

Text of Sermon by Rev John Squires to accompany the Download of his sermon on 27th August 2021

Recently, we celebrated NAIDOC Week. This is a week which has a focus on the First Peoples of this continent and its surrounding islands. It has been held for over 50 years, under the auspices of the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (which forms the acronym NAIDOC).

NAIDOC Week itself continues on from National Aborigines Day, which was held from 1955 onwards; that day, in turn, was a development from the Day of Mourning, which first took place on Australia Day in 1938, when protestors marched through the streets of Sydney, followed by a congress attended by over a thousand people. After the congress, a deputation led by William Cooper presented Prime Minister Joseph Lyons with a proposed national policy for Aboriginal people. Needless to say, the Prime Minister received these representations, and then ignored them.

So NAIDOC Week continues a tradition, now 85 years old, of placing a focus on our Indigenous people. The theme for NAIDOC Week this year is For Our Elders; and that is a most relevant theme, given what has been taking place in our national life for some time now. We have been guided and led by a group of resilient, intelligent, and compassionate Elders from many First Nations communities; and this year, we stand at a very significant moment in that journey with those Elders.

Almost a decade ago, in 2015, the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the then Opposition Leader the Hon Bill Shorten worked together to establish a Referendum Council. That Council worked to build on the work of bodies established by previous governments: the Expert Panel, in 2010, established by Julia Gillard; and then the Joint Select Committee, established by Tony Abbott in 2012. (In true public servant style, of course, there had to be multiple committees, reports, proposals, and processes!!)

The Referendum Council reported in 2017, taking into account the political and legal responses to the earlier reports, as well as the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the general public.

What resulted from that report was a series of First Nations Regional Dialogues, which were Indigenous designed and led consultations right across the country. Indigenous members of the Council formed an Indigenous Steering Group. Together, in consultation with Indigenous community stakeholders and with advice from constitutional experts, they designed the Indigenous consultation process called the First Nations Regional Dialogues.

As a result, thirteen Regional Dialogues were held across the country—in capital cities, regional towns, and with remote communities such as Broome in WA, Ross River in Queensland, and Thursday Island in the NT. In each case, local Elders were involved in the planning and running of the consultation.

Each Regional Dialogue then chose Elders to send to a nation-wide Indigenous Constitutional Convention, which was held at Uluru in May 2017. That is the convention that, after three full days of discussion, produced the Statement from the Heart. This Statement has been the result of a long, careful process of consultation and discussion, under indigenous leadership, with bi-partisan political support.

It is this Statement which is asking for two things from the Australian people: for recognition of the First Peoples in the Australian Constitution, with a permanent Voice to Parliament, and for a Makarrata Commission to oversee the process of making treaties with Elders from the various First Nations of this continent. And that first request is what the referendum, to take place later this year, will be asking us to decide.

What I am talking about today, some will say is political. That is true, in the sense that it is about how we shape the life of our society—which is what politics is about. Governments make laws and oversee processes that ensure the way we live together in society is respectful and considerate of one another. That is the business of politics.

But what I am talking about is not partisan political, in the sense that there are people of all political parties who are supporting the YES case in a coming referendum. Whilst Labor and Green politicians, and many independent politicians, have spoken in support of a YES vote in the referendum, there are many people in the Liberal Party who are also supportive of a YES vote. Whilst the Federal leadership of the Liberal Party is indicating doubts about the proposal, most state Liberal parties are supportive, and a group called Liberals for YES are speaking out in support.

Indeed, in February this year, every First Minister in Australia—territory, state, and federal—agreed to support the Voice to Parliament. This was a highly significant bi-partisan step by a group of informed leaders who recognised the importance of taking this step.

Before that, in the middle of last year, a number of Australian religious leaders declared their support of the

Uluru Statement from the Heart, which includes the request for just such a Voice to Parliament. There are Anglicans, Catholics, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Sikh, Quakers, Baptists, and others who support this, along with the Uniting Church. Our national President, the Rev. Sharon Hollis, was one of the signatories of this document.

