

Why should BUV people care about The Voice?

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Who Am I?

My name's Andy Mitchell. I was born in NZ and moved to Australia when I was 19. I came to faith through the ministry of the Kew Student Residence and worshipped at Kew Baptist Church, before beginning a pastoral role there during an interim period. I sensed a call to ministry that led me to Beaumaris-Mordialloc Baptist and then, most recently, to Whitley College, where I serve as the Lecturer for Practical Theology and Ministry. I completed theological study at Ridley College and was ordained by the BUV in 2019. I'm currently undertaking doctoral research with NAIITS (a global Indigenous theological college) exploring how BUV churches could think theologically about building relationships with local Indigenous communities.

The most common objections I hear from our churches about The Voice are that it's a confusing subject that we don't know much about, and that it's a political issue, which we, as Baptists, have traditionally kept separate from our church life. And I think we're right to acknowledge these realities.

The National Church Life Survey in 2016 found that only 15% of Christians surveyed knew and met regularly with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Perhaps for this reason our movement of churches in Victoria has not been particularly active in our engagement with Indigenous peoples, apart from a unanimous vote to approve a Resolution of Commitment & Encouragement in 2007. This resolution called us to take "practical steps to grow in understanding and in relationship with Indigenous Australians," such as learning the names of the Traditional Owners on whose lands our churches are built, making contact with local Indigenous people and listening to their stories, and integrating national events that concern Indigenous peoples into the lives of our churches. The Reconciliation Action Plan that emerged from the Resolution explained, "We envisage a world where humankind is reconciled to each other, to God and to creation. We believe the Christian gospel holds a unique priority for those at the margins of our society and thus emphasise a special effort to reconcile with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and to learn from their deep wisdom of caring for creation."

As followers of Jesus we are familiar with a vision of how the world was *designed* to be, found in Genesis, and a similar vision for how the world *will* be, named by Jesus as the Kingdom of God. The Old Testament characterises this vision using the word *shalom*, which describes well-being that we experience when we live aligned to God's vision. It encompasses ideas like love, righteousness and justice. *Shalom* is an inherently relational term, in that it is measured in relationships - where there are healthy relationships, there is *shalom*. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God describes the rule and reign of God come to Earth in fullness. This reality could be described in many of the same terms as *shalom*.

We all understand and experience the dissonance of living as followers of Jesus in a world that is not yet aligned to God's vision for it. And I think we have a sense that our absence of relationship with the First Peoples of this land is a part of that dissonance. The Voice represents a significant step toward open dialogue and the healing of these relationships. The invitation from Indigenous peoples found in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, from which The Voice emerges, is simple: We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future."

A further part of this dissonance is the status of Indigenous peoples in this country. We don't have to Google for long to find out that the consequences of colonisation are still being felt by Indigenous peoples - consequences that are not felt by many of the rest of us. The issue of Victorian Baptists' posture toward Indigenous Victorians should be about justice and relationship, not about politics.

I often hear it said in our churches that the Indigenous community doesn't have a unified perspective on The Voice, so how can we know how to vote on it? In my experience I believe the Indigenous community does have a unified perspective, which centres on a recognition of their status as sovereign peoples, deserving of dignity and respect, wishing for the opportunity to represent themselves in issues that concern them, as we all do.

As *shalom*/kingdom people, we want to honour the image of God in all humanity. As Baptist people, we have been on mission for over 400 years, advocating for the dignity of all humanity - even for those who we do not know personally and who may be geographically far from us. It's my belief that we Victorian Baptists can do better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by remembering and enacting the commitments we made to them in 2007.

I am one of those New Zealand citizens who has recently been offered a pathway to Australian citizenship. If my application is approved in time, it's my intention to vote in support of The Voice, not because I think it's a perfect end goal, but because I think a "yes" vote opens a way for the beginning of long overdue dialogue and moves us closer toward God's vision for the world as we have it in Scripture. In my mind, voting "no" when we have nothing to lose from saying "yes," further enshrines these barriers to relationship and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters that we, as Victorian Baptists, ought to be dismantling.