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# AN EMERGING PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

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Australia's introduction of self-determination policy under the Whitlam Government in 1973 is often portrayed as the end of both the 'assimilation era' and 'mission era'. Yet Christian missionaries, while holding various views about the Whitlam Government's policy, also formulated and instituted their own visions of self-determination for Aboriginal people over the 1960s and 1970s. In many cases, the key planks of what became known as the self-determination policy (e.g. forms of Aboriginal representation and self-governance, Aboriginal-controlled industries and mother-tongue education) were present or developing on Christian missions before the 1970s. Focusing on discussions at the Northern Territory's Missions Administration conferences and drawing on the mission archives, this chapter tracks the missions' shift over the 1960s and early 1970s from assimilation to self-determination.

Elsewhere, I have explored the changing approaches of Anglican missionaries to assimilation in the 1960s, arguing that change was forced upon them by financial and political circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The assimilation program on missions was becoming financially, politically and intellectually unviable by the mid-1960s. In this chapter I focus on the

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1 Rademaker, "Only Cuppa Tea"; Rademaker, *Found.*

intellectual bases of the missions' innovations, arguing that the seeds of a Christian self-determination were present within the Protestant missionary conceptions of assimilation as these included the establishment of an 'Indigenous church'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than a revolution in missionary theory and practice, I find a gradual shift in emphasis on the question of how the 'Indigenous church' would be realised.

This chapter also brings 'secular' and 'spiritual' visions of self-determination together, placing the missionaries' visions for self-determination in their wider context, but also revealing the ways in which missionaries' distinctly Christian missiologies of self-determination flowed into 'secular' spaces. Most research into Aboriginal self-determination has neglected mission histories; however, there are exceptions. Miranda Johnson noted the Australian Council of Churches' calls in the early 1970s for Aboriginal land rights and argued that the churches considered self-determination and Aboriginal land rights more as spiritual than economic concerns.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the missions, Noel Loos argued there was a gradual shift in approach of the Australian Board of Missions over the 1960s and a devolution of responsibilities for Aboriginal communities to governments in Queensland. In 1967, its new policy 'Acceptance: The Next Step Forward' envisaged cultural pluralism.<sup>4</sup> John Kadiba, in his study of the Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM), argued that missionaries deemed their traditional 'Indigenous church' principle impossible in Arnhem Land until the 1970s due to their concerns to achieve assimilation.<sup>5</sup>

In the Northern Territory, Christian missions were the Australian Government's agent for implementing a policy of assimilating Aboriginal people into white Australia. According to the Director of Welfare, Harry Giese, this partnership between Christian missions and government was special and 'unique in the world'.<sup>6</sup> Missions were almost entirely dependent on governments for financial support and selectively engaged with various funding schemes. The missions received an annual government subsidy.

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2 The Catholic missions did not subscribe to this theory of mission, due to their different ecclesiology. Following the *Nostra Aetate* Declaration of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, they too made moves towards celebrating Aboriginal cultures and promoting Aboriginal leadership. *Nostra Aetate's* teaching on the good in all cultures enabled what became known as 'incarnating' and 'inculturating' the liturgy. While taking a different theological route, the Catholic missions reached similar practical conclusions to the Protestants. See Rademaker, 'Going Native'.

3 Johnson, *The Land*, 52.

4 Loos, *White Christ*, 139.

5 Kadiba, 'The Methodist Mission', 214.

6 Northern Territory Archives Centre, Northern Territory Records Series (hereafter NTRS) 53, box 3.

From 1942, Child Endowment payments were made available by the Commonwealth for children in institutions, so missions with dormitories began receiving 10 shillings per week per child in their care (the MOM's rejection of dormitories, therefore, came at a considerable financial cost). Over the course of the 1950s, there was heavy investment by the Northern Territory Administration's Welfare Branch in the development of missions. Missions were eligible for capital grants that covered the costs of purchasing livestock, equipment, buildings and vehicles (although the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart refused capital grants, believing these entangled church and state). The Welfare Branch also covered the costs of individual mission staff in particular roles. The range of government subsidies for missionary staff expanded over the 1950s, from covering only teachers and nurses in 1951 to many other roles by the 1960s, including agriculturalists, mechanics and hygiene assistants. Missions then pooled the funds from their subsidised positions to cover the costs of unsubsidised roles, particularly their chaplains.

