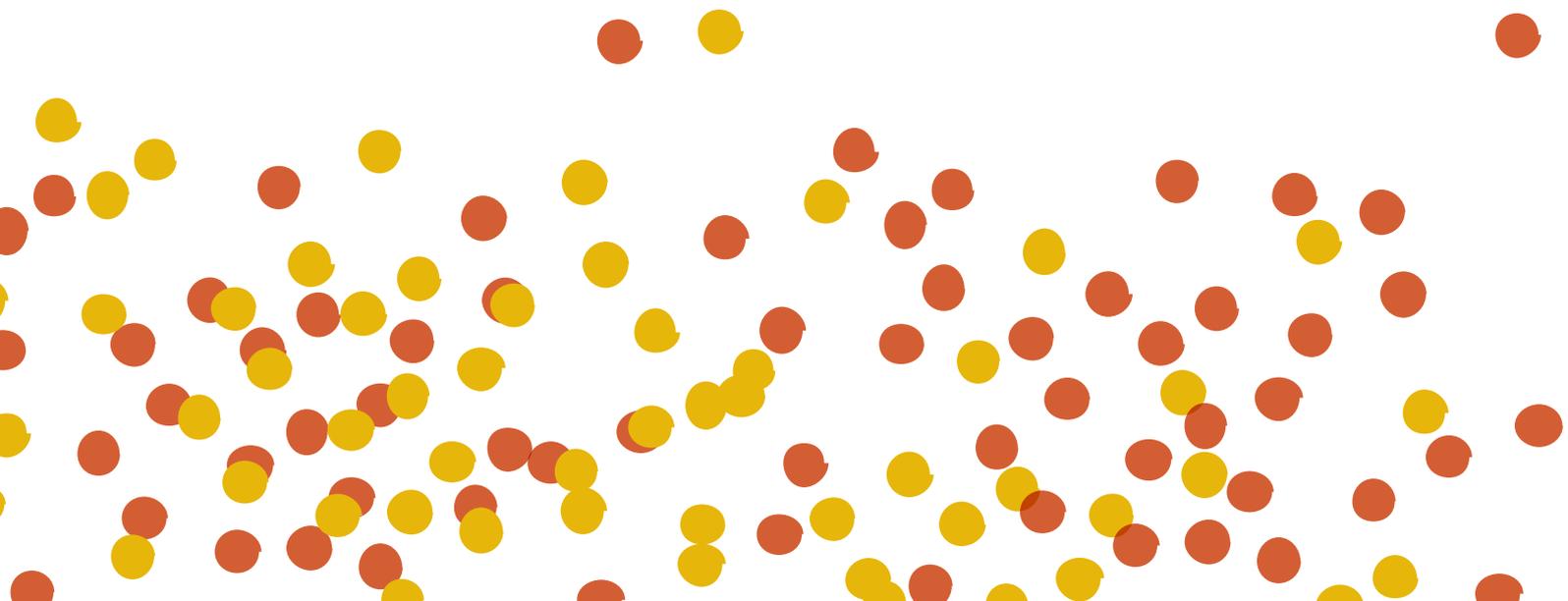


SOVEREIGNTY AND TREATY

A brief discussion guide for Uniting Church members

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Introduction

The Uniting Church Assembly meeting in July 2015 determined:

that a significant priority for its life during the next triennium is to explore with Congress what it would mean for the practices of the Church to recognise and affirm that First Peoples are sovereign Peoples. (Minute 15.08a)

Sovereignty is about honouring those who were here first, and starting to negotiate a new way for us to occupy this land together. It raises many issues and questions, challenging assumptions and beliefs. Maybe if we can name what the issues are for us – what we are curious about, what we fear, what we want to know - we can have a more open conversation.

How is First Peoples' sovereignty possible?

Surely sovereignty rests with states, and is about "the exercise of absolute power by governments or parliament over certain territories, usually nation-states". This is the view we hear when people talk about border control or "we will determine who comes to this country".

This view of sovereignty is less viable in a world of globalisation and the emergence of an international human rights regime. States do not have absolute control. We now live in a world of multiple bodies, communities and political units continually negotiating the limits of their autonomy and authority, and what rights they can exercise in any situation.

So the nation is all of us, and the state is one of the ways in which we govern our common life. It is possible, for example, for the state to represent the nation's sovereignty in relation to other states, but share sovereignty around other issues.

We are being challenged to make space for the idea that First Peoples are both citizens of this nation, and also have political rights as independent communities. While there is not one First Peoples' view about sovereignty, the common concern is to assert an inherent right as a community – and not just as individuals – to negotiate their place within the nation.

We usually assume that settlement was a past, historical event. But what if we assumed that settlement – and the ways in which people share the continent – is an ongoing social and political project? In this case the claim to sovereignty has to do with the terms in which First Peoples engage with or belong to the wider social and political community.

