THE ABORIGINAL RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

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I regret that the Rev. Djiniyini Gondara, Moderator of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, is not with us to give this address as planned. He is a remarkable Aboriginal leader, who is successfully standing in Australia with one foot in Aboriginal culture and the other in white western culture. The outstanding nature of his leadership was demonstrated clearly when he was elected to lead his multi-cultural church as it witnesses today in the dream time lands of his own people.

I cannot stand before you in the beautiful black features of Djiniyini. I must come rather with bleached hands and a pale face. However, I will quote extensively from what Djiniyini has written at the close of this paper.

The Aboriginal response to the gospel is quite unique among the varied responses of South Pacific people we are considering at this conference. For the first 191 years it was almost totally negative; but for the past eight years it has been enthusiastically positive.

This sweeping generalisation, like most generalisations where culture fusion is concerned, is simplistic. But it expresses an important truth that is central to this presentation. The Aboriginal response to the gospel has been quite different in the past eight years to what it was in the previous 191 years. We can even identify clearly the events that prompted the change in this response.

The first period marked by either complete apathy or, at best, casual interest can be divided into four clearly identifiable stages. We will describe each in turn briefly.
A. BEFORE RENEWAL 1788-1979
I. Standing Silently in Terror 1788-1821

The first Christian missionaries to New South Wales, such as Richard Johnson, Samuel Marsden, Samuel Leigh and Walter Lawry, were unable to relate meaningfully to the Aboriginal people with whom they came into contact around the prison settlement of Sydney Cove. Each of these missionaries, in whose hearts there burned the fires of evangelical zeal, wanted to establish communication with the inhabitants of their home under the Southern Cross. But their desires were never realised.

From the perspective of history, it is easy to understand why this link was never made and why, therefore, the response of the Aborigines was so indifferent. The recently arrived white settlers to Australia and those who had inhabited this antique land for over 40,000 years, lived in completely different mental worlds. There were at the time no bridges between the two entirely different cultural patterns that gave meaning to the lives of each. Indeed, those in each group, that is Aborigines and settlers, were constantly making judgements from quite different sets of values.

Unlike the British, the naked Aborigines were a nomadic, hunting people, moving from place to place with few material possessions. Their treasures were not portable; but rather were built into the very lands across which they wandered, the streams and mountains, the rock carvings and the sacred sites, the intricacies of ceremonial handed down to them from the great dream-time heroes.

They have extremely simple homes constructed from several branches taken from nearby trees and no public buildings. Yet their kinship systems were complex, their ceremonial life elaborate, their taboo structures strictly kept, their relationship to their physical environment intimate and the spirituality that emanated from their animistic beliefs and totemistic links permeated the whole of their lives. Added to these considerations, no one spoke their languages. Even worse, it appears from the early records in New South Wales that very few really tried seriously either to understand their rich cultural life or to speak their various languages.

Is it any wonder that the response of the Aborigines to the gospel in the first three decades of the white gaol settlement at Sydney Cove was entirely negative? The Aborigines saw white skinned people, many of them carrying guns and whips, dressed in strange clothes, talking a strange language. They constantly witnessed scenes of unbelievable brutality\(^1\) as they watched strange buildings being put on their hunting grounds. Worse still, they saw their sacred sites being desecrated. Their reaction was one of apprehension, fear and terror.

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\(^1\) For the appalling conditions of living among the early white population of New South Wales see James Udy, *Living Stories*, pp. 6-8.
The early Wesleyan settlers were not unaware of their responsibilities to share the gospel with the black inhabitants of their new land. In fact, when in 1814 the 14 Wesleyans living at Port Jackson wrote to the Wesleyan Missionary Society in London, requesting that an ordained minister be sent out immediately, they specifically referred to the fact that he should be able to relate to 'the hordes of wild natives of a low type, both intellectually and morally.' The awareness of the need to relate to these 'wild natives' was not matched by an understanding of the complex cultural life from which these so-called 'natives' operated from birth to death. This ignorance was their great stumbling block.