The first Missions Administration Conference was held in 1948. From 1953 they were held biennially and hosted by the Welfare Branch with representatives from various mission societies and government departments working in the Territory. By 1961, government delegates present included representatives from the departments of Social Services, Civil Aviation and Health, the Crown Law Office and Welfare Branch (including Harry Giese and Jeremy Long).<sup>7</sup> On the mission side, delegates represented the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Catholic Diocese of Darwin, the Church of England Diocese of Carpentaria, Church Missionary Society (CMS), Aborigines Inland Mission, MOM, Baptist Union Home Mission and Finke River Mission of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>8</sup> At the conferences, delegates discussed overarching Aboriginal policy, mission funding and responsibilities as well as questions around Aboriginal employment, industry and education. These biennial gatherings were the primary site for discussion across mission organisations as well as for airing missions' concerns to government; the conference was, in Lutheran missionary Paul Albrecht's words, 'one of the best venues for a round the table type discussion of the differences' between missions and the Welfare Branch on 'the whole question of helping Aborigines find their place in the Australia of today'.<sup>9</sup>

7 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) F1, 1959/3380.

8 NAA F1, 1959/3380.

9 Paul Albrecht to Harry Giese, 17 May 1971, NTRS 56, box 7.

## Aboriginal choice and hasty assimilation

Missionaries often expressed frustration at the vagueness of government policy around assimilation and what it meant for the long-term prospects of the communities in which they operated. After consulting the MOM, the CMS's Acting Secretary for Aborigines, Bishop Clive Kerle, wrote to Giese with what would seem basic questions about the policy for clarification at the 1961 conference: 'what is the Government policy concerning the future of the mission stations?' and 'where in their plan for assimilation does the Missions fit?'<sup>10</sup>

The answer caused a stir. At the 1961 conference, Paul Hasluck presented a paper informing missionaries that their days were numbered. Although missions had always presumed that in the distant future they would withdraw and hand their authority to Aboriginal people, mission representatives were shocked when Hasluck suggested this might happen in only 20 years time (although Hasluck anticipated that the final 'completing of assimilation' would take 'two generations' or 60 years). Hasluck stated that missions and settlements should 'work ourselves out of a job' because their objectives were to 'help [Aboriginal people] become self-respecting and self-supporting members of the Australian community, living and working wherever they choose to live and work'.<sup>11</sup>

Missionaries had long expressed concern over the 'pace' of assimilation. Hasty assimilation, they argued, was against the wishes of Aboriginal people themselves, so could never create the self-standing citizens for which it supposedly aimed. If assimilation were to enable Aboriginal people to become 'responsible' citizens, rather than 'pauperised' persons, missionaries argued, then surely the desire to change must come from Aboriginal people themselves. In 1953, the MOM's Arthur Ellemor was already raising concerns that assimilation would be impossible because Aboriginal people did not want to assimilate.<sup>12</sup> Again, in 1955, he called for missions to have 'much more discussion with the Aborigines concerning their own future'.<sup>13</sup> The fear that assimilation might be 'forced' mirrored missionaries' fears that they might be forcing Christian conversion and that, consequently, Aboriginal expressions of

10 Clive Kerle to Harry Giese, 10 July 1961, NAA F1, 1959/3380.

11 Hasluck, 'The Future', 6.

12 NAA A452, 1955/368 Part 1.

13 NAA F1, 1954/1025.

faith were inauthentic.<sup>14</sup> The question of Aboriginal choice (especially for evangelicals) was a sensitive issue. In 1959, the conference resolved that it ‘refutes any suggestion that compulsion is exerted upon aborigines on missions to enforce acceptance of Christianity’ and that the missions sought ‘voluntary acceptance of Christianity’.<sup>15</sup> Through the 1950s and early 1960s, missions continued to assert that, although assimilation was merely a temporary phase, it should be a slow, almost imperceptible process that moved at a pace of Aboriginal people’s own choosing. At the 1953 conference, for example, Catholic Bishop O’Loughlin anticipated that missions might even continue for another century.<sup>16</sup>