In May this year, representatives of the peak bodies of many sporting organisations joined together to advocate a YES vote in the voting referendum: the AFL, the NRL, Rugby Union, Cricket Australia, Baseball Australia, Deaf Sport Australia, Football Australia, Basketball, Taekwondo, Golf, and more. There were 20 sporting organisation in all which signed a common statement of support.

For people in the Uniting Church, voting YES in the proposed referendum is a clear way to express our long-held and enduring commitment to our covenant relationship with First Peoples. Voting in this way to support the referendum would be one more step along a pathway that has been clear for many decades, that the I-JCA stands in solidarity with First Peoples in Australia. In 1980, at Noonkanbah in Western Australia, Uniting Church members stood in solidarity with the traditional owners, the Yungngora people, against the mining of their land. (You can see the Rev. Robert Stringer in the bottom photo—he is bald, with a beard.)

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress was established in 1985, and a Covenant between the UAICC and the I-JCA was formalised in 1994. This Covenant recognises that working for reconciliation amongst people is central to the Gospel. In 2009, the Preamble to the I-JCA Constitution was revised to recognise the difficult history of relationships between the First Peoples and the later arrivals, as Second Peoples. Our present relationship is one which seeks to ensure that we commit to the destiny together which we share as Australians.

Many of the various ethnic and cultural groups in our society have also spoken in support of the proposal that will be put to us in the referendum, including a number of Indian and Chinese community organisations, along with Sri Lankan, Italian, Irish, Iranian, Greek, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Pacific Islander community groups — to name just a few.

Leaders of Australian Muslim communities have expressed their strong support of the YES vote in the coming referendum. Indigenous Australian peoples have a long relationship with Muslims, dating back centuries before British colonisation, as Yolngu and other Indigenous peoples in the north of Australia traded and engaged in cultural exchanges with Makassans from Indonesia.

Kate Carnell, the national convenor of Liberals for YES, has said that "An Indigenous voice would be a standing body aimed at practical outcomes, with its existence mandated by the Australian people because they support recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the original inhabitants of our continent. So it is fair, it is practical, it is workable and constitutionally safe."

Many leaders in the Uniting Church have spoken in support of a YES vote. Supporting a vote for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament is yet another step along the pathway that the Uniting Church has been walking for over 40 years, of sharing a destiny together. It's an expression of our central commitment to justice for First Peoples. It is an act that sits at the very heart of the Gospel.

So my advocacy, today, is for a YES vote in the referendum: not as a partisan political vote, but as an expression of the Gospel to which we are all committed. You would each have received the resource that the Assembly has prepared explaining why the Uniting Church is advocating for a YES vote. That provides helpful commentary on this important decision.

Alongside that, let us consider the words from scripture that we have heard today. Moses tells the people that what God requires of us is not "too hard"; for "that word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut 30:14).

Jesus tells us to "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 1 1:29). The word is near; the Voice calls to us. Today, the yoke that we are to take upon ourselves as a nation, is to ensure that First Peoples do have a Voice in our national life. That yoke, I am confident, will be constructive and productive.

The Anglican priest and hymn writer Elizabeth Smith, whose hymns we often sing (as we shall, to close this service today), has written a prayer about the forthcoming referendum. She has shared it online, offering it so that others could pray it too. So let us pray.

"God bless Linda Burney, Minister for Indigenous Australians, and all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who are working towards a "Yes" vote in the coming Referendum.

Give them the words and the wisdom to make the case warmly.

Give them perseverance in the face of hostility or indifference. Give them courage and resilience when they are met with casual, structural, or overt racism.

Give us the grace, in our own communities, to be the allies they need, by our listening, our learning, and our encouragement. Confirm them in their vocation to lead all Australians towards a future where First Nations people are heard, seen, honoured and treasured across this land. We pray through the Spirit who calls us to new ways of living together with justice and truth. Amen."