The abysmal ignorance of the European settlers towards the Aborigines reflected in this correspondence simply mirrored the attitudes and comments of early explorers like Dampier and Banks. The prejudices that resulted from this ignorance distanced the missionaries further from the 'wild natives' and proved to be an almost insurmountable barrier to effective missionary activity for many years.

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2 For more details of this historic letter see Alexander Strachan, *Remarkable Incidents in the life of Rev. Samuel Leigh*, pp. 15-17, or James Colwell, *The Illustrated History of Methodism*, or James Udy *Living Stories*. 
II. Cool Reception to Mission Programs 1821-1854

Three concerted programs were developed to establish Aboriginal missions in the nineteenth century. These were different in style and were initiated in widely separated parts of Australia. However, the outcome of all three was much the same.

The first of these Aboriginal programs was begun in 1821 in the Port Jackson District. This involved the work of both William Walker and his Parramatta Institution, 1821-1824, and John Harper particularly at Bateman's Bay. The response of the Aborigines to these efforts was so negative that Harper resigned in 1828 and no further Methodist programs were attempted in New South Wales as we know it for the remainder of the century.

The second mission to Aborigines was initiated in the Port Phillip District. This involved the appointment of two missionaries by the Methodist Missionary Society and their establishment of the Bunting Dale Mission at Birregurra in 1838.

One of these missionaries, the Rev. Frances Tuckfield, instantly saw the advantage of learning Aboriginal languages, but advocated that a separate missionary should be appointed to each tribe in order to overcome the problem of inter-tribal rivalry that he saw as a hindrance to successful missionary contacts. However, in spite of this enlightened approach to sharing the gospel, the response of the Aborigines was apparently so negative that Tuckwell returned to parish ministry in 1848 and this missionary program specifically ceased.

The third nineteenth century missionary program to Aborigines took place on the other side of Australia in the Swan River Colony (now Perth). The Rev. John Smithers, who began the Perth Wesleyan Mission in 1840, developed an agricultural mission at Wanneroo in 1842. He tried unsuccessfully to move the Wanneroo people to York in 1848. When he was transferred to Hobart in 1854 he was not replaced and his missionary experiment came to an end.

Each of these three programs was shortlived. Each suffered from the complete indifference of the Aborigines. Each faced problems impossible to solve because the missionaries and the Aborigines acted out of completely different cultural backgrounds, which shaped their basic values, standards of behaviour and outlook on life. Each program was considered a failure and caused great disappointment and depression in the sponsoring church body. The negative response of the Aborigines to all three of these missionary programs is fittingly described by the written account of Francis Tuckfield's work which has the title Tuckfield's Magnificent Failure.3

3 Quoted in Arthur F. Ellemore's lecture Methodism Among the Aborigines in Dig or Die, papers given at Wesley Heritage Conference Sydney, 1980, edited by James S. Udy and Eric G. Clancy. I am indebted to Arthur Ellemore, a long time missionary among the Australian Aborigines, for some of the facts of this early period.
III. The Great Silence 1854-1916

The Methodist Church did not attempt to develop any further work among the Aborigines again until 1916. There is a great silence in the missionary literature for 62 years.

The Aborigines, of course, did not disappear. There were, from time to time, suggestions that the government of the day should do something to better their lot. And there were several practical steps taken to do this.

For example, in an effort to protect Aborigines from the ravages of white settlers' greed and diseases during the middle of the nineteenth century, the Port Phillip protectorate was established. George A. Robinson, James Dredge and Edward Stone Parker were appointed as Protectors. But this action was taken by the government and not the church although Robinson, Dredge and Parker were keen churchmen.

Individual Christians raised their voices in public, insisting that Aborigines were "creatures of God, the off-spring of a common parent, the inheritor of a nature identical with his own, in its origin, its capability and its destination."4

These words would have been radical when Parker used them in 1854 during the lecture he gave before the Melbourne John Knox Young Men's Association. Parker was the most competent of the Protectors. He had gathered an extensive knowledge of the beliefs, customs and languages of a number of the tribes.