Hasluck’s 1961 announcement of an accelerated timeframe was therefore especially concerning. In response, F. H. Leske from the Finke River mission, commented that even 60 years was ‘optimistic’. Paul Albrecht also thought that ‘things are getting pushed rather fast’ and that ‘if you push the process of assimilation too quickly ... people may revert to their primitive way of life’. To prevent a ‘throwback’, a degree of autonomy must be given to Aboriginal people and ‘take it at the pace which the people themselves develop’; that is, assimilation depended on a kind of autonomy. Laurie Reece of the Warrabri mission argued for Aboriginal people to be ‘given a sense of responsibility and a part in [their] own destiny’, and Leske queried ‘whether aborigines had any say in their destiny’. Ted Milliken, the Northern Territory Administration’s representative, responded that, ‘if free choice were there, the result would be extinction’; at this stage, missionaries were more concerned than the administration about the degree to which Aboriginal people were conceded ‘choice’.<sup>17</sup> By 1963, in a paper circulated among both Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries, Stuart Fowler of the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) concluded that assimilation was impossible to impose externally but could occur only through social forces from within a community.<sup>18</sup>

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14 Rademaker, “Only Cuppa Tea”.

15 NAA F1, 1959/3380.

16 NAA A452, 1955/368 Part 1.

17 NAA F1, 1961/2151.

18 Fowler, ‘Apostolic’.

## The crisis of assimilation on missions

Given these concerns about Aboriginal ‘choice’ and the realisation that missions’ existing relationship with and support from governments would not continue forever, the question of withdrawing from the Northern Territory became a pressing concern for missions in the early 1960s.

Missionaries knew that the assimilation program was becoming unviable, as the scope of activities required on missions in pursuit of assimilation increased. Assimilation required not only schoolteachers and nurses, but now also builders, home management instructors, hygiene workers and preschool teachers. Though these positions were increasingly subsidised by governments, missions struggled to find recruits. With drastic changes in Australians’ religious participation and practice in the 1960s, missionary societies were facing difficulties attracting not only donations but also new missionary staff.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, missionaries who had been drawn to their vocation for spiritual and evangelistic reasons found themselves overwhelmed by the administrative and practical concerns of running a small community. They often became disillusioned with the day-to-day work of assimilation and frustrated by the seeming lack of spiritual fruit. Aboriginal people, so far as many could see, were not interested in assimilating, nor were they converting to Christianity in the numbers hoped. As one missionary wrote in 1964, ‘there is little evidence of any “break through” and, as far as I can see, not much sign of an Indigenous Church’.<sup>20</sup> Worse still, some suspected that their approaches were actively harming Aboriginal societies by undermining Aboriginal communities’ own existing authority structures.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, although the government was increasing the breadth of subsidies available, these did not match the increasing costs of assimilation, nor growing demands from Aboriginal people to manage their own money. When Aboriginal people insisted that they be paid pensions (available from 1959) and Child Endowment directly and in cash, missions acknowledged that Aboriginal people’s money could not be withheld for much longer. Some gave in to this demand. The CMS Roper River mission, for instance, began paying all subsidies, endowments and pensions to Aboriginal people in 1966. But without that income,

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19 Cole, *A History*, 31.

20 Mitchell Library (hereafter ML) MSS 6040/6.

21 Albrecht, ‘The Finke River Mission’, 10.

the mission could not survive; all but its 'spiritual ministry' was handed over to Welfare Branch in 1968.<sup>22</sup> As missions made greater moves to Aboriginal responsibility (understood as achieving the objectives of assimilation), these moves undercut their ability to continue assimilatory policies. Therefore, assimilation through missions, at least as envisaged at the time, seemed a social, spiritual and financial impossibility.

