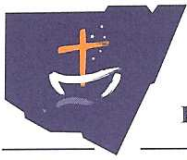


INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

Organisation: NSW Ecumenical Council

Name: Dr Jonathan Inkpin

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NSW ECUMENICAL COUNCIL Incorporated

REVD TARA CURLEWIS, President REVD DR JONATHAN INKPIN, General Secretary

Member Churches:

Anglican Church
• NSW Dioceses

Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Congregational Federation of New South Wales

Coptic Orthodox Church

Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church

Greek Orthodox Church

Indian Orthodox Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society of Friends

Roman Catholic Church
• NSW Dioceses
• Melkite Eparchy

Romanian Orthodox Church

Salvation Army

Syrian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church
• NSW Synod

Associated with the National Council of Churches in Australia

January 21, 2008

The Director
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Closing the Gap

I present this submission on behalf of the Social Justice Commission of the NSW Ecumenical Council, which represents 16 of the most significant Churches (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox) in New South Wales. We have also worked closely with our sister body, the NSW Council of Churches, in conversations with Indigenous people in our churches and seek to do so together more fully in the future.

We are delighted that the Standing Committee on Social Issues is conducting this Inquiry, and we hope that this may be a positive step forward in facing the most important social justice issues in our State and nation. We affirm our commitment to this common challenge and pray for a full and generous response.

Yours sincerely,

(The Revd.Dr) Jonathan Inkipin
General Secretary
NSW Ecumenical Council

**SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMISSION
of the NSW ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

**Submission
to the
NSW Legislative Council
Standing Committee on Social Issues'
INQUIRY INTO
OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Jesus said that: *'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'* (Gospel of John 10:10).

"The first half of the verse is where Aboriginal people live.

They haven't seen much of part two."

(Pastor Ray Minniecon, Crossroads Aboriginal Ministries, interview Sept 2004,
in the report of the NSW Ecumenical Council's Redfern Research Project)

The NSW Ecumenical Council is comprised of sixteen major churches throughout New South Wales and the ACT and, amongst other roles, has for many years sought to enable informed and effective Christian responses to social issues through its Social Justice Commission. In consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this has included a number of contributions on Indigenous issues, including two keynote study kits – *Walking with Indigenous Australians: Churches Speak out on matters of Justice for Indigenous Australians* (1998) and *Unfinished Business: A resource kit on Treaty* (2003) – and *Life in Fullness: a report of the NSW Ecumenical Council's Redfern Research Project* (2004) (following the Redfern riots). Subsequent to the publication of *Life in Fullness*, discussions took place in 2005-6 with the then NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on issues raised by the report and possibilities of further collaboration by churches in helping to address issues of Indigenous disadvantage in New South Wales. Such conversations included participation in the '*Young Aboriginal Women Speak Out*' event held at Parliament House in October 2006, organised by the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and involving the NSW Governor and the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Working alongside NATSIEC, and together with our sister body the NSW Council of Churches, the NSW Ecumenical Council has also held other gatherings to listen to, support and enhance the work of Indigenous Christians in New South Wales. We therefore warmly welcome the Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in New South Wales and hope and pray that our contribution may strengthen renewed efforts to engage with these issues. We affirm the continuing commitment of our member churches to this work, recognising the ways in which churches themselves had a role in the creation of such disadvantage, and offering ourselves as a partner in the process of response and renewal.

We would particularly commend the following under the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

Re.1 (a) Make *Indigenous Poverty History*.

We are not in a position to comment in detail on international policies and programs aimed at closing the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, but we are pleased to direct the Inquiry to the framework provided by the Make *Indigenous Poverty History* campaign. Developed by the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC) of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and supported, among many others, by the NSW Ecumenical Council, this seeks to approach the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage holistically, applying the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Australian context. This offers objective, measurable, targets as part of a strategy linking together health, education, economic, cultural and spiritual concerns. Whilst there may be disagreement about the specific timescales for achievement of the goals which

underlie the closing of the gap in life expectancy, we believe this also coheres well with similar work done by others, such as the HREOC Social Justice Commissioner Mr. Tom Calma. Whilst much great work has been done to address Indigenous disadvantage, a major continuing obstacle has been the short-term nature of many strategies and policies, further undermined by the competing interests of different governmental, public, private and community-based agencies.

