

Ancient wisdom weaving today's wonder

Written by Brooke Prentis

Brooke Prentis gave the Closing Address at the UnitingWomen Conference in Brisbane from 27-30 September. Brooke is Common Grace's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Team's Spokesperson. She is a descendant of the Waka Waka people, an activist for indigenous rights, a Christian pastor, and an accountant.



My name is Brooke Prentis. I come from a long line of strong Aboriginal women.

My Aboriginality comes right through my maternal lines – my Mum, to my Mum's Mum, my Nan, to my Nan's mum, my Great Grandmother. We are Williams' from Waka Waka country.

The times I get to be on my country are sacred.

On my country I look out across the mountains, the Bunya Pines, and the native grasslands. I listen to Eastern Whip Birds, Green Catbirds, and Kookaburras. And as I wait at sunrise, for the sun to peek its head above the horizon, I remember rightly of the Creator. I stand there on country. The country of my ancestors. The country where over 65,000 years of footprints, from my family have been left. The country with over 2,000 generations of story, my family's story. The country that has had the presence of Creator Spirit since time immemorial. My country.

I listen deeply. I've always known that one listens with their whole body – ears, eyes, heart, mind, and spirit.

This is the ancient Aboriginal practice of 'dadirri'. As Aunty Miriam-Rose says:

"Dadirri is also used as a prayer, a prayer in the sense of you just feel the presence of the Great Creator. Aboriginal peoples have lived for thousands of years with Nature's quietness. My people today, recognise and experience in this quietness, the great Life-Giving Spirit, the Father of us all."

Aunty Miriam-Rose

As I stand on my country I can hear the beat of the clapsticks as though in rhythm with my creation, my being.

I can see the songs of creation.

I can feel the stamping of feet so softly in dance on creation.

I remember rightly of the Sun – the giver of life. I am reminded all things are connected. I feel free.

Free from racism, free from sexism, free from the ever present glass ceiling. Free from injustice, free from lack of respect, lack of dignity, and lack of honour. Free from these things I experience in society and within the Australian church.

I hear the call from Creator God, and as I stand on the mountains, beside the living rocks – I listen to God sing to me through the wind rustling through the 200 year old Grasstrees in a beautiful symphony like a Psalm, and Creator speaks like Aboriginal Elders that say, “Care for country and country will care for you.”

As Creator says in Psalm 78 (Psalm 78:1 – 4) (NIV)

1 My people, hear my teaching;

listen to the words of my mouth.

2 I will open my mouth with a parable;

I will utter hidden things, things from of old—

3 things we have heard and known,

things our ancestors have told us.

4 We will not hide them from their descendants;

we will tell the next generation

the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,

his power, and the wonders he has done.

Ancient wisdom given to over 300 nations of Aboriginal peoples, from the Creator, since time immemorial.

We think of the 2018 NAIDOC Week theme. This year’s NAIDOC Week Theme was important.

“Because of her, we can!” It was important as we heard the wisdom of Aboriginal women. It was important because we not only had the opportunity to celebrate our Aboriginal women, but also to acknowledge, recognise, and honour a part of our society that our Aboriginal men often describe as the backbone of our communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have contributed to the fabric of this land we now call Australia – to our families, our communities, our nation, and our churches. Sadly that contribution has often gone unacknowledged.

One Aboriginal woman I learnt about this NAIDOC Week was Barangaroo.

I have told the story of Bennelong for many years now, and I encourage you if you haven’t watched the SBS Series, First Australians, which is free online, then do it. It is compulsory viewing for every person who calls Australia home. You might even consider watching it in a small group or bible study as some members of Newtown Mission in Sydney have recently done.

Barangaroo was the wife of Bennelong. Bennelong was a Wangal man, of the Eora nation, taken prisoner by Arthur Phillip so that Bennelong could teach him about the Eora nations language, economies, families, and society. Barangaroo was a Cammeraygal woman from the Eora nation, part of the Eora fisherwomen. There are many stories of the Eora fisherwoman in their black wood canoes, Nawi, paddling in unison, singing, talking, laughing. They were hunters and providers for their community, clan, nation.

Barangaroo is described as independent and strong, a leader in her own right. MP Linda Burney describes Barangaroo as “a heroine of the Australian story. She was a woman of first nations, who saw what life was like before colonisation and survived.” She was a steward who maintained the lore of the Creator to live sustainably

and, unlike the colonisers, would only ever catch enough fish for her people's immediate needs. It is documented that she witnessed the colonisers catch 4,000 salmon which was far more than any of the colonisers and the Aboriginal peoples could possibly eat and she was outraged. She also maintained culture, dignity, and her role in community when in going to the Governor's house she walked in in her cultural dress which meant wearing nothing but being painted up. They asked her, "Where are your clothes? You can't come in." Barangaroo said, "This is my dress" and walked straight past them with her head held high and she sat at their table.

We acknowledge her Christ-likeness when she intervened when a convict was being flogged by British soldiers for stealing fishing gear from her clan.

When we think about the change that Barangaroo had to face we can only think in admiration and awe about how she maintained culture and womanhood through dignity and leadership.