In the early 1960s, both the CMS and MOM commissioned inquiries into their work in the Territory, investigating the relationship of their work to the policy of assimilation. The CMS terms of reference were to recommend whether CMS should 'continue its work as at present' or 'hand over the work to the government'.<sup>23</sup> When it asked its missionaries if the 'policy of assimilation is capable of fulfilment under existing levels of government support', all but one thought not.<sup>24</sup> Its Federal Council resolved in 1964 to downscale and refocus the work. Rather than continuing the 'industrial' work, the CMS's resources 'should be concentrated on the pastoral, evangelistic and educational work'. For the Federal Council, 'the demands of assimilation require that the civil administration be gradually assimilated to the common pattern of the Australian life': that is, assimilation itself required that civil authorities replace church authorities in Indigenous communities. They would hand over mission administration to government.<sup>25</sup>

The MOM 1965 inquiry's terms of reference were more focused on what they considered the paradox of assimilation and Aboriginal cultural identity. They sought:

To assess the proper relationship between the presentation of the Gospel, the life of the Church, education and social assimilation on the one hand and a continuing Aboriginal culture and language on the other.<sup>26</sup>

Like the CMS, the MOM commission recommended missionaries be relieved of 'administrative details' to free them for 'evangelistic and pastoral ministry' and that administration be passed to 'local governing bodies'. It also recommended 'active recognition of a universal truth' that mission 'is only effective ... if it is taken up by the indigenous church'.<sup>27</sup>

22 ML MSS 6040/5.

23 ML MSS 6040/6.

24 CMS South Australia/Northern Territory office (hereafter CMS SA) Box 19.

25 ML MSS 6040/5.

26 NTRS 53, box 1.

27 NTRS 53, box 1.

## Assimilation and the Indigenous church

This rediscovery, or reimagining, of an old missiological vision of the establishment of the 'Indigenous church' was common across denominations in this time of reassessing missions. Protestant missionary thinking had long been shaped by the theory of nineteenth-century CMS missionary Henry Venn. He defined the 'Indigenous church' by what became known as the 'three selves': it was self-funding, self-propagating and self-governing, thereby embodying the culture and thought of the people. The marks of an 'Indigenous church', as opposed to a mission, would be that it was led by Indigenous clergy and governed and funded by Indigenous people. Missions would be 'self-euthanising', that is, they would eventually hand over all controls to local people, becoming a church, not a mission.<sup>28</sup> This theory was revived by missiologist Roland Allen in the early twentieth century and gained new popularity in international mission circles in the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> In Australia, UAM missionary Stuart Fowler argued in 1963 that the 'indigenous church' theory was 'enjoying tremendous popularity in missionary circles', it was time that 'we who are involved with the Australian Aborigines ... catch up with world trends'.<sup>30</sup>

The Indigenous church concept implied that mission churches would become self-determining as local people replaced missionaries. Yet the establishment of the 'Indigenous church' was not, at first, considered contrary to assimilation. Indeed, the development of an Aboriginal Christianity or 'Indigenous church' was, at first, to be an essential component of assimilation, as it bore a strong resemblance to Hasluck's language of 'self-respecting' and 'self-supporting' Aboriginal communities and of missionaries 'working themselves out of a job'.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the implications of assimilation were open to different understandings and it was possible to see assimilation as overwhelming all vestiges of Aboriginal autonomy. For example, one CMS missionary doubted whether, in the face of what he considered to be the imminent and inevitable white settlement of the Northern Territory, the establishment of an 'Aboriginal church' was a worthwhile objective. He believed there could be 'no separate future for Aboriginal people'.<sup>32</sup> Most missionaries,

28 Tippett, *Introduction*, 85.

29 Allen, *Missionary Methods*; Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion*.

30 Fowler, 'Apostolic', 2.

31 Hasluck, 'The Future', 6.

32 CMS SA Box 19.

however, saw no contradiction between assimilation and the planting of an Indigenous church. For Fowler, the Indigenous church would be a 'training ground' to 'prepare believers for assimilation'.<sup>33</sup> In 1961, one chaplain described the CMS's 'immediate objective' as 'to train, teach and prepare the Aborigines for Assimilation in accordance with present Government policy' as part of a long-term objective of 'the establishment of an Indigenous Church'.<sup>34</sup> Another commented that missions 'should aim at establishing an indigenous church as soon as possible', but in the same document he explained the necessity of preparing Aboriginal people for assimilation.<sup>35</sup>