Of particular critical importance moreover, is the origin and ownership of this initiative as an Indigenous campaign, in which the voices and direction of Indigenous people themselves is uppermost. This makes such an approach different to that of much work done at home, and internationally (for example on the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals, where Indigenous perspectives, and those of the poor themselves, are frequently overlooked). It is nonetheless complementary with such international standards and strategies and would strengthen such approaches considerably. We are pleased therefore to include a copy of the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History CD-ROM for further reflection by the Inquiry and encourage partnership with NATSIEC, particularly its NSW-based staff and representatives. We believe strongly that it would be helpful for the Inquiry, and relevant Government bodies, to strengthen regular consultation and hearings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within New South Wales. This would further consolidate the positive approach outlined in the NSW Government's *Two Ways Together* policy.

Re. 1 (b) Need for a fully-funded holistic approach to closing the lifetime expectancy gap, including attention to spiritual factors

We indicate below some of the major concerns and constructive ways forward of which we are aware. Above all however we wish to affirm the importance of a fully funded and holistic approach to addressing Indigenous disadvantage, and, in particular, the critical nature of spiritual as well as social and economic factors involved in closing the current lifetime expectancy gap. In this respect, we are impressed by the care, dedication, creativity and sheer tenacity of many Indigenous people of Christian and other faith in New South Wales and, alongside other Indigenous leaders, commend their examples and inspiration: not least the work of Aboriginal Catholic Ministries, Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress, Aboriginal Anglican and other Indigenous church ministries throughout the State. Often working at great personal cost, and with insufficient understanding or support from faith-based and secular authorities and agencies alike, we believe they make a substantial contribution to personal and social empowerment leading to transformation in the lives of individuals and communities.

In particular, we commend:

Re. 1 (b) (i) Greater partnership with and listening to the wisdom of Indigenous elders in the area of environmental health

The effects of poor environmental health conditions upon human beings anywhere are well documented and it is those in low socio-economic situations who suffer the most. Addressing the environmental health conditions of Indigenous people thus requires both investment in improved water, sewerage and waste systems affecting Indigenous people and their communities and greater attention to principles of environmental sustainability in economic and social development. In this respect, it is now apparent that the continuing detrimental effects of drought and climate change on the land and

communities of New South Wales has been significantly furthered by a failure, over successive decades, to integrate traditional wisdom and 'reading of the land' into environmental and development policy making. In addition to providing environmental health equity in systems of water provision and quality, sewerage and waste, for Indigenous people, we should like to see an extension of such pioneering initiatives as the Ourimbah Protocol, not merely in forest management but in other areas of environmental health and economic development. Moreover, without re-connecting Indigenous people to land and self-determination, other poverty and health improvements will remain merely palliative.

Re. 1 (b) (ii) Holistic health and well-being

The statistics and personal costs of Indigenous ill-health and poor well-being are staggering in such a highly 'developed' society as Australia. As highlighted above, in this area above all, overcoming such disadvantage requires long-term agreed strategies, policies and specific targets, adopting a full-funded holistic approach. The importance of primary and maternal health and good diet is undoubtedly foundational, and, with others, we commend such projects as the Townsville Mums and Babies initiative and the fresh fruit program in the Clarence Valley. We believe strongly that personal as well as community empowerment is essential to the transformation of Indigenous, and non-Indigenous, well-being and believe that spiritual and cultural nurture is thus critical. We see this reflected in the significantly high levels of culture-rich and/or religiously empowered individuals in Indigenous community leadership.

With so many others, we also warmly welcomed the '*Breaking the Silence*' Report of the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Task Force, not least in its wide and effective consultation with Indigenous people and its well-thought-through recommendations. The NSW Government's decision to support 88 of these recommendations in a five year plan is thus a major step forward. We reaffirm our call however for much greater funding to enable such work to be carried through. The allocation of proper resources in this area as in others is essential to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Failure to do so whilst promoting otherwise good policy not only places more pressure on already hard-pressed agencies and communities, but can actually contribute to deeper despair and cynicism through the creation of well-meaning false hope.

Re. 1 (b) (iii) New models of 're-connecting' Education

Educational improvements are central to addressing Indigenous disadvantage, as reflected in primary health research alone which demonstrates the value of improving the education of young Indigenous women not only to themselves but to the likely life expectancy and general well-being of their children. We also commend the various new attempts around New South Wales to explore means to 're-connect' Indigenous teenagers with land and culture as part of their educational development. The development of Maori 'language nests' in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to demonstrate the importance of language and cultural connection for Maori empowerment, and it is good to see experiments such as the recent introduction of Dharug language teaching at Chifley College in Western Sydney. Such initiatives work best however, as in good religious education and nurture, where they are also supported by elders within community and relate to the wider life of the world and community. The work of the Revd. Tom Slookee,

supported by the Anglican Board of Mission and others, is an example of such church-based work within New South Wales.

