



Making a statement to support Treaty process with Victorian First Peoples

August 2024

Modern Australian history is built on colonial conquest. The historical ripples of that conquest are still felt in Australia today, especially by First Nations Peoples. First Nations People, on average, remain disadvantaged in Australia.

None of us alive today took part in that period of conquest. However, we have the opportunity to work towards correcting the historical injustice. Treaties with First Nations Peoples are a crucial mechanism by which we can build on efforts to correct the historical injustice of the colonial period.

Correcting an injustice or making reparations for harm that has occurred in the immediate past is much simpler than addressing a historical injustice where those who caused the original injustice and those who were immediately impacted by it are all long dead. Such efforts to put things right move from individual compensation to seeking a socially just society for everyone.

As far back as 1988, the National Assembly meeting of delegates from congregations across all of Australia adopted a resolution that committed the Uniting Church:

To support efforts to work beyond the concept of the compact proposed by the Australian Government towards a form of treaty that is an enforceable agreement obtained through formal and full negotiations between Aboriginal political structures and those of the wider Australian community, an agreement which Aboriginal people can use to protect their interests.

The National Assembly and Synod meetings in 2000 and the 2019 Synod meeting expressed support for treaties with Australia's First Nations Peoples.

Victorian Treaty Process

In August 2018, with bipartisan support, the Victorian Parliament enacted the *Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018*. This historic legislation paved the way for forming the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. The First Peoples' Assembly comprises 32 Traditional Owners of Victoria to ensure it represents the state's diversity. Each of the formally recognised Traditional Owner groups is allocated one seat, with the remaining 21 being democratically elected seats split across six regions.

The legislation purposefully does not specify who the treaty will be with or the areas that will be included within it. The silence on these issues allows for self-determination so the groups that want a treaty can negotiate for themselves. The approach means there is scope for more than one treaty to be negotiated.

The Victorian treaty process is unique in Australia. It is currently leading the country as proof that a pathway toward addressing the unfinished business of tackling the colonial past is possible. It will not require a referendum to ratify any final treaties that are negotiated.

In July 2024, the First Peoples Assembly opened Treaty negotiations with the Victorian Government.

Background and details on the First Peoples Assembly and the treaty process can be found on their website <https://www.firstpeoplesvic.org/>

Pledging support for the Treaty process

The First Peoples Assembly is inviting organisations to make a statement in support of the Treaty process in Victoria, to demonstrate to the Victorian Government that many Victorians support the Treaty process. Their preferred text for the statement is:



We, [Insert Congregation name] Uniting Church are proud to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands where we do our ministry and mission across Victoria. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and remember that sovereignty was never ceded.

As a congregation firmly committed to advancing social justice and equality, we want to play our part in righting the wrongs of the past and be part of creating a better future together.

With profound respect for the sovereignty, culture, and rights of First Peoples, we are pleased to announce that we will walk with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria on the journey to Treaty.

We recognise that when it comes to First Peoples communities, cultures and lands, the experts are of course First Peoples.

The past cannot be changed, but we can choose to take steps today that will help heal the ongoing pain caused by the injustices of yesterday.

We believe a better tomorrow is possible and our congregation pledges our unwavering support to the First Peoples' Treaty process in Victoria.

To help build support for the shared journey to Treaty, we will:

- *[Insert commitments]*

By making this pledge, we affirm our commitment to the self-determination of First Peoples in Victoria as they assert their rights, tell their truths, and chart a path towards, and healing through, Treaty-making.

Together, we will create a future where First Peoples' voices are heard, rights are respected, and justice is realised for generations to come.

The statement by the congregation has a section where the congregation can commit to doing certain things. Suggestions from the JIM Cluster on what could be included are:

- Provide advocacy support to the First Peoples' Assembly in support of the Treaty process;
- Continue to provide information to congregation members about the Treaty process and its importance to First Peoples;
- Seek to build meaningful relationships with the local Traditional Owners;
- Acknowledge Country in services and meetings; and,
- Partner with other churches and organisations, as appropriate, to foster the Victorian community's acceptance and embrace of the Treaty process.

An electronic version of the above pledge can be sent to you if you e-mail mark.zirnsak@victas.uca.org.au

If your congregation makes a pledge in support of the Treaty process, please e-mail a copy to mark.zirnsak@victas.uca.org.au or post it to:

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Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia
Centre for Theology and Ministry
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