In such visions of assimilation, it remained possible and, in fact desirable, for the world view of Aboriginal Christians to remain distinct from the world view of other Australians, both Christian and non-Christian. From the mid-1960s missionaries insisted that the Indigenous church had, so far, failed to develop in the Northern Territory due to their own failure to allow for authentic Aboriginal choice and cultural expression. This self-criticism was part of a broader cultural moment that emphasised the need for personal authenticity.<sup>36</sup> If Aboriginal people were allowed the freedom to be authentically themselves and to choose their own path of development, the Indigenous church would soon emerge. Beulah Lowe, a MOM linguist and teacher, for instance, added 'self-expression' to Venn's original 'three selves' when she wrote:

The indigenous church is self-supporting, self-propagating, self-expressing and self-governing ... Regarding self-expression. Firstly there is self-expression in worship patterns. These follow the indigenous culture and are not imposed from without.<sup>37</sup>

The version of assimilation missionaries articulated at the Missions Administration conferences in the early 1960s likewise reflects a greater concern for Aboriginal self-expression and cultural identity, in line with the 'Indigenous church' principles. Missionaries insisted in 1963 that assimilation should not mean any loss of cultural distinctiveness or peoplehood:

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33 Fowler, 'Apostolic', 8.

34 CMS SA Box 19.

35 CMS SA Box 19.

36 Taylor, *A Secular*, 473.

37 NTRS 871, box 127.

Some groups are resisting assimilation because it has been presented to them as implying absorption and obliteration. A fundamental provision ... is the full recognition that Aborigines are a distinctive ethnic group within the Commonwealth and have the right to remain as such.<sup>38</sup>

The 'Indigenous church' model also required that missionaries engage with Aboriginal languages to enable 'self-expressing' worship. The 1963 conference was a watershed for the question of language. The CMS's George Pearson raised the language question and, for the first time, convinced government authorities that missionary linguistics could be of secular use.<sup>39</sup> Language, he explained, was 'part of the people's cultural and spiritual inheritance' and vital to 'their status as a people, with a say in their own affairs'.<sup>40</sup> The conference therefore resolved that since language 'is part of their heritage and a factor of social and cultural importance' governments must fund linguistic research and mother-tongue literacy programs.<sup>41</sup>

On the question of Aboriginal preparedness for leadership, the 'Indigenous church' model meant that missionaries were to trust that the Holy Spirit would guide Aboriginal people as leaders. Barry Butler, from the CMS, wrote in 1969 that 'Missionaries must let Aboriginal Christians develop at their own pace as the Holy Spirit leads them'.<sup>42</sup> Fowler made willingness to hand over authority to Aboriginal people a test of faith:

Faith would not require local skills before handing over – We are walking by sight and not by faith while ever we say 'When I see sound local leadership operating I will be prepared to pull out.' This is simply not the way of faith.<sup>43</sup>

Accordingly, across the missions there were moves to greater Aboriginal representation in leadership bodies (to varying degrees) and attempts to consult with Aboriginal people even at the Missions Administration conferences themselves. In 1961, Cecil Gribble from the MOM proposed that Aboriginal leaders from missions be invited to future conferences.<sup>44</sup> Giese suggested that Aboriginal representatives come as observers only, and that they be excluded from some sensitive discussions. Gordon Symons

38 NAA A452, 1963/2353.

39 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

40 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

41 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

42 Butler, 'Relationship', 1.

43 Fowler, 'Apostolic', 2.

44 NAA F1, 1961/2151.

from the MOM agreed with this arrangement.<sup>45</sup> But Jack Langford from the CMS insisted that excluding Aboriginal people ‘would be a barrier to full cooperation of the Aboriginal representatives’ and ‘cause ill feeling’.<sup>46</sup> Aboriginal representatives were then invited in 1963 as full delegates.

On the issue of representation, the pace of change was markedly slower than what Aboriginal people themselves desired. The conference became a site where Aboriginal people from across the missions expressed demands to have a voice in government. The delegates – Nandjiwarra Amagula, Michael Tipungwuti, Deimbalibu, Harry Jagamara and Denis Daniels – were expected to ‘indicate quite clearly the thoughts and feelings of their own people in regard to the assimilation programme’. Jagamara told the conference that this move was insufficient: ‘it was no good sending two or three representatives like this’. He proposed a conference in which Aboriginal people formed the majority, but he was ultimately ignored.<sup>47</sup> His idea was discussed again at the 1967 conference.<sup>48</sup> In 1969 the conference proposed the establishment of ‘regional conferences of representatives of the Aborigines’ and a ‘Northern Territory wide conference of representatives of Aborigines’.<sup>49</sup> These did not take place.

