



## Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

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### Remembering the National Apology

In May 2000, more than 300,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of justice for Aboriginal Australians. They called for the government to respond to the narratives of suffering of the Stolen Generation that had been outlined in the *Bringing Them Home* Report. They called for an admission that our nation was grappling with issues of national identity. They called for recognition of a colonial history that is marred by division and exclusion. They called for reconciliation, and they called for an apology.

The *Bringing Them Home* report was a detailed 700 page anthology of the systematic abuses perpetrated against Aboriginal children who were taken from their family and denied their connection to country. Rather than side-lining the personal narratives of those impacted by decades of state-sponsored abuse, the report was entirely focused on their stories. In this way, it legitimised the voice of the Australian other that had been silenced for so long.

It still took nearly a decade for the call for justice to be answered. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2008, on only the second day of sitting for his new parliament, then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said sorry. His speech that day was a supplication for justice and reconciliation. It was an acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past, and a reminder that the grief of the First Peoples was something that all Australians needed to recognise and address.

The apology was also about responsibility. There was bipartisan support in the parliament that day for the notion that governments had made grievous errors that had created a legacy of suffering. Through the widespread public support of the apology - the joyous celebrations that took place on the lawns of Parliament House - there was also an acknowledgement of the responsibility that we all carried for past abuses.

This was not about guilt, or about being weighed down by the past. Instead, it was acceptance of a fundamental truth: the responsibility to come to terms with our history is a morally inescapable element of what it means to *be* Australian. Without this acceptance, our nation would have remained diminished. The apology enabled us as individuals to acknowledge that the wrongs committed against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not represent the 'ideal' Australia - the nation we wanted to be.

Six years after this pivotal event in our history, we pause this week to remember the decision we made as a nation to seek forgiveness. It would be flippant for us to suggest that the apology has corrected our past errors. The Uniting Church in Australia, having also apologised, understands this only too well. The Australian Human Rights Commission estimates that Aboriginal people will live seventeen years less than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, will have twice the rate of infant mortality, are three to five times more likely to be hospitalised for mental health issues, will endure unemployment rates three times the national average, and are fifteen times

more likely to be incarcerated. These are not just statistics. They are the next chapter of the narratives we read in the *Bringing Them Home* report. They are the legacy of the injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples, and they are an indictment on us all.

The national apology stands as a discrete act that sought to transform our nation. There is a great deal of work to be done before justice for First Peoples is achieved and the fundamental rights and recognition to which Aboriginal peoples are entitled is realised. However, through the apology, we have the foundations for substantive, long-lasting and positive change for the First Peoples of this nation - a change that will benefit us all.

*Rev. Prof Andrew Dutney, President of the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*

**13 February 2014**