qld).*

Phillpot, Sokar, *attends Cairns Presbyterian Church. Belongs to people from the NT/SA border.*

Prentis, Brooke, *Christian leader and former CEO of Common Grace. Born in Cairns on Yidinji Country but belongs to the Wakka Wakka people (Murgoo - Cherbourg- Bunya Mountains area).*

Purcell, Andrew, *Minister at Biloela Presbyterian Church*

Rosner, Brian, *Principal Ridley College, Melbourne.*

S., Anna, *Former Student of the Bible College of SA.*

Van Gelderen, Ben, *Principal of Nungalinya College, NT.*

## Appendix - Welcome to & Acknowledgment to Country Examples

Below are some recent examples, mostly from Christian churches and organisations, of the wording used for Welcomes and Acknowledgments to Country. Our inclusion of these should not be taken as an endorsement, but rather used to help churches develop their own wording based on the principles outlined in this paper.

Author/Speaker	Context	Statement	Source
Australians Together (secular Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisation working towards reconciliation) Website	Website	<p><i>"I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the (appropriate group) people of the (name of Aboriginal nation) nation, and pay my respect to Elders both past, present and future."</i></p> <p>OR if names of traditional owners are not known or are disputed:</p> <p><i>"I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past, present and future."</i></p>	<a href="https://australians.together.org.au/resources-2/welcome-to-and-acknowledgement-ofcountry/">https://australians.together.org.au/resources-2/welcome-to-and-acknowledgement-ofcountry/</a>
Reconciliation Australia	Website	<p><i>I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present.</i></p> <p>OR</p> <p><i>I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today, the (people) of the (nation) and pay my respects to Elders past and present.</i></p>	<a href="https://www.reconciliation.org.au/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/">https://www.reconciliation.org.au/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/</a>

Anglican Diocese of NT	Greg Anderson	<i>"We acknowledge that in God's providence, the [Larrakia or whatever] lived on and looked after this land for thousands of years. We pray that the ongoing work of reconciliation will bear fruit, and that Aboriginal churches will be strengthened."</i>	Email from Greg Anderson
Glenn Davies Former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney	Opening of Sydney Anglican Synod (2019)	<i>As we gather in the presence of God, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet. In his wisdom and love, our heavenly Father gave this estate to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. Upon this land they met for generations until the coming of British settlers. As we continue to learn to live together on these ancestral lands, we acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders, past and present, and pray that God will unite us all in a knowledge of his Son, in whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible – for all things have been created through him and for him.</i>	<a href="https://www.etynews.com.au/opinion/when-christians-gather-should-we-make-an-acknowledgment-of-country/">https://www.etynews.com.au/opinion/when-christians-gather-should-we-make-an-acknowledgment-of-country/</a>
Jatham Staudinger, Aboriginal man and staff member of Hillsong Darwin.	Hillsong Conference 2017	<i>"In the beginning, the earth was formless and void. Darkness was upon the bottomless depths. . . . and the Spirit of God rushed upon the waters." As the Psalmist says, "When you send your Spirit, you renew the face of the earth." We are gathered together tonight during our National NAIDOC week on the Country of the Wann-gal people, the traditional custodians who lived and danced by the river. And Aboriginal people were and are here. We acknowledge the Elders past, present and future. Now together in many languages, from many lands, we join to worship Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith, the One who unites all peoples, nations and tongues.</i>	Quoted in Tanya Riches article - see Bibliography above. See also: <a href="https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2017/aboriginal-australians-acknowledgedhillsong-conference-opening/">https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2017/aboriginal-australians-acknowledgedhillsong-conference-opening/</a>

Gateway Baptist, Mackenzie Campus (and Wiya-Gal Fellowship associated)	Church service	<i>"We have come together to worship God here today with song and..... We want to acknowledge that the land where we are now was originally given to (insert name of Aboriginal people group) to live and care for."</i>	Phone call with Grant Paulson.
Rev Pete Thompson, Southern Cross Presbyterian Church, Lismore, NSW	Website (including a map of the Aboriginal countries in the Lismore region)	<p><i>We wish to acknowledge that this land, the land on which we meet as a church and in which we have made our home, is the traditional home of the Bundjalung people. Our desire is to live here respectfully and at peace and to be a blessing to all people.</i></p> <p><i>At SCPC, we are richly blessed by our diversity and wish to particularly acknowledge the blessing of having Indigenous members in our church family. We want to be a church family that welcomes all people with understanding and put into practice the barrier-busting power of the gospel which overcomes all our differences and makes us all one in Christ Jesus.</i></p> <p><i>As people who know and have experienced the forgiveness and freedom that flow from saying sorry to God for our sin, we also want to be people who practice repentance and forgiveness with one another so that we can experience the joy of true reconciliation in Christ. In this Spirit, we desire reconciliation to take place within our church and community. We acknowledge the barriers, divisions, and pain between Aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people both currently and in the past and we are willing to say sorry for any part we have played in this. We desire to welcome Bundjalung people and all Indigenous Australians into our church and desire their forgiveness and mutual love so that we may be truly unified in Jesus.</i></p>	<p><a href="http://www.scpc.org.au/acknowledgementof-the-traditional-owners/">http://www.scpc.org.au/acknowledgementof-the-traditional-owners/</a></p> <p>On the church website's homepage – there was a link icon with Aboriginal Flag and words "Traditional Owners" – click on that link and it brings to the webpage</p>

Rev Nathan Campbell, City South Presbyterian Church, Brisbane QLD	Footer on church website	<p><i>We acknowledge the traditional owners of Meanjin, the city now called Brisbane. We pay respect to the Turrbal and Jagera people as those appointed by God, our creator, to be custodians of the land on which we meet.</i></p> <p><i>We long to see a reconciled Australia, built on listening, repentance, and our nation facing issues of racism and injustice both past and present. We prayerfully work with Aboriginal Christian leaders towards this goal.</i></p>	<a href="https://cspc.org.au/">https://cspc.org.au/</a>
Bush Church Aid	Neville Naden post on BCA Website	<p><i>We acknowledge the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth and His ownership of all things. (Psalm 24:1) We recognise that He gave stewardship of these lands upon which we meet to the First Nations Peoples of this country (Acts 17:26). In His sovereignty, He has allowed other people groups to migrate to these shores. We acknowledge the cultures of our First Nations Peoples and are thankful for the community that we share together now. We pay our respects to (please insert name of the nation here) and their elders/leaders, both past and present, and those who are rising up to become leaders.</i></p>	<a href="https://www.bushchurchofaustralia.com.au/content/respecting-our-first-nationspeople/gjkqn8">https://www.bushchurchofaustralia.com.au/content/respecting-our-first-nationspeople/gjkqn8</a>

Christ College NSW	Prayer at Graduation Ceremony	<p><i>Our Lord and loving Heavenly Father, we acknowledge you as the Creator who from one man has made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and who has marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.</i></p> <p><i>We acknowledge that, in your providence, you gave custodianship of the land upon which we meet to the Wangal people of the Eora nation. We also acknowledge the destruction of that people by disease and dislocation, and the painful history between the Aboriginal people and the later settlers of this land.</i></p> <p><i>You, Lord, have placed all peoples in your world so that they may seek you and reach out for you and find you, though you are not far from any one of us. So, we pray that through the Lord Jesus and his gospel you might continue to bring the indigenous people of Australia to yourself and bring peace in our nation. We ask you to strengthen us to work together for the welfare of all and the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.</i></p>	PCNSW GS&C committee report for 2019 NSW GA – email from John Maclean to Peter Thompson.
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