

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES



EMERGING THEOLOGICAL STREAMS

Vol 16, No.2, December 2010

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

ISSN: 1323-6377

Published twice yearly (June, December) by United Theological College, 16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151. Phone: 61-2-8838 8927; Facsimile: 61-2-9683 6617; Website: www.uccs.utc.uca.org.au

Editor:

Dr William Emilsen
wemilsen@nsw.uca.org.au

Review Editor:

Dr Jione Havea
jioneh@nsw.uca.org.au

Subscriptions Editor:

utc@nsw.uca.org.au

Management Committee:

Diane Bertelsmeier, Peter Butler, Andrew Collis, William Emilsen, Jione Havea, David Holden, Clive Pearson, John Oldmeadow, John Squires.

Editorial Correspondents:

Professor Ian Breward
*Honorary Archivist,
Victorian Synod*

Dr Allan Davidson
*St John's Theological College
Auckland, NZ*

Dr Andrew Dutney
*Parkin-Wesley College
Adelaide, SA*

Dr Suzanne Boorer
*Murdoch University
Perth, WA*

Professor Christiaan Mostert
*United Faculty of Theology
Melbourne, VIC*

Dr Helen Richmond
*Nungalingya College
Darwin*

Dr Jill Tabart
Churchill, VIC

Dr Val Webb
Mudgee, NSW

Professor Lewis Rambo
*San Francisco Theological Seminary,
California, USA*

Dr Yang-En Cheng
*Taiwan Theological Seminary
Taipei, Taiwan*

Dr David Thompson
*Faculty of Divinity
University of Cambridge*

Dr Geoffrey Thompson
*Trinity Theological College
Brisbane, QLD*

The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope, 26 January 1988

William W. Emilsen

On 26 January 1988, Australia Day, an estimated 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait people converged on Sydney to protest against the Australian bicentennial celebration. It was according to various observers the largest gathering of Aboriginal people ever in Australia. About half were from New South Wales and the other half came from interstate. Some travelled privately but many travelled in convoys of ‘freedom buses’ like the 150 Yolgnu from the Top End who set out from Darwin down the Stuart Highway in seven hired buses and three support vehicles—the chow wagon, the grease wagon and swag wagon—for the five-day, 5,000km journey via Alice Springs, Adelaide, Mildura and Wagga Wagga. On the way they linked up with similar and bigger convoys from Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, before arriving in Sydney shortly before Australia Day.¹ Together, with a large Queensland contingent organised from Townsville, Toowoomba and Brisbane, they had come for the ‘big march’ variously called by supporters the ‘March for Mourning’, the ‘Black March’, the ‘Long March’ (echoing Mao Zedong’s Red Army’s epic trek), ‘March ’88’ or simply ‘The March’, but best remembered by its legally incorporated name ‘The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope’.

It is scarcely more than twenty years since the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope took place in the streets of Sydney and already its memory in the history of Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia is in danger of being lost in the euphoric afterglow of the bicentennial celebrations and obscured by more recent events such as Prime Minister Paul Keating’s Redfern speech in 1992, the March for Reconciliation across Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000 and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Apology in 2008. The March deserves, however, to be remembered, because it not only galvanized a sense of Aboriginal solidarity that no other event before or since has achieved but also because it had a profound impact on black–white relations in Australia. Furthermore, the March deserves to be remembered because the idea for, and the organization of, the March was the brainchild of the Rev. Enoch Charles Harris (1931–1993), an Indigenous Uniting Church Minister and the founding President of the newly-formed Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). It was largely Harris’ vision, determination and keen sense of justice that gathered together black and white, Christian and non-Christian, radicals and conservatives, recent immigrants and indigenous people from around the world for the March.

¹ Sarah Walls and Mark Forbes, ‘Black “freedom buses” head toward Sydney’, *Times On Sunday*, 17 January 1988, p. 1; Michael Mansell, ‘How the Bicentenary Helped The Aboriginal Nation Grow’, *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 8, No. 1, April 1989, p. 9; Denis O’Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair: The Inside story of Australia’s ‘Birthday Bash’*, Crows Nest, N.S.W., ABC Enterprises, 1991, p. 4; John Pilger, *A Secret Country*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1989, p. 59; *Times on Sunday*, 24 January, 1988.

The Uniting Church and Political Background to the March

The origins of the March go back to 1980 when a general meeting of the Australian Council of Churches (ACC) proposed that its member churches boycott Australia's bicentennial celebration unless 'sufficient progress' was made towards 'the just claims of the Aboriginal people for land rights, freedom to rebuild their society, and financial compensation'.² This resolution was eagerly picked up by members of the New South Wales Synod Youth Conference—just one indication of the close links between the Uniting Church and the ACC at that time—who subsequently persuaded the New South Wales Synod meeting in October 1980 to support the boycott.³ Apart from some minor rumblings in the press shortly afterwards from David Armstrong, the General Manager of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA), the resolution might have gone unnoticed by the general public.⁴ Not even a call for a boycott of the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane and threats of a similar boycott of the Bicentenary a month later by the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), the official advisory body of thirty-five elected Aborigines to the Federal Government, caused much of a stir in the press.⁵ However, in December 1981 all that changed when the Federal Liberal/National Government, led by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, decided to change the official bicentennial theme from 'Living Together' to 'The Australian Achievement'. A press release from the Prime Minister's office, announced that the new theme:

will encompass positive achievements and triumphs over adversity and social problems. It will focus attention on the goals and values of the Australian people, and on future achievements to which Australians can aspire. It will stimulate pride in Australia. It will include the variety of aspects of Australian life. It will recognise that the Bicentennial is primarily an Australian occasion, while also encouraging international participation and inviting consideration of our relationships to the rest of the world.⁶

Those areas to be celebrated in Fraser's statement included political democracy, private enterprise, trade unionism, education, intellectual and technical advances, Australia's multicultural society, the contribution of Aborigines, military achievements, sporting achievements, interest in the Australian environment, and Australia's international contribution.

While the original theme 'Living Together' was considered by many as 'too narrow'⁷, uninspiring and the butt of much amusement among satirists, it did have the advantage of being generally

² Ian Wilson to David Gill, 19 July 1982, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

³ Minute 368/805, New South Wales Synod Year Book 1981.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 October 1980, p. 2; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 1980, p. 2.

⁵ O'Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair*, pp. 170–171.

⁶ Prime Minister's Press release, Australia's Bicentenary 1988: The Australian Achievement, 6 December 1981.

⁷ Alan Cadman to David Gill, 20 July 1982, Bicentennial Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC Archives. Cadman was the Parliamentary Secretary to Prime Minister Fraser.

favoured by most State and Territory Governments and their Bicentennial Councils.⁸ David Armstrong, for example, thought that the phrase ‘The Australian Achievement’ was un-Australian and that it sounded like something that might come out of the United States.⁹ The Labor Premier of New South Wales, Neville Wran, was more adamant in his opposition to Fraser’s proposal. Wran completely dismissed the very idea that the ‘The Australian Achievement’ was superior to ‘Living Together’. ‘In my opinion’, he tersely advised Fraser, ‘it would be socially divisive to adopt your selection as the basis for planning and I must therefore tell you that New South Wales will not associate itself with it [‘The Australian Achievement’] in any way whatsoever’.¹⁰

The Third Uniting Church Assembly in Adelaide in May 1982 also disagreed with Fraser though it may have thought better of it when the original slogan *and* Fraser’s ‘The Australian Achievement’ were discarded for ‘Celebration of a Nation’. The Assembly supported the view proposed by John Brown, General Secretary of the Commission for World Mission, that the Bicentenary ought not to be about boasting achievements but rather about a celebration of ‘our life as Australians—the life of *all* Australians’.¹¹ Swayed too by a stirring address and the symbolic presence of Charles Perkins,¹² Chairperson of the newly-created Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC), the Assembly passed resolution 82.48 urging the Prime Minister to return to the original theme ‘Living Together’. It gave three reasons. Firstly, the earlier theme encouraged community building among all people, especially among Aboriginal and other minority groups. Secondly, ‘Living Together’ allowed Australians to include in their celebrations recognition of the shame and injustices of the past. And thirdly, the original theme avoided interpretations of Australian achievements in material terms and sectional interests that it believed often came at the expense of social and environmental relationships.¹³

With Perkins’ words still ringing in its ears, especially his shaming of the Anglican Church for its plans for a multi-million dollar, bicentennial cathedral or ‘Great Church’ on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, the Assembly, perhaps with a sense of bravado, went much further. Two subsections of resolution 82.48 committed the Uniting Church to prepare ‘a timetable of action in each Synod aimed at achieving appropriate government land rights legislation’. More controversially, the Assembly endorsed the Australian Council of Churches’ 1980 resolution threatening to boycott the bicentennial celebrations unless Aborigines were given land rights and financial compensation. Aware of the ambiguous and potentially explosive nature of its decisions, especially as it was already evident that the other Australian churches (apart from the Catholic Church) would participate

⁸ Paul Ashton, *Waving the Waratah*, New South Wales Bicentennial Council, 1989, p. 48.

⁹ Reported by Keith Suter in a letter to David Gill after the second meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Religion with the Australian Bicentennial Authority, 11 March 1982, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

¹⁰ Ashton, *Waving the Waratah*, p. 43.

¹¹ Miscellaneous [John Brown], Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹² The full text of Perkins’ speech is printed in ‘No Cause for Celebration: The 1988 Bi-centennial’, *Identity*, n.p.

