

Mission Australia's historical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Communities and Organisations

Acknowledgement

Mission Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present for they hold the memories, the culture, and dreams of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs, and continual relationship with the land, and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

Purpose

This history project is an engagement with truth telling. It seeks to acknowledge any negative connotations the name Mission Australia may have for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, clarify that Mission Australia did not run Aboriginal missions, and acknowledge our broader history of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities. It is one step in our commitment to creating culturally safe environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, clients and community members as we continue on our journey of Reconciliation.

Mission Australia's background

In 1996, Mission Australia brought together a group of City Mission organisations, the first of which was founded over 160 years ago.

Our founding purpose is inspired by Jesus Christ, Mission Australia exists to meet human need and to spread the knowledge of the love of God; our vision is for an Australia where all of us have a safe home and can thrive; and our values are compassion, integrity, respect, perseverance and celebration.



Prior to the formation of Mission Australia, separate City Mission organisations operated in various states and territories. City Missions were formed by people from various churches giving food or accommodation to those in need. These older organisations were:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT): Canberra City Mission
- New South Wales (NSW): Hunter Mission, Mission Australia Group Training and Mission Employment, Mission Australia Limited, Mission Australia Southern NSW, NSW Country Services, Sydney City Mission, Wagga Wagga City Mission, Wollongong City Mission
- Queensland (QLD): Town and Country Mission, later known as Brisbane City Mission
- South Australia (SA): Adelaide City Mission, later known as Mission SA
- Western Australia (WA): Jesus People Welfare Services, later known as Perth City Mission

We continue to be a non-denominational Christian service organisation, driven by our founding purpose and led by our values.

Acknowledging our name


We recognise that our name, Mission Australia, includes 'Mission', a word that may hold negative associations for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been living on the Australian continent for tens of thousands of years. From the time of European settlement, they have faced dispossession and systemic injustice.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forced from their Country onto missions, reserves or stations. While government policies varied between States and Territories and across time, these places were created with a stated aim of 'protecting' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a very patronising and paternalistic sense. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forcibly removed from their land and their families, and were not allowed to speak their languages, continue their cultural practices or teach them to their children.¹

Aboriginal Missions were often created by churches or religious individuals to house Aboriginal people, convert them to Christianity and prepare them for menial jobs. Missions, reserves and stations were all designed to erase people's cultural identity

¹ AIATSIS, (2022). Missions, stations and reserves, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/missions-stations-and-reserves>.



and the people in charge often had high levels of control resulting in widespread breaches of human rights and abuse.² The dislocation of families, disruption of close communities, loss of traditional culture and dispossession of land has caused significant intergenerational grief and trauma for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that continues to be felt by many today.

The City Mission organisations that preceded Mission Australia were not Aboriginal missions. City Missions were developed in the nineteenth century across the world, usually in large cities to provide spiritual, physical, and social assistance to the poor.

The City Missions started serving in more regional and remote areas only from the 1970s within Australia.

Mission Australia openly and honestly shares its Christian belief, but we do not attempt to convert people to Christianity in the course of meeting human need. We recognise the pain caused by churches and their affiliated institutions to some people, and the widespread abuses of trust that have taken place across generations. At Mission Australia we play a part in the journey of healing for people who have been hurt, by providing a positive example of Christianity and wholeheartedly striving for reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through recognition, empowerment and service.

Acknowledging the past

Mission Australia acknowledges that as an organisation with a long history, continuing back through older City Mission organisations, we have engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through historical periods of varying cultural understanding and competency. In the past, the organisation may not have consulted appropriately with Elders or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and communities about the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or the support that would have been helpful to them. Through this and other omissions, conscious and unconscious biases will have been present in:

- Governance and decision making without consultation or understanding
- Staff recruitment and succession planning lacking cultural understanding or expectation
- Service design and delivery which was not designed by or with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- Client assessment and support that was culturally insensitive

² AIATSIS, (2022). Missions, stations and reserves, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/missions-stations-and-reserves>.

- Meeting funding obligations as decided by funders rather than the actual needs of people
- Reducing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to provide services to their own communities through competitive tendering processes.

We acknowledge the harms that this has caused and the benefits that have accrued to us as a well-resourced, non-Indigenous organisation. In recent years we have made a commitment to improve our practices so that our behaviours do not cause harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and so that all areas and activities of our organisation are positively contributing to Reconciliation.

While at Mission Australia we have no organisational knowledge of any wrongdoing towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we recognise the incompleteness of records and accept we will likely never know for sure what may have occurred in our name.

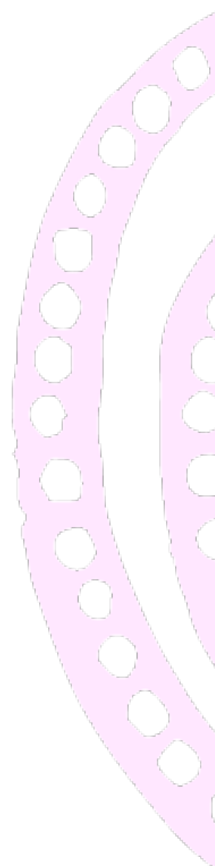
Mission Australia's commitment to Reconciliation

Mission Australia strives for a reconciled Australia where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country will be restored to a place of equity, dignity, and respect. We aspire to see our national soul healed and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to be fully valued. We wish for broken relationships to be restored and social inequalities eradicated. Mission Australia is committed to working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to heal the wounds of the past and move together into the future.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) details how Mission Australia is committed to help reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians. Our first RAP was implemented in 2009 and since 2017 we have had an Innovate RAP.

Supporting our commitments to reconciliation, Mission Australia has committed to strengthening our cultural safety over the next five years, 2024-2029. We have identified and will continue to develop, monitor and evaluate key initiatives that will strengthen our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural responsiveness in our work practices, environments and behaviours. You can read more about this in our Cultural Safety Framework.

Alongside this we have developed an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment strategy, and a partnership kit. We look forward to building on this



progress and are grateful to have a Knowledge Group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, an active RAP Reference Group and a growing network of RAP Champions supporting us on this journey.

Contact

Please let us know if you would like to raise any concerns, access support, or have a yarn. You can contact us at: rapfeedback@missionaustralia.com.au.

