



**COMMISSION OF THE CHURCHES ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**  
of The World Council of Churches

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS LIAISON OFFICE  
777 United Nations Plaza New York, New York 10017 USA



Telephone (1-212) 867-5890  
Fax (1-212) 867-7462  
E-Mail: wccia@undp.org

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, First Session  
New York, May 13-24, 2002

Agenda Item 6: Theme: Education and Culture  
Intervention: World Council of Churches

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished members of the Permanent Forum, my Indigenous brothers and sisters.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I am Peter Smith, a descendant of the Gamilaroi people of Australia. It is a great honour for me to be speaking to you on behalf of the World Council of Churches. Due to centuries of physical and cultural genocide our Indigenous nations face many critical challenges and yet we continue to carry forward the many powerful and beautiful gifts received from our ancestors.

Thirty-five years ago, this month, May 1967 the people of Australia voted in a referendum. As a result of this referendum, Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were officially recognized for the first time in 179 years.

On 26 January 1788 the British set up a colony at what is now known as Sydney. Other colonies were to follow. There was no treaty with the local inhabitants. The land was declared to be "terra nullius", empty land; land belonging to no one. As a result of this false declaration Indigenous Australians were not included in the Australian constitution when the six British colonies federated as the nation of Australia on 1 January 1901. We are to this day, not included in the constitution. In the referendum of May 1967 more than 92% of those who voted, voted "yes" to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders counted in the census and for the Federal Government to be granted the authority to pass laws in regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The Federal government could not pass such laws up until then, nor could Indigenous Australians be included in the census. Officially, we did not exist. To have included us in the constitution in 1901 would be to acknowledge that the colonizing power was being untruthful when the land was declared to be 'terra nullius'. As I stated earlier Indigenous Australians are still not included in the constitution. However as a result of the 1967 referendum we do get a mention in the preamble to the constitution. Progress is being made.

Other colonized countries have experienced the same or similar attitudes towards their Indigenous peoples. There are stories, important parts of our history which do not appear in our history books. My mother, like others of that time, was born out in the bush. She grew up on a reserve until the age of 12 years when she was removed from her family by the State Government authorities and sent out to work as a domestic on cattle properties. The idea being to stop the language, the stories, the culture from being passed on and of course these young girls provided cheap labour. They had been forbidden to speak their own language on the reserves. They had to learn and speak English. As a result of this government policy, many young girls and boys lost contact with their families, their language, their culture and their sense of belonging.

At the age of 45 years, I met with an elderly Aboriginal lady on a reserve in central Queensland. As we spoke she looked at me; a questioning look in her eyes. She asked me "Where does your mother come from?" I told her. "What is your mother's name?" she asked. I told her my mother's name. The old lady had tears streaming down her face. She put her arms around me and hugged me. She didn't want to let go. She was my mother's younger sister, and had not seen my mother from the time she was taken away at the age of twelve. I began to find out where I belonged. Who my people were. Many others have had similar experiences. My brothers and sisters, these stories need to be told.

The history written about the colonization process and its consequences which is taught in our schools is written from the point of view of the colonizers. The Indigenous peoples view of our history is not taught in our schools. Consequently, we have only part of the truth.

Mr Chairman, the World Council of Churches claims that our children, Indigenous children, the children of the descendants of the colonizers and the children of other people who have settled in our respective lands in later years, are entitled to know the truth, the whole truth, not just that part of the truth that the colonizing power has taught us in the past and still do today.

The World Council of Churches asks that the Permanent Forum use all the resources under your mandate to have the governments of member nations ensure that the truth of our history including loss of life, loss of languages and culture is taught in our school. I can understand the sadness of our brother from Canada who mentioned the same view last week.

Finally, Mr Chairman, we offer the resources of the World Council of Churches to assist in this important challenge, quoting the words of a leadership gathering of my peoples in Australia:

"The footprints of my grandfathers are imprinted on the earth and their images become real to me. I see my grandfathers standing tall and strong, warriors of long ago, I hear them singing, I see them dancing, and my spirit moves within me. They told of the emus

fighting and the kangaroos picking up the scent of our hunters. The images fade away as I feel the hurt of my people, I can hear the cries of my grandmothers as they cry for their children. Grandfathers, you can see me as I stand here and feel this hurt. Father, Creator is this the purpose of my being here, or is it you plan to reshape my people to be once again the proud race it once was? Let me walk with you and my grandfathers, towards the dawning of a proud and new nation. I thank you for my sacred being”

Mr Chairman, my brothers and sisters, thank you.