

E.R. TUDOR's KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO
AASN: August 2008

The televised apology, which went Australia wide, and overseas, on Wednesday 13th February of this year, sent waves of relief, and sorrow through the ranks of Indigenous and Non Indigenous Australians. Some people described it as an event that equalled the occasion when a human being set foot on the Moon for the first time.

Almost a year prior to this, the Federal Government outlined strategies to be applied to remote indigenous communities, that related to the availability of alcohol, the granting of permits, and the maintaining of appropriate conduct between individuals within indigenous families. This intervention was touted by some to be the solution to many evils, and by others it was regarded in the same way as a sledge hammer cracks a walnut, or potentially ultimately ineffective.

From the 2020 Summit held in April in Canberra, several major recommendations aiming at improving the lot of Aboriginal Australians were discussed and documented for further action. A number of these recommendations related to education: maintaining a high bar for Aboriginal children in their educational endeavour, and providing them with enhanced support to attain those standards, to empower them in life's journey, and provide opportunities for them that equal those of our more fortunate children, in privileged schools.

Policies and major recommendations can make a difference, but frequently their effect is dampened as people navigate their way through a maze of bureaucratic infrastructure. Large scale recommendations are often slow to be implemented and policies can frequently cover a whole range of general situations without taking account of individual sensitivities and specific needs.

I believe that as Anglican Schools who are trying to make a difference to Indigenous Australians, it is personal and relational initiatives which enable progress to be made. I am sure that as we connect with Indigenous Australians within remote, or not so remote communities, making our relationships personal, is the most powerful way in moving forward. As Chaplains, Counsellors, Principals and Teachers, we can go part the way to enabling our schools to be stewards of humanity and positive connection, if we are able to engineer ways in which young people build positive and sustainable relationships with other young people, be they Indigenous or Non Indigenous Australians.

Against this background I would like to tell three stories to illustrate what I mean about "making it personal".

* x 3 slides

Jemma was a little girl, living in ↑Oenpelli, which was a CMS Mission Community prior to "self determination" being introduced in the mid 1970's. My wife, Liz, was familiar with the Oenpelli of Mission times – no alcohol, sound education, reasonably defined work pathways and harmonious living.

On revisiting that community in 2002, I was privileged to be able to accompany her – what a very different scene we were challenged with: alcohol served from "The Club" twice per day,

noise and frequent fighting within families, significant absenteeism at the school, and many, many people without meaningful work.

We met Jemma (12 year old), during a “disco” for youngsters, during which Liz and I were asked to “man” the barbeque. She immediately took a liking to “us” – or perhaps it is more accurate to say “our digital camera”.

Three months later she was diagnosed with advanced rheumatic heart disease and came to Melbourne with her Aunt for surgery. After a 10 hour operation during which her mitral valve was repaired, Jemma and her Aunt spent four weeks at our home in Kew, whilst Jemma developed the strength to return to the challenging Oenpelli township.

Believing that Jemma was a gifted girl, despite her reading level of a Prep child, we arranged for her to again visit us at Kew later that year. Liz and I had spoken to Rosa Storelli, Principal of MLC, Kew, asking her whether Jemma could be accommodated within one of the Grade 6 MLC classes – not only providing her with a special learning program, but enabling her to take up the opportunity to express herself socially and develop friendships amongst her MLC classmates.

Academic learning proved exceedingly difficult, but Jemma’s popularity amongst her Grade Sixers immediately took off and skyrocketed. We lost count of the number of parties she attended – I learned again what it was like to be a parent taxi driver!

Following a further eight weeks at MLC in the following year, which proved to be more difficult than the initial experience, Jemma then had to undergo further open-heart surgery to again repair the valve that had again become compromised.

Another ten hours of surgery – and a period of rehabilitation at our home in Kew. Later that year we arranged for Jemma to again visit Melbourne for some intense tutoring in literacy and numeracy. This again worked only to a very limited degree.

Two more sessions of open heart surgery resulted in Jemma being fitted with a pig valve in the left side of her heart. This proved an enormous success and her health improved significantly. No longer did she exhibit marked breathlessness during short periods of exercise but she started to grow, put on condition and develop into a fine young woman.

Our involvement from this point became very much diminished – except for the occasional phone call from the Arnhem Land Stone Country to ask about a replacement for her “keycard”, or to request some “time out” from Oenpelli, at our home in Kew.

At this stage we enrolled Jemma at Worowa Aboriginal College in Healesville, following her requests to rejoin an educational community somewhere in or near Melbourne. Again, this educational experience proved “rocky” and following several suspensions, she concluded her time at Worowa.

Jemma returned to Oenpelli, and we did not hear from her for some months. During a conversation with one of Jemma’s distant relatives, we were flabbergasted to learn that she was now married and living at an Outstation near Oenpelli, with her husband Jake, and his

family. On visiting Mamawdawaree in June of the following year, we found Jemma to be a thoroughly happy young wife, living in a supportive family community some two hours from Oenpelli. Clearly she adored Jake, and was much loved by Jake's family. Jemma's own father had died some ten years prior, and her mother had separated herself from Jemma and was living in Darwin.

More than Jemma's newly found good health, and strongly established family relationships, we saw her take on leadership roles within the broader Aboriginal community. Frequently she was asked for advice, and clearly she was much respected by those with whom she lived. One would often see her taking on an organising role amongst groups of little children.

So what is the point of this story? Liz and I have been fortunate to have Jemma cross our paths; we have been fortunate to be able to provide a home for Jemma, albeit sporadically. We have been fortunate to be able to stand next to Jemma's bed as she emerged from anaesthetics; and we have been fortunate to try to watch her abilities being nurtured with appropriate learning experiences. We have been fortunate to have been pestered on the end of her phone, and we have been fortunate to see her now married, happy and influencing others in a positive manner.