Parker closed his Melbourne lecture on The Aborigines of Australia by saying, 'Let every Christian man . . . rise and say with one voice to the government, the legislature, the nation—occupy the land, till its broad waters, extract its riches, develop its resources if you will, but, in the name of God and humanity, save the people.'5

Was it a coincidence that some months later the Australian Wesleyan Methodist Church, when it was granted autonomy from the British Conference in 1855, directed its Missionary Committee to: 'take into serious consideration the question of the practicability of the re-establishment of the Mission to the Aborigines in Australia.'6

We do not know. But, in spite of this plea both by Parker and the 1855 Methodist Conference, nothing practical was done. Looking back to that period those of us interested in the missionary outreach of the Church want to ask the question posed in 1916 by the Rev. James Watson, who became the pioneer missionary to Arnhem

4 Quoted by Arthur Ellemore (Ibid., p.242) from E. Morrison (Appendix) Frontier Life in the Loddon Protectorate.
5 Ibid., p.242.
6 Quoted by Arthur Ellemore (Ibid., p.243) from Minutes of Wesleyan Conference, p.29.
Wesley’s South seas Heritage: Aboriginal Response to the Gospel by J.Udy

Land: 'Strange that the Methodist Church should have neglected such interesting people all these years. I wonder why?'

A partial answer to this question must lie in the dismal failures of the three programs already outlined. A stranger reason is that the missionary endeavours to the islands of the South Pacific proved to be so successful that they absorbed all the energies of the Australian Methodist Church. This was clearly stated by Methodist historian James Colwell when he wrote in 1907: 'It is not wise for a great church to dissipate its resources on a forlorn hope . . . the Aborigines will soon become extinct.'

This myth, that the Australian Aborigines were a 'dying race' lingered a long time in the Australian psyche. As late as 1940 when I was studying Aboriginal culture with Professor A. P. Elkin at Sydney University, this myth was still very much alive. The burning question then was not 'will the Aborigines die out?' but 'when will they die out?'

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7 Quoted by Arthur Ellemore (Ibid., p.242)
8 Article by James Colwell in *The Methodist* (NSW) 10/8/1907.
IV. Cautious Acceptance of Renewed Missionary Efforts 1916-1979

Missionary efforts among the Aborigines were recommenced in the second decade of the twentieth century. These resulted from a consultation held in 1912 between an Interdenominational Committee of church leaders interested in Aboriginal missions and the Australian Federal Government. At the meeting the Methodist Church was asked to take responsibility for missionary programs in Arnhem Land.

This part of Australia consisted of about 31,200 square miles of the Top End of Northern Territory which was largely unexplored at that time. Maisie McKenzie in Mission to Arnhem Land has described it in the following graphic terms: 'It was a wild land of immense variety. There were wide plains, rugged escarpments, gorges and waterfalls, thick jungles and mangrove swamps. Green tidal rivers snaked their way to the coast and islands lay dreaming under a tropical haze in the milky blue waters of the Arafura Sea.'

Missionary work in this region was begun by the Rev. James Watson on 22 June 1916. The location chosen was Goulburn Island. This was the beginning of a missionary saga that affected, in profound ways, the lives of the coastal tribes of Arnhem Land.

Later in 1916 Watson moved eastward to found another mission station at Milingimbi. During the next 25 years three more mission stations were opened at Yirrkala (1935), Croker Island, later known as Minjilang (1941) and Galiwin'ku, Eicho Island (1942). In these Aboriginal communities some of our most experienced Australian missionary leaders, such as the Rev. and Mrs Harold Shepherdson, the Rev. and Mrs Arthur Ellemore, the Rev. and Mrs Tom Webb and the Rev. and Mrs Len Kentish gave years of devoted service in spite of intense difficulties, not the least of which was the isolation.