Still, the Missions Administration Conference made gradual moves to increase Aboriginal control over missions (under white overseers). The Welfare Branch’s Senior Research officer, Jeremy Long, urged superintendents to be more ‘democratic’. Most missions developed some form of form Aboriginal leadership structure – a Village Council or Town Council – in the early 1960s.<sup>50</sup> Aboriginal representatives on these bodies tended to be Christian converts who were also offered leadership roles in mission churches (again, according to the principles of establishing the ‘Indigenous church’). At the 1963 conference, the CMS representative proposed that, given Aboriginal people had made valuable contributions in mission management on station councils, Aboriginal people should also be represented on the Northern Territory Legislative Council; there was some sense that Aboriginal people should be represented as a people, not only as individual citizens. Giese responded that Aboriginal people could be elected ‘like anyone else’ now that they had voting rights.<sup>51</sup>

45 Symons to Giese, 14 December 1962, NAA E460, 1974/773/33.

46 Langford to Giese, 31 December 1962, NAA E460, 1974/773/33.

47 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

48 NAA A452, NT1967/4400.

49 NAA F1, 1969/6123.

50 Long, ‘Some Problems’, 2.

51 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

These moves were nonetheless considered consistent with assimilatory visions by both missionaries and government officials. Aboriginal participation and leadership in town councils, sports and social clubs, for instance, were to be 'education for citizenship', according to the ideals of assimilation.<sup>52</sup> In 1965, the conference urged missions and governments to plan for Aboriginal people 'to take increasing control of their own affairs as they are able'.<sup>53</sup> It also resolved during this process that 'mixed personnel' (i.e. both public servants and missionaries) be employed on missions so that 'Aboriginals may be better prepared for the inevitable encounter with the world which must be faced in years ahead'; missionaries still imagined themselves to be preparing Aboriginal people to meet (secular) white Australia, even in this process of devolution of authority.<sup>54</sup> In this vein, the 1965 conference resolved that the words 'missions' and 'settlement' be abandoned and replaced with 'suitable Aboriginal names'.<sup>55</sup> By 1969, the conference resolved that the word 'mission' be replaced with 'community'.<sup>56</sup> Missionaries also used the conferences to urge government towards measures that might increase Aboriginal people's ability to manage their own affairs. In 1961, Bishop Matthews suggested that Aboriginal people on missions could be made eligible for unemployment benefits. Bishop O'Loughlin agreed.<sup>57</sup> By 1969, the conference proposed a kind of training allowance scheme: 'a special grant of funds be made to missions to allow special projects to be commenced or developed ... to occupy those employable Aborigines who cannot find gainful employment'.<sup>58</sup>

On the question of land rights, missionaries were more ambivalent. Arthur Ellemor, from the MOM, had been an early supporter of land rights. In a paper presented to the 1955 Missions Administration Conference he argued that, since the 'actual land robbery has not yet occurred' in much of the Northern Territory, there was still time to prevent it. Using the language of assimilation, he argued that land rights were essential to 'fit [Aboriginal people] for citizenship' because 'attachment to their traditional territories' was a 'prerequisite for stability' and could be the starting point for 'newer concepts of land rights for agricultural, pastoral

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52 Long, 'Some Problems', 1.

53 NAA F1, 1965/3502.

54 NAA A452, 1965/8518.

55 NAA A452, 1965/8518.

56 NAA F1, 1967/3401.

57 NAA F1, 1961/2151.

58 NAA A452, 1965/8518.

and home-building'.<sup>59</sup> Yet, when Nabalco proposed a bauxite mine on Yolngu land near the Yirrkala mission, the MOM agreed to the mine in 1958 without consulting Yolngu people. The missionaries reacted to Yolngu concerns in diverse ways. Some joined the Yolngu in their protest (notably the superintendent of the mission, Edgar Wells, who the MOM later dismissed for his involvement).<sup>60</sup>