¹³ The bicentennial theme had various incarnations; beside the ‘Living Together’ and the ‘Australian Achievement’, other themes adopted included, ‘Lets Make it Great in ‘88’, ‘Give Us a Hand to Make it Grand’, and finally ‘Celebration of a Nation’.

in the bicentennial celebration, the Assembly adopted the strategy of appointing a task group to chart its way through a potential minefield. It would prove to be a daunting task.

From the beginning the nine-member bicentennial task group (including two Aboriginal members Joyce Clague and Charles Harris) and three consultants (including Charles Perkins),¹⁴ was beleaguered with difficulties. At its first meeting on 11 April 1983, its convenor, Bernard Clarke, Secretary for Aboriginal Affairs in the Commission for World Mission, spent a considerable amount of time clarifying exactly what it was that the Assembly had asked it to do.¹⁵ He acknowledged that there were difficult questions for the group to interpret. How did the task group interpret its mandate? How would it understand 'sufficient progress'? How could it establish a timetable of action for land rights legislation in *seven* synods with different State and Territory legislation?¹⁶ Given the federal nature of the Uniting Church how do you get the synods to work together on a national issue? What is the best way to contact parishes? How is the task group to publicise its work throughout the Church?¹⁷ And then there was the perennial problem of funding Assembly activities. There was no budget for the task group. It would have to go cap in hand to the Commission for World Mission.

Clarke was also aware that a negative reaction to the Assembly's resolution was building up in some of the synods. He correctly surmised that appeals to the synods for funding assistance would be deemed inadvisable. Even before the bicentennial task group first met, Geoffrey Scott, Executive Officer for the Board of Social Justice in the Synod of South Australia, warned Clarke of the necessity of consulting with the synods before the task group made any recommendations to the wider church and expressed his concern with the Sydney-centric nature of group's membership.¹⁸

Reaction from the Queensland Synod was even more disturbing. John Woodley, Director of the Board of Social Responsibility in the Queensland Synod, expressed his fears early on to Clarke stating that he doubted whether the Assembly resolutions would be supported by the Queensland Synod.¹⁹ And a month after the task group's first meeting he wrote again reminding Clarke that the primary responsibility for taking action on land rights rested with the synods not the Assembly and warned him of the consequences should the Assembly attempt to impose its will on the Synod. 'I believe', Woodley wrote in late May, 'that it is essential that Queensland be allowed to pursue

¹⁴ The original membership consisted of Bernard A. Clarke (convenor), Joyce Clague, Jill Perkins, Charles Harris, Graeme Ferguson, Jean Skuse, Harvey Perkins, Chris Gardiner, Bill Adams; Consultants: Keith Suter, Charles Perkins, Peter Tebbutt. See David Gill to Bernard Clarke, 20 August 1982, Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁵ B. A. Clarke to members of the Bicentennial Task Group, 20 August 1982, Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁶ B. A. Clarke to Peter Tebbutt, 1 March 1983, Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives; Bernard Clarke to members of the Bicentennial Task Group, 20 August 1982, Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁷ These questions were still being asked five months later; see the Minutes of the Bicentennial Task Group, 17 August 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁸ Geoffrey D. Scott to B. A. Clarke, 18 March 1983, Bicentennial—Papers, Correspondence 1983–1984, UAICC, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁹ John Woodley to B. A. Clarke, 11 April, 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

the task in this regard without seeming to be directed from “outside”.²⁰ Woodley explained much damage had already been caused by the Assembly’s Commission for World Mission’s special issue of *Mission Probe* released late the previous year setting out specific goals for land rights in each synod. It had antagonised many parishes throughout Queensland; the depth of feeling was so strong that it was doubtful whether the majority of them would support the views in *Mission Probe*. In order to change the hearts and minds of people in Queensland, Woodley pleaded that ‘the process of education’ needed to be an appropriate one for the Queensland Synod.²¹

It was not only the reception of the Assembly resolutions and the special issue of *Mission Probe* that troubled Woodley. He was also alarmed by a number of statements stemming from the minutes of the task group’s first meeting. These, too, he believed, if followed through, would make the task of educating people on land rights more difficult. Woodley’s reservations all centred on what was appropriate for Queensland. He reiterated his earlier concern that materials like *Mission Probe* prepared by the Assembly almost certainly would be ‘useless in Queensland’. And if model resolutions were to be prepared by the task group for the synods, they should be promoted by people in the Queensland Synod rather than being seen to have come from the Assembly. Finally, confirming Clarke’s earlier fears about approaching the synods for funding, Woodley responded, ‘I shudder to think about the possible reaction of anyone at the Assembly level approaching the Queensland Synod concerning finance for this project.’²²

In the Synod of Victoria there was more support for the Assembly resolution than in Queensland but there, too, John Jamieson, Executive Director of the Division of Ecumenical Mission, warned Clarke that there was much misunderstanding as to what the Assembly was trying to achieve. Furthermore, he warned that requests for funding would generate considerable ‘heat’ and that there were signs of growing opposition from leading figures within the Synod.²³ As confirmation of this latter point, he forwarded an extract from a letter to the editor in the Synod’s magazine, *Church and Nation*. In that letter the Rev. Ray Outhred, a former chairperson of the Gippsland Presbytery, launched a blistering attack on the Assembly’s resolution:

this seems as good a time as any to let you know of my feeling regarding the Assembly decision as to participation—or not—by the Uniting Church in Australia in the Bicentennial Celebrations....I regard the decision as blasphemous. ... What else can one say about a decision that this Church will not, as a Church give thanks to God for all He has done in Australia in 200 years, unless certain governments have taken certain action—or rather action which is still not certain—regarding that amorphous subject “Aboriginal Land Rights?” ...What else? Well, one can say that it reflects an attitude of

²⁰ John Woodley to B. A. Clarke, 31 May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²¹ John Woodley to B. A. Clarke, 31 May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²² John Woodley to B. A. Clarke, 31 May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²³ John F. Jamieson to B. A. Clarke, 15 June 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

base ingratitude to God and of singular lack of respect and appreciation for our pioneers and forebears ... The Church could be headed for trouble on this one, and it is not hard to envisage many members following their conscience rather than an Assembly decision which they find offensive.²⁴

By the task group's first meeting then there was a welter of letters pouring into synod magazines sharply critical of the Assembly and openly defiant of its resolution; it was becoming clear to Clarke and other members of the task group that certain councils of the church would decide to participate in the Bicentenary regardless of what the Assembly had decided. Keith Suter, the secretary (self-styled the 'rapporteur') of the task group, underscored what was becoming increasingly obvious to all: 'the Uniting Church in Australia consisted of various layers, each of which had a high degree of autonomy as to how it would react to bicentennial activities.'²⁵ It would be difficult, surmised Suter, if not impossible for the task group to develop recommendations that might influence the various councils' involvement in bicentennial activities.²⁶

Despite the clamour the task group pressed on with the job it had been given. Charles Perkins, acting as one of its consultants, stiffened the task group's resolve. He outlined a clear strategy for the task group and persuaded it not to waver from the Assembly resolution. The election of the Hawke Labor Government in March 1983 had given him hope for a new era in black-white relations in Australia. He had a good working relationship with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, and was able to share with the task group confidential information about the government's intentions to introduce national land rights legislation and programs to address 200 years of Aboriginal disadvantage. Armed with this inside information Perkins proposed that the task group adopt the strategy of encouraging the Uniting Church to throw its support behind the Commonwealth Government's legislation and its accompanying program in the area of health, education, housing, equality before the law, employment and welfare; and, if the legislation was not in place by the 1985 Assembly then the Uniting Church should withdraw from all bicentenary arrangements.²⁷

Certainly, the noises coming from the new government made for more pleasant listening than those coming from the Church. The Labor Government had clearly indicated its intention of changing the theme of the Bicentenary back to 'Living Together'.²⁸ Clyde Holding's sympathetic interest in the Assembly resolution was encouraging and his statement for the recognition of national land rights was 'totally consistent with the objectives of the Uniting Church as reflected in the

²⁴ Extract from a Churchman's letter concerning the Bicentennial Celebration, c. June 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²⁵ Minutes of the Bicentennial Task Group, 12 April 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²⁶ Minutes of the Bicentennial Task Group, 12 April 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²⁷ Minutes of the Bicentennial Task Group, 12 April 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

²⁸ Minutes of the Bicentennial Task Group, 12 April 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.; Minutes of Bicentennial Task Group, 15 June 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

resolutions of the Assembly²⁹ The minister even promised that the Commonwealth Government's legislation would override State objections should that be necessary.³⁰

Of course it was one matter for a government to draft legislation to address Aboriginal grievances; it was another for it to pass into law. But for the task group desperately searching for a strategy to implement the Assembly's resolution, it was reassuring to have a Government to whom it could talk and whose program it could endorse.³¹ After meeting with the minister in May 1983, Clarke wrote to Holding assuring him of the Uniting Church's support of the Government's legislative program: 'Please be assured of the good will of the Uniting Church, Commission for World Mission, to you and your government as you carry out your mandate.'³²

Having become convinced that the Government's objectives were consistent with those outlined in the Assembly resolution, the task group then adopted the strategy first mentioned by Charles Perkins that it mount a political program to support and/or pressure the Federal Government so that it fulfilled its promised program of national land rights legislation.³³ The task group did all in its power to support, agitate, and persuade the Government into honouring its promises.³⁴ Somewhat naively, it also believed that it could call upon the synods and the whole membership of the Uniting Church to do the same.³⁵