Within Christian education, we also draw attention to the growing number of Indigenous scholarships being provided, with appropriate cultural support, seeking to provide spiritual and cultural foundations to effective educational growth. The experience of the Opening the Doors Foundation in Victoria has also demonstrated the difference which Indigenous-led educational initiatives can make to addressing entrenched disadvantage. The work of the Revd. Shayne Blackman and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in Townsville also demonstrates how effective pathways for education and community development can be made where good Indigenous leadership is combined with the release of land and finance. Within NSW, we further commend the Australian Catholic University's specific B Ed program for enabling Aboriginal teaching assistants (AEA's), to become fully qualified teachers. This highly successful venture could benefit from much greater support from the NSW government, particularly in encouraging the expansion of the Aboriginal Culture and Languages component of the course, so that these teachers are equipped to maintain and develop such proficiencies in both indigenous and non-indigenous students in NSW schools.

Re. 1 (b) (v) Equity in Housing Provision

Good housing, with adequate family space, is an essential human right and of vital importance for the nurture of individuals within families and communities. It is distressing to see that reports over several years, including the recent 2007 review by Price Waterhouse Coopers, continue to show up mismanagement and neglect by governmental services as well as Indigenous failures. The difficulties surrounding the Redfern-Waterloo Environment Plan is a case in point for the way in which Indigenous needs and rights have in certain cases been inadequately heard or safeguarded in government thinking and planning with developer and other interests.

Re. 1 (b) (vi) Reversing the penal culture

As the numbers of Indigenous people in custody have continued to grow, even after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and incarceration rates for men and women are so significantly higher for Indigenous men and women than for other Australians, a re-evaluation of penal policy clearly continues to be needed. The enthusiasm of certain political leaders for this means of addressing offending is also part of the problem within New South Wales.

We commend further support for alternatives to gaol, including 'circle sentencing', the Drug Court (orders for treatment in lieu of a gaol term), periodic and home detention, and community service orders and we urge that greater funding is provision is made for their use in rural and remote areas. Chaplaincy and other Christian ministries, such as Kairos, have also shown their worth across the State but Indigenous chaplains are extremely rare. We would therefore encourage the Government to work more closely with churches and prison ministries in exploring ways to increase the numbers of Indigenous chaplains, funding and practical support.

Re. 1 (b) (vii) Reviewing categories which exclude access and funding support

We believe that certain categories of funding and policy management need reviewing, particularly definitions of 'remote' and 'rural' which can prevent assistance being

brought to certain Indigenous people and communities who in New South Wales may face similar problems but are not located in some of the 'classic' locations for example of the Northern Territory.

Re. 1 (d) Beyond the NT Intervention

In line with the Churches' National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (NATSIEC), we support intervention to ensure that communities are safe and free from violence and abuse but have been alarmed by certain aspects of the Northern Territory intervention. We do not support mandatory health checks for children, as it is well documented that this can increase the trauma for victims, nor do we support removal of permits (which seems possibly counter-productive to the alleged intent of restoring control and undermines the vital goal of Indigenous self-determination). We have grave concerns that the plan, in its entirety, is not properly funded and that sufficient doctors and health professionals who are specifically trained in child abuse are not available. We also believe that quarantining of welfare payments should only apply where it is proven that there is a failure of responsibility and children are at risk.

Instead, we support NATSIEC's call to all governments to fund long term solutions to the problems facing Indigenous communities. Other specific urgent areas for attention include:

- Committing \$400 million to health, as repeatedly requested by the AMA.
- Ensuring that every child has a fully funded and resourced place in school, with the same access to resources available to every other Australian child.
- Ensuring that there is adequate long term policing in place to ensure the safety of community members.
- The urgent building of housing to address the chronic shortage.
- The review of employment and economic development opportunities; and converting the many jobs currently being run through CDEP into real and properly funded jobs.
- Above all working with communities to address their issues.

We believe that the Two Ways Together policy of the NSW Government is a better alternative on which to build.

Conclusion

Again we reaffirm our pleasure that this Inquiry has been undertaken by the Standing Committee on Social Issues and we encourage consideration of the goals and work of the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign as an underlying framework for addressing this vital concern within our nation, State and local communities, and as a shared expression of our combined churches' commitment to working in partnership with others to address these issues.