

REPORTS

Ministerial Training for Aboriginal Australians

In August-September, 1985, Dr John May was able to visit the most distant member school of MATS, Nungalinya College in Darwin, and its subsidiary (soon to become autonomous), Wontulp-Bi-Buya, in Townsville. This is his report on the situation of pastoral training for Aboriginal Christians.

The fact that the Uniting church has nominated an Aboriginal, Revd Terry Djinyini Gondarra, as Moderator-elect of its Northern Region, and that the Anglican church is about to ordain its first Aboriginal bishop for Northern Australia, is testimony to the foresight of these churches in laying the foundations of theological training for Aboriginal ministers. Nungalinya College, in one of the newer outer suburbs of Darwin, grew out of a community development centre started by the Uniting church, as it became clear that Aboriginals aspired, not just to social work, but to pastoral ministry. The College is residential, though allowance is made for the nomadic trait in Aboriginal culture, by integrating time spent in the students' home areas into the curriculum. A subsidiary of Nungalinya, which includes the Roman Catholic church among its sponsors, Wontulp-Bi-Buya, in Townsville (North Queensland), uses the theological education by extension (TEE) method to cover a vast area, stretching from northern New South Wales to the Torres Strait Islands. Yet another approach, is that of the Lutheran church in Central Australia, which has trained Aboriginal pastors "on the job", without any institutional or organisational structure, for some years, though this is now under review.

Both Revd Don Carrington, Dean of Theological Studies at Nungalinya, and Revd Robert Bos, who runs Wontulp from the Queensland-style "basement" of his Townsville home, are quite explicit about the need for an indigenous Aboriginal theology, as the basis of authentic Aboriginal ministry. Together with several other people throughout Northern Australia, they are patiently exploring the interpretation of the Bible by Aborigines, in the light of their own myths and legends. Both are studying indigenous movements, which have sprung

up outside the official churches, similar to the new religious movements in Melanesia. (It is interesting to note that a Melanesian, Mr Alexander Dawia, is writing a thesis on Aboriginal theology at the University of Papua New Guinea.)

Because of its more hierarchical ministerial structure, and its special requirements for ordination to the priesthood, such as celibacy, and a high academic standard, the Roman Catholic church has been unable to participate wholeheartedly in these experiments, though it does make use of the orientation courses offered by Nungalinya and Wontulp's TEE materials. Fr Martin Wilson, whose Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit is presently based at Pularumpi, on Melville Island, collaborates with Nungalinya on courses, and produces the journal *Nelen Yubu* ("The Good Way"), to which people, interested in Aboriginal theology and ministry in Northern Australia, regularly contribute field reports and articles. And yet there have been some outstanding examples of ministry to Aborigines by Catholics, such as Fr John Leary, in the Northern Territory, and Frs Maurice Heading SJ and Pat Mullins SJ, in Townsville, where, for over ten years, the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council has been a forum of discussion and action on many issues affecting Aborigines. (Thanks to Fr Mullins, who is a member of it, I was able to attend one of its meetings.)

It would be quite unrealistic to discuss Aboriginal theology and ministry, however, without taking into account the struggle for land rights – and, especially in North Queensland, for elementary human rights – in which all Aborigines, to a greater or lesser extent, are at present engaged. The movement to regain legal title to ancestral land has been particularly successful in the Northern Territory. The Northern Land Council, based in Darwin, controls access to vast tracts of Aboriginal land, especially in Arnhem Land, and negotiates mining rights and royalties on behalf of the local people. The Aboriginal Land Councils are funded from these payments, and not from grants controlled by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (much to the latter's chagrin!), and they are responsible, not to the DAA, but to the federal minister. The Central Land Council is mainly occupied with the negotiation of so-called "excisions" from pastoral leases and former mission stations. When the Whitlam Labor government granted Aboriginal stockmen on the huge Central Australian cattle stations the

award wage (i.e., the wage level negotiated by agricultural workers' unions for their members), they became uninteresting as a source of cheap labour to the owners (mainly overseas-based multinationals), and were consequently evicted with their families. Some eked out an existence in the desert, while others drifted into Alice Springs, where the newly-conferred right to drink alcohol spelt their social and moral ruin. Mission stations, such as the Roman Catholic one at Santa Teresa, 80 km south-east of Alice Springs, and the more-distant Lutheran one at Hermannsburg to the west, are progressively handing back ownership and management of their leases to Aborigines.

Legislators in the Northern Territory, and especially in Queensland, are doing everything in their power to ensure that as little as possible is actually conceded to Aborigines, e.g., according the latest NT proposals, Aborigines, who have settled in towns, are deemed to have forfeited any rights to traditional lands. The national campaign for land rights tends to be spear-headed by mixed-race Aborigines, whom Western education has equipped to take on the media and the politicians at their own game, such as the highly-controversial and articulate Pat Dodson of the Central Land Council. The tribal Aborigines of the Centre and the Far West reportedly feel threatened by this activism. There is also the question of their preparedness to take over the administration of areas, which include national parks, mine sites, and cattle stations. The Institute for Aboriginal Development, begun by the Uniting church, and now under the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, offers courses in many of the required linguistic and technical skills to Aborigines around Alice Springs. The real problems confronting Aborigines would seem to lie deeper: What is their ultimate motivation for participating in such activities? Are they prepared to accept full responsibility for them in the Western economic and political context?

At the core of all these issues is the relationship of the Aborigines to their land, a relationship which is intrinsically religious, and pervades their entire culture, although this is seldom appreciated by Europeans, including missionaries. It may not always be easy, even for Melanesians, to grasp just how central the land is in Aboriginal religion, and relations between Melanesians of the Torres Strait Islands and Aborigines in North Queensland are not always harmonious. Perhaps it is here that the churches

can make a unique contribution, by encouraging Aboriginal Christians to express their relationship to the land theologically, so that its connection with human rights, and social ethics in the broader Australian context, becomes clearer. The churches, cooperating ecumenically, can also help both Aboriginals and Melanesians to see that these issues are Pacific-wide, as is brought out in a Uniting church bulletin on New Caledonia:

People in Australia often call for an end to French nuclear testing in the Pacific, and the Australian government has criticised the French. But the French government always replies that Australia supplies the uranium – and the uranium is mined on Aboriginal land. If we talk about a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific, or an end to French nuclear testing, we have to talk about these issues, which are all linked: land rights for Aboriginal people, freedom for the people of Tahiti, and independence for Kanaky (*Kanaky Update* 2/10).

Let us make no mistake: despite the dedicated and creative efforts of a number of church people, the pressures on Aboriginal Australians to deny them their basic rights, and keep them in ignorance of the wider implications of their struggle, are enormous. They, and the other peoples of the Pacific, need leaders firmly rooted in their own cultures, yet able to transcend tribal, geographical, and racial barriers in Christian solidarity. To this end, much more could be done to coordinate and indigenise theological education in the region.

MATS could well intensify its relationships with theological centres in Northern Australia. Aboriginal students could attend our Study Institutes and Student Conferences, and student exchanges could be resumed (Moderator-elect, Djinyini Gondarra, was educated at Rarongo Theological College in East New Britain). We could contribute to one another's journals, and issues affecting Christians through the Pacific could have a more prominent place in our curricula. The Australians are keen to participate more actively in MATS, and this report shows what an important contribution they could make.

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