Who knows what Jemma's future will be? All we can be confident about is that she has a fine family that now surrounds her together with our constant and ready support in Melbourne. Her ability to live within a white community has certainly evolved and she is able to speak confidently to people and has been empowered to negotiate her decisions with others.

I dare to say that some of this ability, which will be so important for her in future years, may have developed through the myriad of experiences that Jemma has been exposed to during her times in Melbourne. Experiences which although challenging for her, have had a personal essence through their connection with us – perhaps this has worked in part! Relationships with Indigenous brothers and sisters: making these personal, not enmeshing them in systems or bureaucracy, but reaching out with warmth, strength and humanity - in the end such relations which are grounded in friendship, acceptance and genuine interest will go some way to making some difference.

And in orbiting between two communities, Jemma has been empowered to live successfully within a 21st century modern Australian world, whilst at the same time not losing her cultural and family associations within her Oenpelli community whose foundation for her, stretches back thousands and thousands of years.

Several years ago, our Old Trinity Grammarians' Council, donated money for annual visits by young people from communities in remote Australia, to Trinity Grammar School. Such visits were to range from two to six weeks and were to be complemented within return visits by Trinity boys to those connected remote communities. Platten and Kyle were two boys who arrived at Trinity in August 2006, funded by this program.

Platten has been a bit of a rogue – even into drugs, and there was some reservation about him spending time at Trinity. Kyle was a quiet young man – almost excessively, and perhaps somewhat depressed. He was almost deaf due to the failure of his family to monitor

nasal and ear infections with appropriate medical treatment during his childhood. Platten and Kyle were both from an Aboriginal outstation, some five to six hours from Oenpelli by road and track.

Whilst at Trinity, Platten spoke to boys during class visits, Chapel services and small group sessions, and whether students were 4, 10 and 15 years of age, they were fascinated by his personal stories and showed tremendous interest in, and appreciation for what he had to say.

Kyle was less forthcoming and I am sure his shyness was due to his debilitating deafness. It was fortunate that a parent, whose medical role is as a senior consultant at the Eye and Ear Hospital in Melbourne, offered to see Kyle. Within the weeks of Kyle's stay at Kew, he underwent two procedures which entailed the repair of his eardrums, through the grafting of tissue taken from a region at the back of the neck, close to the ear.

Whilst at Trinity both boys undertook training in using digital A/V equipment – the hope being, that when they returned to their community in the Arnhem Land Stone Country, they would be able to compile a record of some of the unique practices and cultural facets, which have been so much part of the life and survival of their people, for so many, many years. In short, we hoped to skill these boys with something that would assist them in developing some sustainable enterprise, which would benefit both them and their families.

Some ten months later, Liz and I again visited the outstation community to which Platten and Kyle belong. Kyle was a different person – he could now hear and he was vigorously engaged in learning traditional painting styles from his grandfather, Lofty. Recently on visiting an exhibition of Aboriginal Art in Collingwood, Kyle's paintings were amongst the most highly prized.

Platten had also moved forward in his life – not only was he now operating as a ranger at the outstation, but had been appointed as the youngest member of the Western Arnhem Land Council, whose role is to make policy and make decisions concerning the distribution of funds for project work in the Western Arnhem Land region.

I am sure that both these boys benefited from their time at our school. Whilst with us at Kew, the connections between them and various members of the Trinity community, were personally grounded. Making the connection personal – that was important! And through the personal relationships, that were experienced and grown during their time in the south, both Platten and Kyle developed the confidence to enable them to take on meaningful roles back in their country. Positive outcomes from personal relationships – I am sure it was this, that made some difference.

But there is a further side to this story. In all these cases, these young aboriginals have given a great deal to our communities here in the south. Our school, for example, was significantly enriched by both Platten and Kyle.

And some of the personal relationships which focussed around Platten and Kyle have led to wonderful opportunities for Trinity boys. Twice each year, our Head of Science takes with him 3 – 4 boys to run technology programs at the Oenpelli School. Mostly these are our best boys in that we want to provide the best for the Oenpelli school. Last year we included a boy who was disengaged and personally challenged. Yes this was a risk, but I was hopeful that the experience in Oenpelli might turn this young fellow around. What we saw was the emergence of a great empathy for, and gentleness, in dealing with young Aboriginal children – qualities we had never seen in this student previously, in the context of his Melbourne school.

What a tremendous opportunity had come his way, and he had taken it on board in the most positive manner! Personal connection – making experiences personal. This was fundamental again in bringing about change, and making a real difference.

In James 2 Verse 26, emphasis is assigned to deeds. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” Deeds are not everything, and without some foundation of faith, it is true, they can be somewhat hollow. There is no doubt that Government policies and bureaucratic guidelines by themselves are not the answer to those enormous issues facing our Indigenous Australians – in fact facing all Australians. Deeds grounded in bureaucracies and systems do not make the difference; deeds which are personalised and grounded in genuine friendship will, in my mind, make an unquestionable difference. When Christ walked with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, his presence provided a comfort to those he joined, even though they didn’t recognise him. They undoubtedly appreciated his companionship and the presence of his “person”.

In thinking of our role, bringing about a positive difference, calls on each one of us, to seek personal contribution through personal relationships and genuine friendship.

So, making experiences with Indigenous Australians personal, I believe, is at the hub of reconciliation, healing and regrowth. Personal deeds are of all importance and seeing how each of us can impact personally on the lives of others, including our Indigenous friends and neighbours, is the real challenge. It certainly is for me, and I am sure it is likewise for all of us at this special gathering.