By the third meeting of the bicentennial task group in August 1983 there were tensions and divisions building up within the group itself. It was clearly evident that not all of its members were completely comfortable with the strategy of lobbying the Commonwealth Government.³⁶ The political situation throughout the nation had hardened against land rights legislation. There were pressures from the synods questioning whether it was time for the Uniting Church to appoint a national committee to coordinate its bicentennial celebrations. After all, it was pointed out by David Gill, the Assembly Secretary, and Graham McAnalley, General Secretary of Synod of Victorian, that the Catholic Church, which had stood shoulder to shoulder with the Uniting Church on land rights, had recently appointed Sir Bede Callaghan, Chancellor of the University of Newcastle, as Chairman of its national committee to coordinate its bicentennial celebrations.³⁷ Not only had

²⁹ B. A. Clarke to Clyde Holding, 26 May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³⁰ B. A. Clarke, Report of visit to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³¹ B. A. Clarke, Report of visit to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³² B. A. Clarke, Notes for discussion with Right Hon. Clyde Holding, May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³³ B. A. Clarke to Bicentennial Task Group, 1 June 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³⁴ Bicentennial Task Group, How do we achieve the objectives in the Assembly Resolutions? Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³⁵ B. A. Clarke, Notes for discussion with Right Hon. Clyde Holding, May 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives; B. A. Clarke, Bicentennial Task Group: Points for Report to the Assembly Standing Committee in March, [c. February 1984], Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

³⁶ Minutes of Bicentennial Task Group, 15 June 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³⁷ Graham A. McAnalley to David Gill, 16 September 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives; David Gill to B. A. Clarke and Keith Suter, 28 September 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

the Catholic Church decided to participate in the Bicentenary, several Aboriginal organisations and high-profile individuals were planning to celebrate as well. Many like Burnum Burnum, an Aboriginal actor, activist and ‘Dreamtime’ story teller, had mixed feelings towards the Bicentenary. He even took his idea for an alternative Aboriginal celebration called ‘Goodwill Australia’ to the task group for the Uniting Church’s support. (The Goodwill Australia Aboriginal Celebrations were intended to focus on ‘Ethnic/Aboriginal cross-cultural exchanges’—a kind of mass welcome to country in the thirty weeks leading up to the 26 January 1988.) Burnum Burnum’s proposal received a mixed reaction from the task group and a lukewarm response from the newly-formed Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.³⁸ Also, within the Uniting Church there were significant Aboriginal leaders who were pro-bicentenary and believed that the Uniting Church should take an active part in the bicentennial celebrations. Joyce Clague, for example, was a member of the New South Wales Government Bicentenary Committee and Walda Blow from Victoria considered the boycott of the Bicentenary as unduly negative and the Bicentenary as an opportunity for all races to contribute their talents, skills, and ideas to as a ‘multi-racial nation.’³⁹ Understandably, as well, many Aboriginal organizations with reservations about celebration had been lured (even if reluctantly) into giving tacit approval to the Bicentenary by accepting substantial Commonwealth grants for community and cultural centres, sports and recreation facilities, publications, films, plays, and various ‘goodwill’ activities.⁴⁰

The task group was swimming against the tide; after almost eighteen months it was forced to admit that it could not carry out the task the Assembly had given it. A way forward was proposed by Graeme Ferguson, Principal of United Theological College and a member of the bicentennial task group. Ferguson took the theological high ground. He effectively gave the Uniting Church a theological *raison d’être* for celebrating the Bicentenary. Drawing on works dealing with play, festivity and celebration, including Harvey Cox’s *The Feast of Fools*, Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, Josef Pieper’s *In Tune with the World* and Hugo Rahner’s *Man at Play*, Ferguson argued that the Church had a distinctive role to play in celebrating the Bicentenary because of its very nature as a Christian community. The church, he reminded the task group, was essentially a ‘doxological community’; it lives, praising God.⁴¹ The Church has a crucial role in helping people to celebrate with integrity and joy. In celebration the Church affirms the essential goodness of the world in the creative, reconciling, re-creative activity of God. Its purpose for being is not to justify itself by its useful work or sacrificial service, but simply to be—adoring God.⁴²

³⁸ “Goodwill Australia”: The 1987 Aboriginal Celebrations, 20 July 1983, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

³⁹ Perceli Ratawa, Report on the Bicentennial Celebrations, 17 June 1984, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

⁴⁰ David Gill to B. A. Clarke, Keith Suter and Max Griffiths, 8 December 1981, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly. The Federal Government made \$200 million dollars available for a national program of events.

⁴¹ Graeme Ferguson, ‘Echidnas and Myall Creek: Celebration and Suffering in 1988’, in *From Here to Where? Australian Christians owning the past—embracing the future*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1988, p. 58; see also, The Uniting Church in Australia, Report of the Bicentennial Committee, Appendix II—Bicentennial Celebrations, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fourth Assembly, May 26–June 1, 1985.

⁴² Ferguson, ‘Echidnas and Myall Creek: Celebration and Suffering in 1988’, p. 58.

Celebration finds its purpose in itself. It is a moment of disengagement and distancing. As a result, it cannot properly be used as an instrument directed to an end other than itself. Attempts to make celebration of the Bicentenary dependent on achieving specific political goals confuses political strategy with a moment when we are entirely in and for the present moment in memory and hope.⁴³

Celebration cannot properly be used as a means to another end, Ferguson insisted, not even for the Uniting Church's political demand for social justice.⁴⁴

Not everyone agreed with Ferguson's theology of celebration. Don Carrington, for example, from Nungalinya College in Darwin, insisted that *the* issue was justice and land rights and where once the Assembly had said that it was prepared 'to leave father and mother and home and our precious bicentennial party for the sake of justice and solidarity with Aboriginal people' the present mood of the Assembly made him feel like Moses on the shores of the Red Sea with 'a whole bunch of people carrying a UCA LOGO wanting to go and celebrate 200 years in Egypt.'⁴⁵ Chris Budden, a Research Officer in the Northern Synod, also rejected Ferguson's proposal but his arguments were more theological than those of Carrington's. Budden refuted Ferguson's argument that the two issues be separated and disputed the notion that celebration finds its purpose in itself. Budden argued that celebration itself is a political statement which bestows meaning on events and that the linking of the two issues was crucial for a proper understanding of Australian history. Budden's substantial point was that the conquest, dispossession, and destruction of Aboriginal society were central to a full appreciation of Australian history and the linking of the two issues by the Assembly was a deliberate attempt to ensure that people in the Church confront the way that Australian history has been distorted.⁴⁶

To have land rights is to perceive history differently and to celebrate a different perception of the past and to hold forth a new future. ...if we can face our past honestly and own it as part of our life under God, then we can forge new futures out of that brokenness. But to deny the brokenness of our past means that we can never deal with it now or in the future...What I am trying to indicate is that if the nation is not willing to remember its past and what it has done, and thus be willing to create a new way of including all its people in the nation then we should not help the nation celebrate a false understanding of its history. We should not allow it to remember the past in an inadequate way, or allow it to gloss over the past and refuse to accept the way in which the past has shaped

⁴³ Ferguson, 'Echidnas and Myall Creek: Celebration and Suffering in 1988', pp. 46–47.

⁴⁴ Bicentennial Task Group, Establishing an Assembly Task Force to relate to the UCA to the Bi-centennial, [undated], Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

⁴⁵ Don Carrington to B. A. Clarke, 7 June 1985, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial march 1988, Folder 7 Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁴⁶ Chris Budden, 'Some reflections on Celebration and the Bicentennial', Aboriginal Affairs—Bicentennial Celebrations—J. Hooper/World Mission/Old Synod.

our present... What is celebrated will suggest what the community is and who it is that ought to be included.⁴⁷

For Ferguson, however, celebration did not simply mean superficiality or frivolity. It was not celebration on pragmatic grounds—telling Australians that the past was good. It did not exclude what he described as the ‘real history’ of Australia. Real celebration, Ferguson insisted, did not ignore or repress evil, tragedy, pain and suffering. The praise of God includes the exaltation of the Cross in all its shame. It recognised and named the many tragedies and harsh sufferings so abundant in Australia’s history—the injustices of transportation, the dehumanising brutality of the criminal justice system, murderous genocide, the destruction of the land, the hardship of the potato-famine immigrants, the tragedy of war, and the story of refugees escaping from pogroms, rape, pillage and destruction.⁴⁸ Real celebration occurs when these negativities are recognised and confronted. The theological task for the church Ferguson proposed was to provide a theological framework capable of bearing suffering within which people can name their past, exorcise their demons and celebrate their achievements.⁴⁹ For Ferguson it was ‘absurdity’ for the Uniting Church not to be involved in the Bicentenary. To do otherwise was to effectively forfeit its right to be heard on public affairs.⁵⁰

Ferguson’s theology of celebration was a powerful tonic. It eventually led to a separating out of the question of celebration from the political demand for social justice which, was becoming increasingly evident to the task group, would need to continue beyond 1988. In March 1985, therefore, the Assembly Standing Committee dismissed the bicentennial task group and set up two new committees in its place. The first committee was based in New South Wales. Ferguson was appointed convener. Four members from the original bicentennial task group—Keith Suter, Joyce Clague, William Adams, and David Gill—and two new members, Dorothy McMahon and Chris Walker made up the committee. Its task was to decide how the Uniting Church should celebrate and report back to the 1985 Assembly.⁵¹ The second committee consisted of a ‘social action’ group working primarily with the newly formed Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, at least until its formal recognition by the 1985 Assembly, on developing strategies and plans to support Aboriginal and Islander people in their struggle for land rights and related social matters.⁵² It was based in Adelaide. Clarke was its convener and he and members of the Racial Justice–Human Rights Committee in the South Australian Synod made up the committee.⁵³

⁴⁷ Chris Budden, ‘Some Reflections on Celebration and the Bicentennial’.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, ‘Echidnas and Myall Creek: Celebration and Suffering in 1988’, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Ferguson, ‘Echidnas and Myall Creek: Celebration and Suffering in 1988’, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Graeme Ferguson to William W. Emilsen, 21 January 2011.