Barangaroo was part of womanhood, sisterhood, family, community. Aunty Millie Ingram reminds us that "we are reminded through Barangaroo's story passed down through the generations, and generations, that Aboriginal woman have fought that same fight right up until today and we're still doing it and Barangaroo's our legacy, she's the one that we learn from."

NAIDOC Week this year we got to acknowledge so many Aboriginal women. I had an overwhelming emotion of being so grateful for those Aboriginal women who have gone before me and who fought (and continue to fight) for justice, equality, and freedom – within society and within the church. I am overwhelmed by their humbleness, Christ-like humbleness. In an acknowledgement of country when we pay our respects to the Elders past, present, and future, this is who I think of – we are thanking them for their love and struggle.

There are many Aboriginal Christian women from all over this land we now call Australia who have changed my life – who have taught me about culture, language, art, theology, and how to faithfully follow Jesus through many trials and tribulations. There is Aunty Faye Gundy who lives in north Brisbane and was the Aboriginal worker when I was in High School and who taught me about identity, culture, and pride. Aunty Mary-Ann Coconut who lives in Napranum in Western Cape York who was the first Aunty I heard sing hymns in language. Aunty Rose Rigney who is from Raukkan in South Australia who is a great prayer warrior. And there are many many others.

In my NAIDOC Sermon I especially recognised two Aboriginal Christian women who have been instrumental in me standing here today. Aunty Jean Phillips and Aunty Rev Denise Champion. I acknowledge them here today and the roles they have played in the Uniting Church.

I don't want all these Aboriginal women's stories to be forgotten, I want the Australian church to know and value these prayer warriors, these social justice warriors, these theologians, these pastors.

It is up to us the next generation, and you, our non-Indigenous sisters from many different cultures, to follow in these Aboriginal Christian women leaders footsteps. Footsteps they have left as they pick up their cross and follow Jesus. May God give us the wisdom, strength, and courage to change Australia for the better as these women have done and will continue to do.

Some of you have heard me say, this Australia is broken, in chaos, and in a mess. As Aboriginal people we feel it under our feet as we walk this land. We see it on our skin as we see the scars and cuts bleeding from racism. We hear it in our ears as we hear the screams of poverty and systems that are unjust and need dismantling. We weep it through tears of grief, loss, and trauma. As women, we can play a key role in weaving a new tapestry of Australia – the Australia I dream of – one built on truth, justice, love and hope.



To You – to Aunty, to Nan, to Sister, to Daughter, to niece, to cousin.

To Barangaroo to Trugininni, to Pearl Gibbs, to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, to Mum Shirl, to Aunty Jean Phillips, to Aunty Rev Denise Champion, to Brooke Prentis, to Deirdre Palmer, to Aunty Yaritji Heffernan, to Danica Patselis, to Aunty Maria Anderson-Tanner, to Catherine Solomon, to Aunty Di Torrens, to Alison Cox, to Joya Waia, to Julie McCrossin, to Justine Gawinygawiny, to Katrina Woodrow, to Jill Braeden, to Jemma Whittaker, to Shaliece Farmer, to Lote Tomane, to Keena Djandjomerr, to Jasmine Cox, to Zion Pitt, to Abigail Neuendorff. To the new lives, the next generation, growing inside some of our women here today – to the future generations yet to come.

To all of you. Look beside you. Both sides.

To your sister, to your neighbour.

In Colossians 2 in The Message it says

“I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God’s great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else.”

Here at Uniting Women, our stories have collided into that tapestry, the Creator’s tapestry. In the last few years the tapestry has grown from Eora nation, to Kurna nation, to now here on Yuggera, Jagera, and Turrabul nations, here in Meanjin, the place now called Brisbane. And whilst we stand on concrete and bitumen, and we are deafened by the noise of the city, we know we stand on country here in Kurilpa – the place of the water rat, we look out to Maiwar, the Brisbane River, we see the story of Biame, the Rainbow Serpent, the Creator, we look to the west and see Mt Coot-ha, the place of Kuta, the native honey bee – and we realise we have much work to do.

Our tapestry of love, of sisterhood, of followers of Jesus – travels back with us as we return to the places we now live. Sacred country. Ancient country. One does not have to travel to be on country. My hope is you return with the yearning to learn of the first peoples of the land on which you live to embrace their ancient wisdom, to stitch the next part of the tapestry to embrace today’s wonder.

The Creator has taken these ancient threads and new threads and is weaving a tapestry called Australia.

As Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, from the Ngarrindjeri peoples, who comes from over 2,000 generations of weavers, says,

“Stitch by stich, circle by circle, weaving is like the creation of life, all things are connected.”



As we stretch out our hand with our needle and thread, and as you encourage each sister around you to pick up their needle and thread, we weave together ancient wisdom to create today's wonder. We weave together as women, Love and Leadership, Strength and Solidarity, Friendship and Faith, Beauty and Bravery, Kindness and Kingdom, Humanity and Hope.

Together, across cultures, across congregations, across this movement that is the Uniting Church - we are **WEAVING WISDOM AND WONDER.**

Let us stand together.

A blessing in the words of Aunty Betty Pike:

May you always stand as tall as a tree,

Be as strong as the rock Uluru,

As gentle and still as the morning mist,

Hold the warmth of the campfire in your heart,

And may the Creator Spirit, Lord God, Papa Jesus, always walk with you and walk with us.

Amen.

Thank you.