Lest you think that I'm just referring to the men, let me add one more story to the roll call of heroic missionary wives that George Carter gave us in his fascinating overview of the missionary enterprise in the South Pacific region at the beginning of this conference.

When Tom Webb established the Methodist mission at Milingimbi, different tribal groups made their camps in the vicinity. Some of these were traditionally hostile to one another. Their near proximity created an atmosphere of continual tension. The slightest offence, even an old injury, real or imagined, was sufficient cause for a spear-throwing, blood curdling episode, which could end in injury and even death. On one occasion when Tom was away from home some groups of agitated Aborigines came across from the mainland and raised their spears in a threatening way against two boys, who had no chance to escape. Evelyn Webb, disregarding her own safety, rushed in between the lifted spears of the angry group and the two boys. Her shock

Maisie McKenzie Mission to Arnhem Land, p.2.
tactics so surprised the Aborigines that they lowered their spears and the situation was talked through to a satisfactory conclusion.

In spite of the devoted service given by a succession of missionaries in the five coastal missions in Arnhem Land, and the respect and love that often developed between individual missionaries and those with whom they worked, there was little evidence of a depth positive response in these Aboriginal communities as a whole to the gospel.

Reviewing the response of Aborigines to the gospel during this period Djiniyini Gondara has written: 'As Aboriginal Christians we have adopted nearly all of the white missionary traditions, customs and the ways of life. This is very sad indeed.

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The missionaries have been successful in convincing many Aboriginal leaders in the church and many ordinary Christians that our ways of life, culture and tradition are all satanic and evil. This has stopped our freedom to search for and create the true Aboriginal worship and Aboriginal expression of the gospel message and has sown division amongst our people.

'The missionary's words in the past were stumbling blocks for the Christian gospel to break through in Aboriginal culture, in order to bring true and purer meaning of God's words in our own context.'

From the point of view of the Methodist Church, missionary policies during this period were gradually changed in order to give the Aborigines more responsibility, greater decision making and ultimately full control of their community affairs. In this, the Church was much more forward looking than the Federal Government in meeting the aspirations of Aborigines for authority and freedom.

The five Arnhem Land mission stations developed into towns conducted by the Aborigines themselves. When the Aborigines were given citizenship rights and the franchise, the mission staff was able to give instruction on political and municipal procedures and rights. They even provided teams of linguists to translate important official government documents into the various Aboriginal languages.

Because of these developments, Methodist Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land made the transition to self determination more easily than most other settlements. They had learned to trust the missionaries and wanted them to remain in Arnhem Land to work with them as partners and workers in a time of rapid social change.

But there were many new factors developing in 1969. Decisions of the Federal Government made radical changes in Aboriginal communities. I want to let Djiniyini tell the story from this point because he was one of the Aborigines affected as he was a teenager growing up in Galiwin'ku, Eicho Island:

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'This new government felt sorry for our aboriginal people and felt they should have more money. All the workers were put on a training allowance and later onto award wages. They received this money too quickly, and did not know how to use it wisely. The Christian church knew that change must come, and that equality of opportunity must apply to all Australians, both black and white.' \(^{11}\)

Missionaries suggested that changes should be slower. Djiniyini agreed with this. But radical change came too quickly. Money was acquired too easily by Aborigines. Listen to Djiniyini describe what happened in Aboriginal communities:

The Communities were administered by all Aboriginal councils. Many of those changes took place in Arnhem Land destroying the Christian community spirit and there was no longer respect for each other in the community. The people were travelling backwards and forwards by charter aeroplanes bringing back things for their children and for their wives, as well as bringing liquor which destroyed the life of family and community. The fight would go on every day. The missionaries' spirit was corrupted. It was like the early days when missionaries went to stop the tribal fights. The churches and missionaries tried very hard to stop drinking and fighting and helped the communities in Arnhem Land to see and understand that many white-man values are bad and make you spoiled. One Christian missionary said: 'The white-man values take away your true aboriginal traditional values, your aboriginal spirituality, your culture and your aboriginal identity.'