⁵¹ Report to the Assembly Standing Committee, March 1984, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

⁵² Report to the Assembly Standing Committee, March 1984, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly; Minutes of the Meeting of the Racial Justice Group of the Social Justice Commission of the U.C.A. in South Australia, 9 May 1984, UAICC Box 2, Folder 1984, Bicentennial.

⁵³ The members included Bernard Clarke (Convener), Rod Wenham, Heather Soutcott, Paul Ford, Peter Lumb, Bill Heath, Kath Russell, Colin Leane, Nancy Sheppard and Lynda Buxton.

At the fourth Assembly, held in Sydney in 1985, debate on the Bicentenary was a major issue. Leading one side of the debate was John Brown from the Commission for World Mission, one of the church leaders whom, in a concerted attack on the Uniting Church a couple of years earlier, the *Bulletin* had condemned as a communist. Brown clearly recognised that both the mood of Uniting Church people and of Australian society in general had changed since the time of the 1982 Assembly's decision in favour of a boycott. 'Our hopes [of realising 'substantial steps'] have been overtaken by events, they are ashes blown to the winds...gone!'⁵⁴ He warned of the reactionary forces who were using the media and playing upon public concerns that land rights were a threat to non-aboriginal Australians. But he argued passionately that the basic underlying reason why the church had acknowledged the justice of Aboriginal claims for land rights over the last twenty years had not changed at all. 'The facts of prior ownership, of sometimes brutal and forced dispossession, of seizure of lands from Aboriginal people by law or proclamation, the impoverishment and decimation of many groups, and the lack of any resources to participate in Australian society',⁵⁵ these, Brown insisted, continued to be facts which must be faced, no matter how powerful the opposition or indifferent or hostile the feelings of the public might be.

The Uniting Church, Brown continued, should not retract from its long-standing support for land rights just because the battle was becoming difficult:

The Bible makes it clear that justice is NOT just about equality or equal treatment. It is about the defence of the most vulnerable people in the society and limiting the power of the powerful who reduce the poor to dependence, who take from those who need in order to extend their resources or wealth, who trample over the little people in the community. When people seek justice they are therefore seeking concrete action to redress a situation in which certain groups are held in their poverty, are ground down to apathy, or violence or uselessness to the wider society. In this struggle there can be no compromise. There is no way through. Our actions are either just or they are oppressive. They are either for the poor or they actively permit the continuing debilitating dependence which prevents them from struggling constructively to better their lot and to contribute to the wider society. The Commission believes that there is no choice for us, for God in Jesus Christ has declared where he stands. We must stand with him!⁵⁶

The key figure on the other side of the debate on the bicentennial celebrations was Graeme Ferguson. In presenting his committee's report, Ferguson reiterated his 'theology of celebration' hammered out earlier in the bicentennial task group. He reminded the Assembly that the church

⁵⁴ The Uniting Church in Australia, Report from the Commission for World Mission, C13.4.5, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fourth Assembly, May 26–June 1, 1985.

⁵⁵ Report from the Commission for World Mission, C13.4.8, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fourth Assembly, May 26–June 1, 1985.

⁵⁶ Report from the Commission for World Mission, C13.4.10, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fourth Assembly, May 26–June 1, 1985.

was a celebratory community which did not ignore past suffering and injustice. He made it clear that the Australian Bicentennial Authority was sensitive to the attitudes of Aboriginal people to the Bicentenary. He drew attention to the ethnic diversity of Australia and noted that many conflicting interests had to be balanced within the central commitment of the Uniting Church to being a 'multicultural' church. He believed that the Bicentenary would provide a focus for exploring and celebrating Australia's multicultural and pluralistic society. Moreover, Ferguson insisted that the Assembly was expected to provide leadership for all the councils of the Church, including the many congregations and parishes that had applied for funds for particular projects and were already involved in planning bicentennial activities. And as far as acting in solidarity with the Aboriginal members of the Church was concerned, he encouraged people to support alternative Aboriginal celebrations (an idea originally proposed by Harvey Perkins on the bicentennial task group), including a celebration of lamentation or 'mourning for a lost land'.⁵⁷

Ferguson's 'theology of celebration' won a decisive victory over the 'boycott' option. Perhaps it was received with a sense of relief by members of the Assembly who were nervous of persistent accusations that the Uniting Church's agenda was being determined by left-wing radicalism. It gave the Assembly and many members of the Uniting Church in Australia permission 'to become fully involved in preparing for and in celebrating the Bicentennial' as a joyous and creative occasion.⁵⁸

The decision of the Fourth Assembly to participate in the Bicentenary came, however, as a shock to the leaders of the newly-formed Congress. When Charles Harris reflected on the bicentennial debate at the following Assembly, the disappointment was still palpable: 'In Adelaide in 1982', Harris began, 'Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church from various parts of Australia felt immensely affirmed and supported.'⁵⁹ In the decisions on the Bicentenary, 'You said to us "The Uniting Church is committed with the Australian Council of Churches to only take part in these celebrations if sufficient progress has been made towards the just claims of Aboriginal people for land rights, freedom to rebuild their society and financial compensation."⁶⁰ Harris emphasised what the decision had meant to Aboriginal people:

Here was the Uniting Church at its highest level saying that it would not join in the party if this small part of our membership still suffers. The church promised our experience would determine its action. The church placed our needs above its desires and proper

⁵⁷ Report of the Bicentennial Committee, Appendix II—Bicentennial Celebrations, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fourth Assembly May 26–June 1, 1985; Bicentennial Task Group, Establishing an Assembly Task Force to relate to the UCA to the Bi-centennial, [undated], Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC—UCA Assembly Archives.

⁵⁸ Minute 85.40.6, Bicentennial Celebrations, Minutes and Reports of the Fourth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1985.

⁵⁹ Minute 5.2.1, The Bicentennial, Report of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fifth Assembly, May 22–May 28, 1988.

⁶⁰ Minute 5.2.1, The Bicentennial, Report of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fifth Assembly, May 22–May 28, 1988.

expectation of joyful celebration.... The church had given us hope, not by promising money, but by saying the church's task was to act by standing alongside the poor, in this case Aboriginal people.⁶¹

Charles Harris then reflected on the 1985 Assembly when delegates accepted the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress as a new part of the church's life. 'We felt sure of the church's real love because of its action.'⁶²

Then, at the same Assembly, Harris observed the Uniting Church 'reverse course' on the Bicentenary:

We heard the fourth Assembly acknowledge that the substantial steps referred to in the third Assembly had not been achieved. We could feel the tension as the church was caught between standing with Aboriginal people or moving to be with those who would participate in the celebrations. ... We felt the church moving away from us. Where it had previously been saying, "We stand with you", now it said, "We will support you, but we must stand with our people in our celebration." We know it is the church's choice where it stands and what it does. However, we cannot deny our crushing disappointment at its choice⁶³.

Aboriginal Planning of the March

Arising out of the disappointment with the swell of support for the Bicentenary, the jettisoning of promised national land rights legislation ('the great disaster' according to Charles Perkins) by the Hawke Government in 1984 when Brian Burke, the Premier of Western Australia (1983–1988) saw it as an electoral liability, and the general hardening of the media and mining lobbies against land rights, Harris began to conceive of a black alternative to the celebration of a nation, a 'celebration of mourning' (reminiscent of the Day of Mourning protest staged at the sesquicentenary Australia Day in 1938⁶⁴) to highlight the great gulf in the values between the original Australians and those who came after them.⁶⁵ In March 1984 the leaders of Congress issued their first public statement concerning the bicentennial celebrations and suggested a march across Australia during the Bicentenary:

We recommend to the Bi-Centennial Committee that it is the end of time for talking, but it is time to see some action—the people who are suffering and dying people cannot

⁶¹ Minute 5.2.1, The Bicentennial, Report of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fifth Assembly, May 22–May 28, 1988.

⁶² Minute 5.2.1, The Bicentennial, Report of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fifth Assembly, May 22–May 28, 1988.

⁶³ Minute 5.2.1, The Bicentennial, Report of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Handbook and Working Papers, The Fifth Assembly, May 22–May 28, 1988.

⁶⁴ See Jack Horner and Marcia Langton, 'The Day of Mourning', in *Australians 1938*, ed. Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt, Broadway, NSW, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987, ch. 3.

⁶⁵ [E. C. Harris] to B. A. Clarke, 22 March 1984, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly.

wait. The time is now. If Aboriginal people wait, nothing is going to happen. We therefore request your Bicentennial task group to support the proposed March for Mourning to Canberra to celebrate there in sackcloth and ashes. ... As the members of the national committee considered this question of the Bi-Centennial, the thought came through very clearly that what Aboriginal people felt was the need for a celebration of mourning ...⁶⁶

The driving force behind the idea of a march was the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress President, the Rev. Charles Harris. He was its instigator, its visionary, its primary advocate, spokesman, trouble-shooter and figurehead. It was he who worked incessantly travelling around the country building bridges between Aboriginal groups, between them and the white community, and between church people and the non-church people. Though Harris was supported by many others, especially Bernard Clarke, Anne Gray from Townsville, recently appointed to a full-time position with Congress and Joan Gaines, an American missionary from Amarillo, Texas, on six months secondment with Congress, it was his energy, determination and keen sense of justice that brought the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope into reality.

