

> Our Wurundjeri recognition sculpture – telling the story

We acknowledge and respect
the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation,
the traditional custodians of this land since time immemorial.

We are learning that the land is not ours to own,
but to look after and that if we listen,
we may hear in it the calling of the eternal Spirit.
Responding to this call, we commit ourselves to work
for justice, reconciliation, and care of the earth.



A vital part of our life in the Uniting Church, and in Australia as a whole, is our relationship with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. At Assembly and Synod levels there is the Covenant and now a revised Preamble; but how should we respond at the local level? As one response, Brunswick UC's Church Council asked the Renewal Team to incorporate an appropriate recognition of the traditional owners of this land in the renovation of our buildings and grounds (2006-10).

The usual approach, of course, is to attach a standard-form plaque to an outside wall, usually near the main door. However, we wanted to do something more significant than that – something that would catch the attention of people passing by and invite their deeper reflection; something that would say more about who we are; something that we ourselves could relate to in much more interesting ways. As we thought about what form it might take, we also felt it should

be something more “grounded” in the land itself than a sign on a wall. Beyond the object itself, it was also important that we develop the concept in dialogue with the Wurundjeri and the broader Aboriginal community as far as possible.

And so we embarked on what became quite an extended process. Patience turned out to be an important component of “doing it right”! Some of the things that stand out from that process and the sculpture that emerged from it (just before Christmas 2012) are:

- **Consultation about the concept.** When Uncle Ringo Terrick, from the Wurundjeri Elders Council, gave a formal Welcome to Country at the reopening of the church building in November 2010, I spoke with him about our emerging ideas. He gave his hearty support to the concept of a sculpted boulder of local bluestone surrounded by native plants, and seemed happy for us to take it forward from there.
- **Consultations about the text.** After developing a draft and refining it with Church Council, the whole congregation was invited to endorse the text. Just as importantly, we sought the views of the UAICC (United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress) and also the Wurundjeri Elders Council. As it turned out, this took a very long time, not due to controversy but simply because both groups were overwhelmed by other demands on their

time. While we never did hear back from the WEC, the text was endorsed by the UAICC, and we decided to go ahead.

- **Incorporation of Wurundjeri art.** Early on, we noticed the work of Wurundjeri artist Mandy Nicholson (nee Thomas, website <http://www.bunjils-country.com>) across the road at Moreland Town Hall. Mandy generously agreed to let us adapt her manna gum leaf image, which reminds us of the leaves used by Uncle Ringo in his Welcome to Country. Our sculptor was happy to collaborate with Mandy in this way, leading to the beautiful image that's etched in the stone under our growing gum tree. Mandy's artistry and Uncle Ringo's welcome are specifically acknowledged in the caption to that image.
- **Connecting the sculpture with our worship life.** From the outset, sculptor Anthony Russo suggested that we "split the boulder" and have a figurative creek bed winding through it. The creek bed can be seen as flowing out from (or into?) the baptismal font, and towards (or from?) the hustle and bustle of Sydney Rd. The split stone also makes me think of the empty tomb with the stone rolled away. We have been using the recognition text in worship, and have also begun using the sculpture as a starting point in our liturgy.

I'm looking forward to grounding our common life and witness around the sculpture in future worship services, and in other ways too. For example, sitting around and telling stories ("yarning") is central to Aboriginal cultures. Wouldn't it be great if we gathered at the sculpture to share our stories and hear from others? We could do this formally, with organised topics, or simply when the mood takes us. We could reflect together on different parts of the recognition statement, and develop personal and group responses. We could share the story of our sculpture with others (for my part, I'll post this article on our website and look into revising it for Crosslight or other publications). We could gather at the stone before heading as a group to actions for "justice, reconciliation and care of the earth." That's just a start – what are your ideas?

Let's continue this telling of stories, sharing of ideas and joining together in action, because the recognition project was never intended to be fully "finished". Our recognition statement is now quite literally set in stone, and that is a profound witness to the community and our own future selves. But its language is deliberately liturgical and missional, inviting us to reflect, listen and learn – and then sending us out.

Shawn Whelan