'What he said is very true, because many of our people were already saying to others things like these: 'Don't believe what the church and missionaries are telling you. You must accept all the white man's values because they are better than our own, leave your old ways of living and live like the rest of the Australians.'

'Galiwin'ku, Eicho Island experienced the Revival on 14 March 1979. This year was a very hard year because the churches in Arnhem Land were going through very difficult times. There was suffering, hardship and even persecution. Many people left the church and no longer the Christian gospel had interest and value in their lives. Many began to speak against Christianity or even wanted to get rid of the church. This attitude was affected by the changes that were happening. There was money and other things coming into the community from the government. . . There was more liquor coming into the communities every day, and more fighting going on ... Whole communities in the Arnhem Land were in great chaos ... The Aboriginal people were listening to many voices; the government was saying you are free people and you must have everything you want, just like the other Australians . . . They were like the vacuum suction which was sucking in everything that comes, without knowing that many of the things that came into communities were really unpleasant and which only destroyed the harmony and the good relationship with the people in the communities.'\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) Djiniyini Gondara. *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, p.4.  
\(^{12}\) Ibid, pp.4-6.
Djiniyini will tell the story of these electrifying events which read more like the story of the first century church than contemporary happenings in Aboriginal communities:

'In 1975 I had just completed my theological training in Papua New Guinea in Raronga Theological College and was appointed to Galiwin'ku Parish ... The church was challenged by the power of the evil which clothes itself in greed, selfishness, drunkenness, and in wealth. As I went around in my daily pastoral visitation around the camp, I would hear the drunks swear and bashing up their wives and throwing stones on the houses and glass being broken in the houses. And sometimes the drunks would go into the church and smoke cigarettes in the holy house of God ... 

'The whole of Arnhem Land was being held by the hands of satan. I remember one day I woke up early in the morning and went for a walk down the beach and started talking to myself. I said, 'Lord, why have you called me to the ministry? Why have you called me back to my own people? Why not to somewhere else, because there is so much suffering and hardship?'

'I then returned to the manse where Gelung my wife and the children were. This was our last day before we left for our holidays to the south ... The reading I selected was from the Old Testament, Ezekiel 37:1-14. The Valley of the dry bones . . .

'After the morning prayers, my wife, Gelung, the children and I were ready to leave for Gove and then on to Cairns in North Queensland. We were away for four weeks and returned on 14 March 1979 ... These dates and the month were very important because this is the mark of the birth of the Pentecost experience in the Arnhem Land churches or the birth of the Arnhem Land churches. To us it was like the Pentecost in this 20th Century. It happened when Gelung, the children and I arrived very late in the afternoon from our holidays . . . When we landed at Galiwin'ku Airport we were welcomed and met by many crowds of people. All seemed to be saying to us we would like you to start once again the Bible Class fellowship . . . Though Gelung and I were so tired from the long trip ... we just committed ourselves to the needs of our brothers and sisters . . .

'After the evening dinner, we called our friends to come and join us in the Bible Class meeting . . . only seven or eight people came to that Bible Class meeting ... I began to talk to them that this was God's will for us to get together this evening, because God had planned this meeting through them so that we will see something of His great love ... I said the word of thanks to those few faithful Christians who had been praying for renewal in our church, and I shared with them that I too had been praying for the revival or for the renewal for this church and for the whole of Arnhem Land churches, because to our Heavenly Father everything is possible . . .

'I then asked the group to hold each other's hands and I began to pray for the people and for the church that God would pour out His Holy Spirit to bring healing and
renewal to the hearts of men and women, and to the children. Suddenly we began to feel God's Spirit moving in our hearts and the whole form of prayer life suddenly changed and everybody began to pray in Spirit and harmony. And there was a great noise going on in the room and we began to ask one another what was going on ... In that same evening the words just spread like the flames of fire and reached the whole community in Galiwin'ku. Gelung and I couldn't sleep at all that night because people were just coming for the ministry, bringing the sick to be prayed for, for healing. Others came to bring their problems ... so the Lord touched them and healed ...