Harris' initial idea was a march beginning from various places in Australia with the objective of arriving in Canberra (not unlike the Great Peace March in the United States to Washington in the mid-1980s) where there would be a ceremony of mourning based on the story of Mordecai in chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Esther.⁶⁷ Although the focus of the March would eventually shift from Canberra to Sydney in 1987, the story of Mordecai throughout its planning played a prominent role in both its conception and justification. For example, in attempting to persuade international speakers such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Baptist minister and one time Democratic Party's candidate for the Presidency of the United States and Allan Boesak, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, to come to Australia to support the March, Harris would return to Mordecai's courageous example:

This March across the whole of Australia is not a Bicentennial activity—it arises out of our sense of outrage. We want to forcefully and peacefully direct attention to another history, another reality which wider Australia still refuses to acknowledge or correct. Many Aboriginal organisations intend to regard the Bicentennial as a year of mourning. We want to go a step further and share that mourning, first in marching and secondly in an act of both worship and demonstration in which we re-enact the dance of Mordecai before the Court of the King. This will take place on the lawns in front of the new Commonwealth Parliament House, Canberra. In this act we will challenge the Australian people with

⁶⁶ [E. C. Harris] to B. A. Clarke, 22 March 1984, Bicentennial—1983–1984, UAICC Archives, UCA Assembly; 'Aborigines declare war on Bicentenary', *SMH*, 5 March 1986, pp. 1, 14, UAICC, Folder C2j Bicentennial Aboriginal Organisations.

⁶⁷ The book of Esther tells the story of how Mordecai responded to Haman's plan to kill 'all the Jews, young and old, including women and children' in one day (3:13). Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sack cloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry. He then protested outside the gate of the palace where he attracted the attention of Queen Esther who interceded with the King on the part of the Jewish people, even at risk to her own life.

their continuing marginalisation of Aboriginal people.⁶⁸

Throughout most of 1986, however, the March was little more than an idea, an intention, just number 15 of Congress's 32 'objectives' for 'becoming the most action oriented body in Aboriginal Affairs in the nation'.⁶⁹ Objective No. 15 simply stated: 'Plan towards a major protest in 1988, in a march across Australia for justice, and to invite with all Aboriginal organisations in Australia the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al[lan] Boesak to be the main speakers.'⁷⁰ A letter written under the signature of Bernard Clarke and Charles Harris in March 1986 seeking support for the March from the two Aboriginal presbyteries in the Uniting Church—Calvary Presbytery in Queensland and Bethel Presbytery in the Northern Synod—reveal that there was still much work to do in persuading Aboriginal people to support the March. In terms of enlisting their support the letter clearly stated that it would not be a political march but a 'preaching march' taking place over a period of months. On the way to Canberra participants would preach the gospel and talk with people about their hopes for Australia and their vision of a country freed from racism and injustice.⁷¹ To those in the Bethel Presbytery who preferred to emphasise personal encounter rather than protest and proclamation, the letter reiterated that there is a necessary place for 'the prophetic and public announcement of the judgment of God upon a rebellious nation'.⁷² In an attempt to allay fears that the national committee of Congress was entering into conversations and cooperating with non-Christian Aboriginal organisations about the March, again the response was forceful: 'We must not let the non church people lead us by the nose on the road to justice, being pulled as if reluctant towards the Kingdom of God. We are the ones God calls. We should be at the lead, with our eyes set clearly on Jesus.'⁷³ At the end of the letter there is a note of urgency: 'We must begin to plan NOW if anything significant can happen.' The national office of the Congress would need to engage an 'organiser' in early 1987 and invitations to Jackson, Boesak and other international guests needed to be issued '[w]hatever happens about a march and celebration of mourning. These are very busy men and if we don't move now they will have commitments to someone else.'⁷⁴

At the September 1986 Annual Conference of Congress on Magnetic Island, just off the coast of Townsville in North Queensland, Aboriginal involvement in the Bicentenary was still a contentious issue. There Harris presented his plans for a celebration of mourning which would include a march across Australia that would 'claim this country for Jesus Christ' and 'seek justice for all Australians'. Harris hoped that the March would begin with the Aboriginal presbyteries in the north and conclude with a 'great rally' in Canberra. He indicated that he had travelled around

⁶⁸ E. C. Harris to Rua Rakena, 2 April 1987, Box 14 UAICC—The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 8 Overseas Speakers correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁶⁹ [32 Objectives for 1986], UAICC General, Box 25.

⁷⁰ [32 Objectives for 1986], UAICC General, Box 25.

⁷¹ E. C. Harris and B. A. Clarke to Rrurrambu [Dhurrkay], 17 March 1986, Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁷² E. C. Harris and B. A. Clarke to Rrurrambu [Dhurrkay], 17 March 1986, Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁷³ E. C. Harris and B. A. Clarke to Rrurrambu [Dhurrkay], 17 March 1986, Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁷⁴ E. C. Harris and B. A. Clarke to Rrurrambu [Dhurrkay], 17 March 1986, Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin. (My italics).

the country garnering support from many Aboriginal groups including Anglicans and Catholics. When questions were raised about associating with other Aboriginal groups, Harris, employing all his rhetorical skills, was able to allay those concerns by assuring them that ‘the focus of the march would centre on Jesus Christ’.⁷⁵

If we are going to march we need to know that God is in it, or it will not be blessed by God. ... In Congress we acknowledge Jesus as Lord. If He leads us we need not fear ... The issue is the platform on which we stand ... The church must stand on the platform of Almighty God which is to announce justice and denounce those which erode the platform He has given to us ... I believe many [Aboriginal people] won't support the march. If you can't support the march I hope that you support those who take part in it. If you can't be involved in all of it I hope you will take part in some of it. We are living under the Pharaoh.⁷⁶

The Conference was eventually won over by Harris' oratory. It subsequently proposed that all Congress people participate in a march for justice across Australia during the early part of 1988 which would culminate in Canberra.⁷⁷

With the National Conference of Congress backing the March, support for the March began to gather momentum. Aboriginal groups from around the country warmly embraced the idea of a march and offered to help organise it locally.⁷⁸ Catholic Aboriginals rallied as well after Harris met with Pat Dodson, an Aboriginal leader and former Catholic priest, and addressed a large gathering of Aboriginal Catholics during Pope Paul II's visit to Alice Springs in November 1986. The Commission for World Mission came out strongly behind the March and urged all members of the Uniting Church to support it with accommodation, transport, finance and by participating in the March.⁷⁹ Canberra Presbytery followed the Commission's lead soon afterwards.⁸⁰ Maori leaders in New Zealand expressed their support for the March. A March '88 organising committee was

⁷⁵ Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, 5–11 September 1986, at Magnetic Island, North Queensland, Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, Conference reports, 1983–1987, R1030/150, John Oxley Library.

⁷⁶ Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, 5–11 September 1986, at Magnetic Island, North Queensland, Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, Conference reports, 1983–1987, R1030/150, John Oxley Library.

⁷⁷ Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, 5–11 September 1986, at Magnetic Island, North Queensland, Aboriginal and Islander Christian Conference, Conference reports, 1983–1987, R1030/150, John Oxley Library; ‘Congress Meets on Magnetic Is.’, *Journey*, November 1986, p. 34.

⁷⁸ Minutes of the National Committee of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, 21–22 November 1986, National Committee Minutes, Aboriginal and Islander Congress 1985–1988, JOL, R1030/154.

⁷⁹ Resolution 86.11.12, Minutes of the National Committee of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, 21–22 November 1986, National Committee Minutes, Aboriginal and Islander Congress 1985–1988, JOL, R1030/154.

⁸⁰ B. A. Clark to N. D. McDonald, 7 January 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7 Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

formed which published thousands of pamphlets titled ‘March Update’ promoting the March.⁸¹ Letters were written to international organisations such as the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches in New York seeking to bring international awareness to the March. And Jessie Jackson had given an indication that he might be able to come.

However, despite the growing momentum, there were still many fundamental questions about the March that remained unanswered. In February 1987, Ann Wansbrough, a research officer in the New South Wales Board of Social Responsibility, wrote to Harris not long after she had given the bible studies at the Annual Conference of Congress in Darwin, identifying matters that still needed to be resolved, especially if Congress wanted the Synod to promote the March and to assist it with funding. What was needed, Wansbrough clearly identified, was a clear statement from the Congress about the March: what its purpose was – what was it trying to achieve? When did they want people to be in Sydney or Canberra? What was its destination – Sydney or Canberra? Who were the Aboriginal people in each area with whom local churches should liaise? Who was being brought out to Australia to speak? When and where will they speak? What funds were needed and why? How could local non-Aboriginal people be involved and what practical matters could non-Aboriginal people help with? Wansbrough was concerned that the concept of the March was still too fuzzy for most presbyteries and parishes to be able to support it and feared that if it was not sorted out quickly there was a risk that non-Aboriginal people might take it over.⁸²

Harris’s response to Wansbrough was courteous yet firm. He urged her to be patient and stressed that the March would be organised in an ‘Aboriginal way’. More precise plans would emerge closer to the event but for the moment Harris insisted that he needed to follow his own methods and allow time for Aboriginal people to become strongly committed to the March.⁸³

In truth both Harris and Wansbrough were correct. Harris needed more time as support for the March nationwide was still fragile and tentative.⁸⁴ Wansbrough, too, was vindicated four months later when the second issue of ‘March Update’ answered her precise questions! What is the March? It is a march across Australia to highlight one of Australia’s greatest problems. Who can participate in it? All people—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—who feel the ‘system’ in Australia is unjust and working against those on the lower rungs. When does it start? The March is to be launched nationally on 4 July 1987 and will start any time from then until 26 January 1988. What does it

