



General Assembly of Australia decisions about Acknowledgment of Country

Dear brothers and sisters,

When the General Assembly of Australia (GAA) met last week, it considered a report about “Acknowledgement of Country” in church contexts.

The report and decision have attracted attention in the Christian media, the wider media and on social media. I thought it would be helpful to give some explanation and comment.

An Acknowledgement of Country — or a Welcome to Country by an indigenous person — has recently become a common part of Australian public life. They are presented with a wide range of wording recognising that the land on which the meeting is being held was occupied by the local First Nations people. They often affirm the continuing connection of the people to the land and offer respect to aboriginal people and their elders. They may include explicit references to spiritual beliefs.

The Assembly had a lengthy and serious discussion about the place of an Acknowledgment of Country in church life in light of our convictions about the Christian faith.

In the debate, different views were expressed about the meaning and significance of Acknowledgements. There was a common recognition that the indigenous people of Australia suffered greatly from unjust actions and violence by European settlers. There was also a common recognition that many Christian missionaries sought the best for Aboriginal Australians and sought to protect them. While European culture brought many evils, it also brought the great blessing of the gospel of Christ. There was also a common desire for the Presbyterian Church to pray and work for reconciliation and for the good of Australia’s aboriginal people.

The decision of the Assembly was first of all about what is appropriate in worship. Presbyterian churches take worship seriously as the activity in which we focus on and fellowship with God. Our tradition is that worship should include only elements for which we have direction or positive examples in the Bible. In consistency with that, the Assembly determined that an Acknowledgement of Country is not appropriate in a worship service. That does not preclude a church from praying to the Lord about the history of our country and asking for blessing on Aboriginal people. That is to be encouraged.

The Assembly further recognised that outside of public worship, churches may find it appropriate to use an Acknowledgement of country which should be consistent with a Christian worldview. This would mean affirming that God, the Creator, owns all land as he gives it to

various nations as stewards. The use and wording of an acknowledgement is to be decided at a local level and will be shaped by the local context.

The full text of the resolutions is given below. The final resolution reflects the fact that the issue came to the GAA as an appeal from the NSW Assembly.

This was one of the longest and most intense discussions at the Assembly and a resolution on such a matter is not going to satisfy everyone. Some will feel the Assembly has been too strict, others that it has not gone far enough. I encourage members of the church who are concerned to seek to understand the debate and the decision carefully, and not to make the matter a point of division. Let us make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

David Burke
Moderator-General
14 September 2023.

Assembly resolutions on Acknowledgement of Country.

1. Affirm that in spite of many mistakes and cruelties perpetrated since colonisation, yet much good, notably the proclamation of the gospel, has been accomplished for the benefit of the indigenous population.
2. Affirm that there is no consensus, even among Aboriginal people, as to the meaning and significance of Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country practices, and that the multiplicity of tribal traditions and boundaries of tribal areas make a consistent practice impossible.
3. Affirm that the wording of Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country practices almost invariably carries overtones of an indigenous spirituality inconsistent with Christian belief.
4. Affirm that, as Christians, we have to avoid wording that suggests final ownership of land is vested in people rather than with the Creator.
5. Declare that Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country practices are inappropriate for public worship where the call to worship centres on God.
6. Recognising that the past cannot be changed, encourage a positive desire to build bridges and to work prayerfully with Aboriginal people for reconciliation.
7. Since there is no universally recognised official wording, permit freedom for churches to adopt wording consistent with the Christian world view and to use an Acknowledgement of Country for occasions outside of public worship; with words such as (adapted from the Bush Church Aid Acknowledgement of Country):
 - We acknowledge the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), the Creator of heaven and earth and His ownership of all things (Psalm 24:1).
 - We recognise that He gave stewardship of these lands upon which we meet to the indigenous occupants of the land (Acts 17:26).
 - We recognise that in His sovereignty, He has allowed other people groups to migrate to these shores.
 - We pray for civil peace for all people groups in order that the gospel of peace would be freely proclaimed (1 Tim. 2:1-2).
8. Advise GANSW that it may proceed with the implementation of its resolution recorded in GANSW BB 2019 Min. 89 (3), in consistency with the resolutions above.