Next morning, the Galiwin'ku Community once again became the new community. The love of Jesus was being shared and many expressions of forgiveness were taking place in the families and in the tribes. Wherever I went I could hear people singing and humming Christian choruses and hymns, when in the past I would have expected to hear only fighting and swearing and many other troublesome things that would hurt your feelings and make you feel sad. Many unplanned and unexpected things happened ... The fellowship was held ever night and more and more people gave their lives to Christ, and it went on and on until sometimes the fellowship meeting would end around about 12 midnight. . . People did not feel tired in the morning, but still went to their relevant work . . . Many Christians were beginning to discover what their ministry is, and a few others had a strong sense of call to the ministry to be trained to become Ministers of the Word. And now today these few ministers who have done their training through Nungalinya College have been ordained . . .

The Spirit of Revival has not only affected the Uniting Church Communities and the Parishes, but as well the Anglican Churches in Arnhem Land ... I would describe these experiences like a wild bush fire burning from one side of Australia to the other.13

13 Ibid. pp.7-10.
C. SEQUAL TO RENEWAL 1979-87

A direct result of the revival in Arnhem Land was the formation of the new movement called the Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress. The seed for this development was sown in New Zealand when the Rev. Charles Harris and the Rev. Bernie Clarke met with Maori and Pakeha in a Maori Marae at Ohope. The Third Assembly of the Uniting Church accepted the Congress and incorporated it into its Commission for Mission.

Many people ask the question, 'What are the aims of the Congress?' Djiniyini would answer: The Primary aim of the Congress is evangelism. Aboriginal and Islander Christians want to respond to the command of Jesus to 'Go and make disciples'. But evangelism is not only just organising the occasional rally, or even door knocking. Evangelism means caring for the whole person. We want to be free to engage in a Holistic ministry to our own people. Yes, we want them to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And yes, we are concerned about housing, employment, training, community development, alcohol rehabilitation, land rights, health and youth work.'

Reflecting on these new developments in the Aboriginal response to the Gospel it is better to have Djiniyini speak to us rather than have me attempt to say what he and other Aborigines think. Consequently, as he should have given this paper, I'll let him have the last word:

'Aboriginal Christians are called by the Spirit of the Living God to plant Christ in this Australian soil, rather than transplant the western forms of Christianity. We must promote Christ as the living and acceptable part of our own tradition and faith through our ceremony and culture. The early missionaries came to Aboriginal land with the funny idea that there was either no Aboriginal religion at all, or that it was entirely of the devil. There was no proper foundation laid for the gospel message in the hearts of the people, and no bridge built between the old and the new. Though Christian missionaries encouraged the Aboriginal Christians to produce the fruit of Christianity, there was no firm or adequate theological basis. That's the reason why we need Nungalinya College, which trains our theological students for the ministry and the lay people to take important roles in the life of our church through Christian education.

'Nungalinya College provides training that is related specifically to the Aboriginal context and styles of learning.

‘The eighties have marked the move towards indigenous ministry in each community. The Spirit of God is doing wonderful things for the Aboriginal Christians throughout Australia. God's Spirit is challenging Christian ministers and lay people (both men and women) to be obedient to his words in the holy Scripture, to spend more time in learning, listening, studying and sharing God's word in the fellowship of all believers.

‘The Aboriginal church is beginning to build up a strong Christian teaching in the level of our congregation, especially with what is happening in the Arnhem Land churches and in Pitjantjatjara parishes. We strongly believe that to follow up the evangelism there must be an ongoing teaching in all levels of different ages. Aboriginal churches can develop this teaching in their own methods of teaching, using our own stories which relate to our situation.

'Please pray for the Aboriginal Christians, for an enduring and maturing faith, for inner joy and peace in adversity, for the gift of Spirit in the patient ministry of reconciliation and healing, that the Word of God may speak to their lives and culture.'

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Listen to the Spirit, pp.46-47.