⁸¹ The March Flyer, [1987], Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁸² Ann Wansbrough to E. C. Harris and B. A. Clark, 18 February 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives; see also Brian Smith’s concerns from the Board of Social Responsibility in the Synod of South Australia about the lack of a clear statement of the philosophy, aims and objectives of the March; Brian L. Smith to E. C. Harris 12 January 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁸³ E. C. Harris to Ann Wansbrough, 18 February 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁸⁴ Brian L. Smith to E. C. Harris 12 January 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

hope to achieve? It hopes to expose the plight of Aboriginal people in Australia to international scrutiny, promote and strengthen Aboriginal identity, heal the hurts of the past and build a better community.⁸⁵ The main focus of the March will be in Sydney where there will be rallies and protest meetings against 'the misguided paternalism and shameful neglect of Aboriginal people over the past 200 years.' Mention is made of another march to Canberra in time for the opening of the new Parliament House in May 1988 but these plans were still very provisional.⁸⁶

In April 1987 Terry Widders, an Aboriginal man and former secretary to the Aboriginal Development Council of the Australian Council of Churches, was employed by the executive of Congress as the National Co-ordinator for the March. Widders was keen to add a third aspect to the March. Not only were Sydney and Canberra to form different legs of the March, Widders wanted to add Townsville as well to the mix. His vision for the March had three geographical foci, each with a separate theme and at a separate time in the bicentennial year or 'Year of Mourning' as many Aboriginals preferred to describe it: in January in Sydney the March would focus on the effects and consequences of invasion during the previous 200 years; in May in Canberra at the opening of the new Parliament House, the March would concentrate on the theme of Aboriginal sovereignty (building on earlier work by Kevin Gilbert), and then in August at the Festival of Pacific Arts in Townsville, the March would concentrate on the future of the Aboriginal people.

By adding this third aspect to the March, we add the idea of a future oriented into the March. Three aspects—Sydney, reflections on the past—Canberra, reflections on the political present, and the relationships between the state institutions and Aboriginal and Island people and the festival which is future oriented, into which we can lend our ideas and energy and contribution to embellish, firm or add to the festival other aspects of what we think are worthwhile indigenous futures.⁸⁷

Widders' expanded conception of the March reveals not only some variance with that held by the executive of the Congress but it also highlights the still fragile nature of the March concept itself as late as mid 1987. He reported to Congress just before his resignation in late July that the March concept was 'precariously poised' and that considerable work still needed to be done in promoting the very idea of the March to Aboriginal and Islander people if they were to embrace it as a 'symbolic idea'.⁸⁸ Widders stayed on until shortly after the national launch of the March on the 4 July in the Balmain Town Hall when Listell Jackson took over as the National March Co-ordinator. As a media event, however, the launch was a disappointing failure. No one from the media came—a failure Clarke attributed to the lack of big-name speakers, a strange response

⁸⁵ The March Flyer, [1987], Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁸⁶ The March Flyer, [1987], Box 26, UAICC—Pre-1988-UCA Assembly, NRCC Archives, Darwin.

⁸⁷ Terry Widders, A Report to the Steering Committee of the March '88, 4 April 1987, Box 14 The Bicentennial March — 1988, Folder 12 Duplicates of correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁸⁸ Terry Widders, A Report to the Steering Committee of the March '88, < 4 April 1987, Box 14 The Bicentennial March — 1988, Folder 12 Duplicates of correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

considering he and the poet and playwright Kevin Gilbert spoke at the launch.⁸⁹

The launch, however, did give the March a much-needed boost in another way. Out of the 150 people who attended and 15 organisations represented support for the March expanded beyond the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe, and their associated networks to include powerful Aboriginal organisations such as the Federation of Land Councils and the National Aboriginal Coalition.⁹⁰ Increasingly, planning for the March developed a broad base of black and white support. Public figures, politicians, Aboriginal activists and other organisations endorsed the March and in many instances expressed their willingness to be involved. They included high-profile individuals such as Barry Unsworth, the Premier of New South Wales, Gerard (Gerry) Hand, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Third Hawke Ministry, Ken Gabb, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Unsworth Government, Father Frank Brennan, Jesuit priest and lawyer, the Rev. Ian Tanner, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Rev. John Smith, founding President of God's Squad Christian Motorcycle Club, Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Allan Boesak.⁹¹ Both Gabb and Hand, issued press statements stating that they intended to boycott all official bicentennial functions and join in the March instead. Hand wrote:

I endorse the proposal by the Christian Congress for a peaceful march on January 26 as it can be seen as an important Aboriginal and Islander action, and should be supported.... For non-Aboriginal Australians in Sydney on this day, to march together with Aboriginal and Islander people would be a positive step in developing the partnership a future Australia must have...⁹²

Aboriginal activists Judy Chester, Kevin Cook, Kevin Tory, Chris Kirkbright, and Anne Gray became involved with the planning of the March and Catholic organizations such as the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council of Queensland and the Sisters of St Joseph publicly endorsed it.⁹³

By late 1987 planning for the March became more frenzied, not helped by the dearth of available funds. It soon became evident that at least \$100,000 was needed just to fund the 'national' or

⁸⁹ B. A. Clarke to John Smith, 25 August 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁹⁰ B. A. Clarke to Kevin Cook, 17 August 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁹¹ E. C. Harris, Media Release, 23 December 1987, Box 14, UAICC-The Bicentennial March, Folder 4, March Association Incorporation and Insurance, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁹² Statement by Gerry Hand, M.P., Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, 23 December 1987, Box 14, UAICC, Folder 9, Miscellaneous correspondence/documents/pamphlets, Jan 85-Jan 88, UCA Assembly Archives; Tracy Austin, 'Govt boycott spreads', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 January 1988, p. 4; Glenn Milne and Tracey Aubin, 'Minister backs black protests', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January 1988, p. 1

⁹³ E. C. Harris, Media Release, 23 December 1987, Box 14, UAICC-The Bicentennial March, Folder 4, March Association Incorporation and Insurance, UCA Assembly Archives.

Sydney part of the March. The cost of bringing some of the international speakers and guests to Australia had to be met, public liability insurance of \$5,000,000 had to be paid. Venues, tents, scaffolding, barricades for the Anzac War Memorial, Porta-Loos, and short-wave radios had to be hired. Posters, pamphlets and newsletters needed printing.⁹⁴ With successive issues of 'March Update' the alarm bells began to ring louder.⁹⁵ Whereas the first issue gently pleaded: 'FUNDS are always needed, and any donation received will certainly help this project,' the second issue was more strident: 'MONEY, MONEY, MONEY IF ANYONE HAS ANY WE CAN SURE USE IT!' By the fifth issue there was a note of desperation: 'WE STILL NEED FINANCE. This need is urgent.' Funding applications to the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism and the Australian Bicentennial Authority were sympathetically received but were turned down because they did not meet the criteria. The entrepreneur and philanthropist, Dick Smith, and overseas churches such as the Disciples of Christ in the United States and Canada were unable to help. Apart from the Australian Council of Churches who gave \$5,000 and the Christian Conference of Asia who sponsored people from third-world countries to attend the March, the bulk of the money came from Uniting Church sources, particularly the New South Wales Board of Social Responsibility, the Assembly's Commission for World Mission, and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress itself.⁹⁶ The rest was made up from donations from individuals before and on the day of the March, the sale of armbands, posters and T-shirts, and a talent quest sponsored by Radio Redfern (dubbed the 'Black Heart' radio station in Sydney).⁹⁷

Accommodation was also a concern because Charles Harris had promised free board to Aboriginal protestors from outside of Sydney. But accommodation for almost five thousand people was never going to be easy to find. Even if the committee had the money to pay for hotels, which it didn't, most hotels in Sydney were already booked by the massive influx of visitor attending official bicentenary activities. Thus, emergency strategies were called for. A 24-hour hotline was set up to receive offers of accommodation and to assist individuals and groups looking for places to stay. Fortunately, both the black and the white community responded magnificently. Endeavour Migrant Hostel in South Coogee and Westbridge Migrant Hostel at Villawood were made available. Linda Burney, an Aboriginal educational consultant, arranged for the Settlement in Darlington to take 50 to 60 people; Kevin Cook negotiated with the La Perouse Aboriginal community to take 400 people. The Addison Road Community Centre in Marrickville offered to take 150 and more if additional toilet and shower facilities could be found. Most important were the hundreds of individuals and

⁹⁴ March Update, [Issue No. 5], Box 14 The Bicentennial March–1988, Folder 2 March Updates, September 1987–March 1988.

⁹⁵ Project Submission for March for Justice, Freedom and Hope For All Australians, c. July 1987, Box 14, UAICC–Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 9 Miscellaneous correspondence/documents/pamphlets, Jan 85–Jan 88, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁹⁶ B. A. Clarke to Jean Sinbad, 31 August 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence; John P. Brown to E. C. Harris and Bernard Clarke, 6 October 1987, Box 14 UAICC–The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 8 Overseas Speakers correspondence; Minutes of the March for Justice Freedom and Hope Steering Committee, 20 October 1987, Box 14–UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 10 Agenda/Minutes/ reports of the Steering Committee, July 1987–January 1988, UCA Assembly Archives; Minutes of March '88 Steering Committee, 21 July 1987, Box 14–UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 10 Agenda/ Minutes/reports of the Steering Committee, July 1987–January 1988, UCA Assembly Archives.

⁹⁷ March Update, [Issue No. 6], Box 14 The Bicentennial March–1988, Folder 2 March Updates, September 1987–March 1988.

numerous local churches in and around Sydney who offered their homes and halls free of cost.

Feeding an army of people also presented logistical headaches. Less than a week before the March the situation looked grim, only to be saved by the quick thinking of Anne Gray who successfully persuaded Franklins and Coles and other businesses to donate massive quantities of basic food stuffs such as canned food, long-life milk, sugar, flour, tea, coffee, fruit juice, cereal, and kitchen utensils such as pots, pans, can openers, cutlery, paper plates and cups.

