



# Synod submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission – Summary

## Introduction

The Yoorrook Justice Commission was an independent formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria. It was set up by agreement between the Victorian Government and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the independent and democratically elected body established to represent Traditional Owners of Country and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission was led by five Commissioners, of whom four were First Peoples. The Commission's final report to the Victorian Government was tabled in Victorian Parliament on 1 July 2025.

In February-March 2024, the Commission invited the Synod to provide a written response to questions on the topic of "land injustice". A written submission was provided to the Commission in the lead up to a public hearing involving the Uniting, Anglican and Catholic Churches on 1 May 2024.

The following sheet is a summary of the Synod's response to the questions from the Commission. The full submission can be found on the Commission's website at <https://www.yoorrook.org.au/hearings/public-hearings-29-april-3-may-2024>

## Synod Submission to Yoorrook

### General engagement with First Peoples

The Synod's submission outlined how in 1994 the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia entered into a covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress "so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ."

From the mid-1980s, the main focus of the Uniting Church in responding to issues of justice for First Peoples has been the relationship and covenant with the Congress, with a desire that issues of justice for First Peoples be understood through First Peoples' voices. The Covenanting Statement between the Uniting Church in Australia and Congress included recognition that there are many injustices faced by First Peoples, including land injustice, cultural and spiritual disenfranchisement, disproportionate incarceration rates and deaths in custody, and inequalities in housing, health, education, and employment opportunities. The submission outlined how the Synod had supported and funded, and continues to support and fund, initiatives targeted at addressing these multi-faceted injustices.



The submission provided a brief history of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in Australia. It also provided a history of the operations of the Victorian Congress and Narana Creations (a project of the Victorian Congress) from 1996 onwards.

### **Involvement in missions**

A brief history was provided of the missions associated with the precursor denominations of the Uniting Church that were set up in Victoria during the mid-1800s. These were Buntingdale Mission at Birregurra (1839-1848), Ebenezer (1858-1903), Ramahyuck (1862-1903) and Coranderrk (1863-1924).

### **Property grants/ownership in Victoria**

The Yoorrook Justice Commission asked about the number, size and value of the Synod's churches and associated land holdings in Victoria at various points from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. At the time of writing the submission, the Synod had 504 church buildings in Victoria with an additional 1,041 land holdings including significant holdings such as aged care facilities operated by Uniting AgeWell.

The Commission also asked the Synod to outline what land grants had been made by the colonial authorities in Victoria between 1836 and 1870 to the churches that later made up the Uniting Church, before the practice of making such land grants ceased. The Synod provided the information that was able to be collated at the time of the submission. The Synod Trusts team continued to undertake research and was later able to inform the Commission that the Synod has identified 127 properties currently held by the Church for which land was granted by the Crown in this manner, besides properties which have previously been sold.

The submission also outlined the provision of properties made by the Synod to First Peoples in Victoria. In 1982, the Synod established a property transfer or purchase programme with a target of \$750,000 worth of property transfers or purchases for the benefit of First Peoples by 1985. By 1987, there had been six transfers or purchases of property for the benefit of First Peoples organisations. The total value of the transfers was approximately \$500,000. One of these was a property in Echuca, which continues to operate as the Berrimba Childcare Centre under the Njernda Aboriginal Corporation.

### **Financial contributions to Congress**

The Synod of Victoria provided \$2.7 million in payments to the Congress and other First Peoples' bodies between 1989 and 1994. In 1996, the Synod provided \$325,000 to acquire a property at Minajalku (Thornbury) for an ecumenical centre in Northcote under the control of Congress. Further, \$481,000 was provided to support the appointment of a Victorian State Congress co-ordinator for three years, appoint and train First People leaders in the synods of Victoria and the Northern Territory, and assist Nungalinya College, Darwin, with education for ministry and leadership.



From 2001 to 2023, the Synod provided \$9 million as grant payments for the mission and ministry of Congress in Victoria. The Minajalku Centre was sold by Congress Victorian Oversight Committee in 2023 for \$3.6 million, which is now used to generate income to support the work of Congress in Victoria.

## **Advocacy work with and for First Peoples**

The submission outlined what advocacy and campaigning actions the Synod had undertaken in support of Treaties and to address injustices that continue to be experienced by First Peoples. As far back as 1987, the Synod resolved that:

*The Australian Government be requested to establish in 1988 effective processes involving Aboriginal people which are designed to lead to a treaty which recognizes prior Aboriginal ownership of Australian land, and which will begin to address the continued dispossession and needs of Australian Aboriginal people.*

At the request of the Commission, the submission outlined the statements made by the Uniting Church National Assembly and Synod regarding the injustices inflicted on First Peoples and opposing systemic racism.

## **Conclusion**

The submission concluded with the statement that the Synod's approach to reconciliation and redress revolves around a commitment to substantive justice to be achieved through the lens of First Peoples' self-determination, and its commitment to support for the Treaty process within Victoria.

More information regarding the Synod's engagement with the Yoorrook Justice Commission is available by contacting: [Synod@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:Synod@victas.uca.org.au)

If you are interested in learning more about Covenanting visit: <https://victas.uca.org.au/resources/covenanting/>