DISCUSSION:

- *Does this sense of what sovereignty means help you in this discussion?*
- *What difficulty/unease does it leave you with?*

The challenge to our identity as a nation

The claim to continuing Indigenous sovereignty questions the stories we tell about ourselves – i.e. the way we see ourselves as a nation.

Stories of colonial occupation or invasion are always about the exploitation of labour, the taking of land, the shift of wealth from the colonised lands to the colonial centre, and national glory. What colonising people explain to themselves and those they have colonised is why this exploitation is a right and proper thing. We have a need to be a moral people.

Earlier colonial expansion was justified on Christian grounds. It was right to occupy other lands so that people could be converted and civilised. But by the time of the invasion and settlement of Australia the story had changed. Our story was that the people did not own the land (they had no boundaries and had not added labour) and were wasting the land. They were a primitive and uncivilised peoples, and we were helping them by offering European culture and Christian faith. Because they did not own the land it could become the legitimate possession of the British Empire (and white men). And it would all be done peacefully. Sadly the Indigenous peoples would die out before a superior culture.

The claim to continuing sovereignty challenges the sense we have of ourselves, and our moral justification for being in this land. It makes us face the question: are we really such a moral people and moral community if we stole land and killed the original people? This is a difficult thing to face, and too often denial has been the response.

DISCUSSION:

- *How do you respond to the way this issue of history and identity has been described?*
- *Does this in any way name one of the issues for you in this conversation about sovereignty?*

The church's narrative

- The church shares much of the national story and identity. In practice, the story carried by the church supported colonial expansion:
- Not only were Aboriginal people considered to be sinful (needing conversion), but their culture was said to be sinful. They were a sinful people. By denying sacred life in Indigenous culture the church undermined that culture and its value – some Christians even today speak of culture as evil.
- It offered a gospel that was individualistic and spiritualised – conversion for the salvation of souls. Nothing in the gospel to help people with their oppression and dispossession.
- It confused citizenship and discipleship, so that “Christian values were really Western values. The church acted as if European culture was the height of human achievement.
- It didn't see First Peoples as equal people. Indigenous people had 'potential' as rational beings, to be brought to fruition through conversion and learning the values and habits of British society. It confused conversion with 'making people like white people' – as any photo of people going to mission churches reveals.
- The church contributed to the argument of terra nullius, empty and unoccupied, because it said that the spiritual narratives that underpinned custodianship were false.

The people who brought the gospel to First Peoples were largely compassionate and caring people. But they lived in this European world and church, and believed that the best thing that could happen is for First Peoples to find a place in the same world. Sovereignty challenges our past and present practices as church, and forces us to ask about the gospel we proclaim.

DISCUSSION:

- *How do you respond to that account of the life of the church? What new thoughts does it raise?*
- *How do you want to respond?*

The other challenges this brings

There are some other challenges we must also face:

- i. We need to own up to the story of our nation. Can we recognise a new form of settlement, a new way of sharing the country that gives genuine self-management, rights of citizenship, a communal voice in parliament, and a genuine voice in custodianship of the land? What role might the church have in encouraging that conversation in the wider society?
- ii. We live on stolen land. We took the land without payment, treaty or negotiation. But we cannot go back 229 years. We have to deal with it. Can we build a society that recognises theft and (i) seeks some form of reparation, (ii) seeks ways for people to fulfil their custodial obligations to land, (iii) allows Second Peoples to live here with some security, but (iv) does not put the interests of large corporations like mining companies before the needs and survival of the people and the earth? How does the church deal with its particular role in dispossession, and explore what reparation might look like – see the example of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10)?
- iii. In challenging our founding narratives, claims to sovereignty invite us to ask what remnants of racism still inhabit our lives.
- iv. Sovereignty challenges the church to revisit the story it tells about itself and Jesus, and to ask how that story has been entangled in the settler colonial history of this nation.
- v. The church needs to provide real support – financial and people - to develop Indigenous theologies that will challenge all our theologies.
- vi. A sense of injustice and grievance runs very deep for many First Peoples. There is a need to hear and honour history as a foundation for present and future relationships – not to put the history away, but to see how it shapes now. If so, could the UCA set this as a real priority, with special interest in the local church's history with First Peoples?
- vii. We assume that the Church exists, and people have to figure out their place. What if we included the voice of First Peoples in reshaping our church and its central claims?
- viii. The Church relied on the Doctrine of Discovery as justification for entering this country. The Assembly repudiated the Doctrine, which raises very real questions about the Church's theological reason – its God reason – for being here.
- ix. Honouring sovereignty makes us reflect on the way we do mission. It might lead to learning the story of sacred life in this place, and what that means for the gospel. We might wonder how God's sovereignty was exercised in this place, and how that challenges the way mission theology often assumes the mandate it claims for itself. What could we do as Christians to ensure some of these conversations happen?

The overall question is:

What might be compassionate and authentic responses to sovereignty that empower First Peoples, strengthen the church's ministry of reconciliation and love of God and neighbour, and enable the church to live more faithfully in Australia?