Apart from meeting the pressing material needs of the Aboriginal protestors arriving in Sydney for the week of the 22–29 January, the March '88 Committee had to file an application to the Corporate Affairs Commission for incorporation,⁹⁸ obtain permits from the police, traffic and emergency authorities, appoint Koori Marshalls for the March, provide guides to help people through the city to where they were staying, give undertakings concerning noise, erect flags and PA Systems in Redfern and Belmore Parks, attend press conferences, arrange photographers to record incidents of concern, and appoint speakers for the vigil on the 25 January, the rally in Hyde Park on the 26 January and associated events at the Bondi Pavilion.⁹⁹

The March committee had to plan carefully against threats of violence by racist whites and radical blacks. Rumours of violence came to a head when Michael Mansell, an Aboriginal lawyer and radical activist, sparked controversy in the press linking the March with a violent protest against the 'First Fleet' re-enactment.¹⁰⁰ According to Mansell celebrating the landing of the first fleet was tantamount to glorying 200 years of genocide. Although Harris supported Mansell's view on Aboriginal genocide and admired what he had achieved in the black community,¹⁰¹ both he and the National Conference of Congress were totally opposed to violence and any attempt to disrupt

⁹⁸ Its purpose was 'To organize the March for Justice, Freedom and Hope and to organize the activities associated with the March.' The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope Committee, Inc., was the body that is coordinated the March and rally in Sydney on the 26 January, 1988. Its President was the Rev Charles Harris, Vice President, Christopher Kirkbright, Secretary, Anne Gray, Treasurer, Kevin Cook, Committee Members: Judy Chester, Jean Pattel and Dorothy Harris.

⁹⁹ Itinerary of Events—Sydney, n.d., but Jan 1988, Box 14, UAICC, Folder 9, Miscellaneous correspondence/documents/pamphlets, Jan 85–Jan 88, UCA Assembly Archives; Minutes of the March for Justice Freedom and Hope Steering Committee, 1 December 1987, Box 14–UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 10 Agenda/Minutes/ reports of the Steering Committee, July 1987–January 1988, UCA Assembly Archives; Correspondence/Documents/Pamphlets, Jan 85–Jan 88, UCA Assembly Archives. Bondi Pavilion. 24/1/88. The theme for the occasion was 'Building Bridges' (i.e. Black and White people coming together to look beyond 1988 to set the tone for January 26, 1988. There were numerous Aboriginal Groups performing and a wide representation of prominent public speakers. Master of Ceremonies: Gary Foley and Peter Garrett. Prominent speakers included Patrick White (writer), Jim McClelland (Diamond Jim), Jo Vallentine (Senator), Peter Garrett (Midnight Oil), Jack Mundy (Trade Unionists) John Hawkes (Circus Oz), Bruce Petty (Cartoonists), Maureen Watson, Bobby Sykes, Faith Bandler, Barbara Armitage (Mayor of Waverley); Minutes of the March for Justice Freedom and Hope Steering Committee, 15 December 1987, Box 14–UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 10 Agenda/Minutes/ reports of the Steering Committee, July 1987–January 1988, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Gray to E. C. Harris, 20 August 1987; B. A. Clarke to Elizabeth Gray, 4 September 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence.

¹⁰¹ E. C. Harris to J. A. Handerg, 8 September 1987; B. A. Clarke to Elizabeth Gray, 4 September 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 1988, p. 37.

the official bicentennial celebrations.¹⁰² Harris was also aware of how easily media predictions of widespread violence could erode the broad public support for the March that he had so assiduously built up.¹⁰³ Throughout the planning for the March he and Congress never wavered in its insistence on holding a peaceful march. Each issue of 'March Update' emphasised a 'peaceful protest' and implored people to keep it such.¹⁰⁴ Harris was determined that the March would not reflect poorly on Aboriginal people and went to great efforts to prevent bickering among different Aboriginal groups just before the March. Harris wanted the March to change people's minds, bring about reconciliation between all Australians and witness to the distinctive contribution of Aboriginal Australia. In response to threats that groups of whites might try to disrupt the March, Harris was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as saying:

The Aborigines who will come to Sydney in January are really desperate to present to the world and Australia their situation in a non violent way....When the Aborigines arrive, we will have community leaders address them on what to do if confronted by violence.¹⁰⁵

Again on the day before the March, he reminded listeners at a Memorial Service at La Perouse that the March 'will definitely be a NON violent attempt to highlight to this nation and to the world the plight and predicament of the Aboriginal people as being less than migrants and immigrants in there [sic] own land.'¹⁰⁶

A key factor in ensuring that the March was peaceful was the relatively late decision just before Christmas in 1987 to issue a general invitation to non-Aboriginal supporters to participate in it.¹⁰⁷ While there were quite intense debates within the March Committee as to how visible whites should be in the March, almost from the beginning the Committee had welcomed non-Aboriginal people's participation provided they accepted Aboriginal control and direction. From Harris's involvement in the bicentennial task group he was aware that the March could be a powerful symbol of reconciliation for many people within the Uniting Church. An anonymous report titled 'The Attitudes of the U.C.A. & Congress in Relation to the Bicentennial' that was published as an appendix to the Minutes of the November 1987 National Committee of Congress clearly reflects Harris's and Congress's mind on non-Aboriginal involvement:

This march will be in Sydney on 26 January and will be one way of giving expression

¹⁰²Minutes of the March for Justice Freedom and Hope Steering Committee, 3 November 1987, Box 14–UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 10 Agenda/Minutes/ reports of the Steering Committee, July 1987–January 1988, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹⁰³J. A. Harding to E. C. Harris, 8 September 1987; B. A. Clarke to Elizabeth Gray, 4 September 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence; Denis O'Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁴March Update, [Issue No. 6], Box 14 The Bicentennial March–1988, Folder 2 March Updates, September 1987–March 1988.

¹⁰⁵*Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 December 1987, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶March Update, Aboriginal Memorial Service, 25 January 1988, Box 14 The Bicentennial March–1988, Folder 2 March Updates, September 1987–March 1988.

¹⁰⁷E. C. Harris, Media Release, 23 December 1987, Box 14, UAICC–The Bicentennial March, Folder 4, March Association Incorporation and Insurance, UCA Assembly Archives.

to the Assembly resolutions. It is a March organised by Aborigines, but for us all. The greatest sign we could gain from the Uniting Church that it does indeed stand with us is for you to join us. Let us act in solidarity to share in the March, hand in hand, side by side. If you are visibly and physically there we will be encouraged and strengthened.¹⁰⁸

Harris' Christmas 'wish' for all Australians to join in the March expressed his desire that the March might be instrumental in creating a new future for Australia. In a media release issued at this time, he wrote: 'There can be no greater promise of justice and freedom than our joining together in such a march, no greater sign of hope for Aboriginal people than your presence with us.'¹⁰⁹ Harris never ceased to reiterate that Congress was involved in a peaceful protest that would show to Australia and the rest of the world that there were black and white people in Australia who supported 'Freedom from racism, prejudice, and degradation; justice to right the wrongs...and hope for a bright future for Australia as a nation.' It was Harris's dream that at Australia's tercentenary all Australians would 'stand side by side as brothers and sisters, regardless of colour or creed.'¹¹⁰

The Day of the March

On the morning of 26 January an estimated 20,000 Aboriginal people gathered at Redfern Park in the inner suburbs of Sydney. To begin with there was a definite solemnity in the air. Aboriginal people carried banners declaring: '40,000 years of dreaming. 200 years of nightmare', 'White celebration for black desecration', 'Veterans of the 200 year war want justice and peace'. The marchers were like mourners and protestors at a wedding feast; their very presence an accusing finger wagging at the million-plus people who had come into the city that morning to participate in the bicentennial activities, especially to see the procession of Tall Ships into Sydney Harbour (effectively symbolising multiculturalism) and a re-enactment of the First Fleet (symbolising British origins). Kevin Carmody, an Aboriginal singer and songwriter, likened the marchers to 'black currants' in what he and many others considered a 'bitter birthday cake'. The seriousness of the occasion was expressed in terms that Charles Harris and Gary Foley from Redfern's Aboriginal Legal Service in Sydney described as a 'do or die' effort. The banner '1988: What's There to Celebrate?' stretched across the front of the dais erected in Hyde Park for a rally where marchers later that afternoon would gather said it all. The answer was self-evident; by almost every measure, Aboriginal people had very little to celebrate. The 26 January, Australia Day, was hardly cause for celebration; for many Indigenous Australians it represented 'invasion day'—conquest, repression, dispersal, and 200 years of dispossession.

Around midday the mood began to change. Marshalls explained the significance of the March

¹⁰⁸[E. C. Harris], 'The Attitudes of the U.C.A. & Congress in Relation to the Bicentennial', Appendix 4, Minutes of the National Committee Meeting of the UAICC, 13–14 November 1987, JOL R1030/154.

¹⁰⁹E. C. Harris, Media Release, 23 December 1987, Box 14, UAICC—The Bicentennial March, Folder 4, March Association Incorporation and Insurance, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹¹⁰E. C. Harris to J. A. Handerg, 8 September 1987, Box 14, UAICC, The Bicentennial March 1988, Folder 7, Correspondence.

and reinforced the importance of holding a peaceful and dignified protest. The marchers then started from Redfern Park along Chalmers Street, across Cleveland Street into Elizabeth Street and Eddy Avenue for Belmore Park near Central Station. This leg of the March was for Indigenous people only. It was led by Harris and members of the planning committee who were followed by tribal people from Central Australia carrying spears and wearing white ochre body paint and red-coloured head bands. The traditional people did not march but corroborated along the road to the rhythms of clap sticks and didgeridoos. 'It was a fantastic sight', Harris reflected afterwards, 'to see the traditional owners of this land corroborating through some of the main streets of Sydney.'¹¹¹ Their very presence seemed to engender strength and dignity in the other marchers.

The slogan 'We have survived' was the resounding theme of the March. It glared and blared from posters, placards and T-shirts. Taken from a protest song performed by Bart Willoughby's Aboriginal reggae band 'No Fixed Address', it captured the frustrations of the black community.¹¹²

We have survived the white man's world
 And the hurt and torment of it all
 We have survived the white man's world
 And you know you can't change that.

The slogan was also emblazoned on black, yellow and red Aboriginal flags which festooned the March. One large banner expanded on the theme of survival: 'We will not forget, we will not go away, we will not be silent, we will not die, we will fight and we will survive.' The March was a sign of a people's resilience, endurance and growing confidence in themselves and their cultural heritage. Alana Harris, an Aboriginal photographer at the March, captured the people's determination and dignity in her pictorial history, *Australia's Too Old to Celebrate Birthdays* (1988). She wrote in her introduction that the March not only drew attention to the Aboriginal land rights struggle and deaths in custody but it was also an opportunity to show non-Aboriginal people that their culture had survived. Anne von Bertouch, a voyager on the first-fleet re-enactment, wrote poignantly in her diary that one read into the message 'We have survived' the missing words '...in spite of everything'.¹¹³

Just before one o'clock the marchers entered Belmore Park where thousands of welcoming and respectful non-Aboriginal supporters had gathered to join the March. The supporters broke out in thunderous applause, clapping and cheering as the Aboriginal marchers wove their way into the already crowded park.¹¹⁴ The Aboriginal flag was held high and arms were raised in triumph. When the marchers halted, the tribal people sat in a group at the front of the Aboriginal marchers

¹¹¹ E. C. Harris, 'March for Justice, Freedom and Hope', [c. November 1989], Box 18 UAICC — Personnel Files, Folder 4, Charles Harris, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹¹² The slogan 'We Have Survived' became an unofficial anthem of black pride and resilience.

¹¹³ Anne von Bertouch, *The Voyage Out: The First Fleet Re-Enactment*, Newcastle, N.S.W., Hunnifords Lane Press, 1991, p. 293.

¹¹⁴ Annie Cossins, 'The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope on Invasion Day', *Scarlet Woman*, Issue 24, p. 19.

and performed traditional dances. By then the atmosphere was electric; there was scarcely a dry eye among the estimated 30,000 people present. Aboriginal broadcaster, Michael Bayles, captured the excitement of the moment in his continuous report of the March on Radio 88.9 Redfern: 'People in the streets were screaming and cheering...everyone was blown out by the non-Aboriginal support.'¹¹⁵ Mark Russell for the *Daily Telegraph* expressed a similar sentiment, 'It is so magnificent to see black and white Australians together in harmony.'¹¹⁶ Several observers noted that what began as a day of mourning and protest became a day of celebration. The journalist Wendy Bacon, observed that the 'voices of dissent' became tinier the closer one got to 'the glistening waters of Sydney Harbour'.¹¹⁷

After an hour of traditional dancing and more procedural announcements from the organisers, long, colourful columns of Indigenous and white supporters, men, women and children (some in prams flying the Aboriginal flag), marched peacefully yet triumphantly from Belmore Park along Elizabeth Street to the southern end of Hyde Park in the centre of the city. By the time the kilometre-long crowd arrived at Hyde Park the numbers had swollen to near 40,000 people.¹¹⁸ Hyde Park was a sea of red, yellow and black. Some people climbed trees to watch tribal Aboriginal people perform more traditional dances and to listen to the speeches. Indigenous leaders from around Canada, Japan, the Philippines and elsewhere were welcomed and expressed their solidarity with Aboriginal people. The whole event was a triumphant symbol of reconciliation. From the dais erected in Hyde Park Charles Harris offered a prayer of thanks to the 'God of the Dreaming' for being with Aboriginal people both in the past and the present, Galarwuy Yunipingu, Chairman of the Northern Lands Council, announced that it was biggest crowd 'ever seen to mourn the injustice of the past', and Gary Foley, looking out on the black and white faces in the crowd standing together in a show of unity said, 'This is what Australia could be like.'¹¹⁹ On Radio Redfern, Mick Byles the following week concurred, 'It was a 'good black day'.¹²⁰

The Significance of the March

The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope was the focus of the largest gathering of Indigenous people ever in Australia and arguably the centrepiece of Aboriginal protest during the bicentennial year. The March had taken three years to plan and organise and was by far the most exciting and successful event staged by Aboriginal people during the Bicentenary. For weeks, months and years afterwards Aboriginal and Islander people spoke with pride and feeling about the March. Even today, over twenty years later, people are watery eyed when they talk about it. There are still strong feelings.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Annie Cossins, 'The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope on Invasion Day', *Scarlet Woman*, Issue 24, p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Mark Russell, '20,000 protesters in peaceful march', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 January 1988, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ Wendy Bacon, 'Voices of Dissent around Sydney Harbour', in *Aboriginal Perspectives of the Bicentenary. A collection of papers*, ACT Schools Authority, 1988, p. 28.

¹¹⁸ The number of those present range from 10,000 to 50,000.

¹¹⁹ Denis O'Brien, *The Bicentennial Affair*, p. 4; Ken Brass, 'A march of mourning ends with rejoicing', *Australian*, 27 January 1988, p. 10; Annie Cossins, 'The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope on Invasion Day', *Scarlet Woman*, Issue 24, p. 19.

¹²⁰ *88.9 Radio Redfern* [videorecording], Film Australia Video, [1988].

But what did the March achieve? What is its significance? Historians are generally wary about overestimating the significance of a single event in history. It is dangerous to speak glibly about ‘watersheds’ and ‘turning points’ but it is clear even at this near point in time that the March was not ephemeral; it did have a profound impact upon Aboriginal and Islander people. First of all, the March represented a moving and dignified statement of protest and survival not easily forgotten by those who were present. The coming together of so many people from widely disparate groups—Koori, Murri, Nyungar, Yolngu, Anmngu and so on—in an impressive show of unity demonstrated to Australia and to the rest of the world the enduring strength of the Indigenous people of Australia against almost over-whelming adversity. The March was visible proof that black history had not been forgotten and that black culture was alive. The black marchers had gloried in their Aboriginality. Aboriginal and Islander people refused to be treated as migrants and immigrants. Nor would they be muted by the dominant discourse inherent in multiculturalism.¹²¹ In the week following the March, excited Aboriginal callers rang into Radio Redfern to say that the March had proved to Australians and the world that they had survived. For Aboriginal and Islander people the March was a powerful symbol of survival against the odds. Gerry Hand, the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Hawke Government (1983–1991) writing on the first anniversary after the March, also clearly perceived ‘survival’ as a, if not the prominent theme in the March. He described it as ‘probably one of the most successful events of the bicentenary year ... a magnificent show of Aboriginal unity and strength, a demonstration of Aboriginal survival to the rest of the world.’¹²²

Secondly, the March brought Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together in a powerful statement of unity and solidarity. To many Aboriginal people it was an almost unbelievable experience to receive the support of so many non-Aboriginal people. The presence and public affirmation by thousands of white supporters lifted the mood of the marchers from mourning and protest to one of celebration. In the solidarity and unity of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people there was an overwhelming sense that Aboriginal and Islander people had a future to celebrate. Harris’s Christmas wish was granted. For many people in the Uniting Church who had decided to stand alongside Congress and not to participate in the Bicentenary, their presence at the March heralded the possibility of that new future and a softening of mainstream attitudes towards questions concerning the Aboriginal ownership of land.¹²³

Finally, the March propelled Charles Harris into the national and international spotlight and promoted the fledgling Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress as one of the leading Aboriginal and Islander organisations in the country. Harris had been the one most responsible for the success of the March. He had organised it so that it was peaceful, disciplined, and determined.

¹²¹Peter Cochrane and David Goodman, ‘The great Australian journey: cultural logic and nationalism in the postmodern era’, in *Celebrating the Nation: A critical study of Australia’s Bicentenary*, ed. Tony Bennett, Pat Buckridge, David Carter and Colin Mercer, St Leonards, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin, 1992, p. 178.

¹²²Statement by Gerry Hand, M.P., Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, 23 December 1987., Box 14, UAICC, Folder 9, Miscellaneous correspondence/documents/pamphlets, Jan 85–Jan 88, UCA Assembly Archives.

¹²³See Cochrane and Goodman, ‘The great Australian journey’, p. 177.

He had also gone to considerable efforts to gain the support of both black and white communities. Throughout the planning of the March Harris grew as a national leader, becoming more self-assured and purposeful. The March for Harris was a symbol of what Aboriginal and Islander people could do together in their common struggle. He openly admitted that the March had political objectives, but his primary objective was to offer Aboriginal communities new hope and a new future.¹²⁴ The March he organised and led will go down in history as one of the most significant Aboriginal statements ever made to the Australian nation. Like Martin Luther King Jr, like his mentor Pastor Don Brady the 'fighting parson' and Aboriginal leader from Queensland, Harris' vision was: 'let my people go free.'

¹²⁴E. C. Harris, General letter to friends, 1 September 1987, Box 14 The Bicentennial March — 1988, Folder 12 Duplicates of correspondence, UCA Assembly Archives.