At the 1963 Missions Administration Conference, delegates debated the question of consultation and land. Giese 'stressed' that there had been 'full discussions' between government, mining interests and mission authorities but conceded that 'there should have been earlier consultation with the people'. Gribble, from the MOM, argued that it was missions' responsibility to 'consult with local people'. Pearson from the CMS suggested determining a date for the 'eventual transfer of ownership of mission leases to the people' to remove missions from negotiations around future land use.<sup>61</sup> Yet, that year, the Groote Eylandt Mining Company also began operations, after negotiating with the CMS to pay royalties into a trust for Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal landowners were consulted, but only after the mission had already reached this agreement.<sup>62</sup> For the missionaries, the mine was an answer to their prayers. Given the mission's uncertain future, the jobs that mining would provide meant the community (and its 'Indigenous church') might survive into a post-mission future.

The Missions Administration Conference reached few resolutions on land rights. The 1965 conference recommended that a 'commission be established to examine claims by individuals or groups of Aborigines to ownership of land'.<sup>63</sup> A resolution of the 1971 conference recommended that where mining leases are granted on Aboriginal reserves there be mandatory 'special conditions after consultation with local Aborigines' to protect Aboriginal interests.<sup>64</sup> The United Church in North Australia, however, eventually changed its position from the MOM's earlier approach.<sup>65</sup> In 1972, it challenged Prime Minister McMahon's Australia

59 NAA A452, 1955/368 Part 2.

60 Wells, *Reward and Punishment*, 25–26.

61 NAA F1, 1963/1989.

62 ML MSS 6040/5.

63 NAA F1, 1965/3502.

64 NTRS 56, box 4.

65 The United Church in North Australia was a union of Methodist and Presbyterian churches that developed in Darwin during the Second World War and preceded the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977.

Day statement, urging the government to ‘continue its examination of its policies’ and calling for ‘legislation to grant a proprietary right to any Aboriginal clan which can demonstrate “cogent feeling of obligation to the land”’.<sup>66</sup>

The conference’s failure to establish a position on land rights was partly because the ‘Indigenous church’ model did not give missionaries any direction on questions of customary land tenure. Whereas local governance and cultural programs were easily understood as in the interests of ‘self-governing’ and ‘self-expressing’ churches, land rights were not. Missionaries had long sought to uphold the spatial isolation of Aboriginal communities as they believed it aided community cohesion and cultural vitality and gave Aboriginal people a degree of protection from influences missionaries deemed ‘undesirable’. But they also wanted Aboriginal people to have jobs. It was never clear how maintaining isolation could be consistent with the long-term goals of assimilation. Mining was attractive because, missionaries believed, it would offer a source of income for remote communities, without requiring people to leave. The expectation that the Indigenous church be ‘self-supporting’ also pushed missionaries towards mining, as mining might make these communities economically viable. While missionaries expressed concern that Aboriginal people be given a ‘choice’ about the use of their land, they presumed that Aboriginal people would choose economic development. Missionaries were eager that Aboriginal people live on their country but many had a limited vision of Aboriginal land rights. It was only after the Yolngu made their protest heard that missionaries argued that land was vital, not only for economic and social reasons, but also cultural survival, and land rights were integrated into missionary visions for the authentic Indigenous church.

## Abandoning assimilation

By the late 1960s, missionaries increasingly felt that ‘assimilation’ could not capture their objectives for Aboriginal people because it did not allow for ‘choice’. By 1969, the government line was that assimilation meant that Aboriginal people ‘will choose’ to live like other Australians.<sup>67</sup> At that year’s conference, Fr Leary commented that difficulties with Aboriginal

<sup>66</sup> NTRS 55, box 10.

<sup>67</sup> NAA F1, 1967/3401.

‘social development’ were due to Aboriginal ‘failure to accept the responsibilities that must be accepted’. The solution was ‘to aid him with his willing cooperation’; Leary was still thinking that Aboriginal people might be encouraged to ‘choose’ assimilation.<sup>68</sup> Most other delegates thought otherwise. At the 1971 conference Paul Albrecht circulated two papers.<sup>69</sup> He objected to the ‘imposition’ of assimilation and warned that ‘social change’ must come from ‘within’ or else ‘it can lead to complete social disorganization’.<sup>70</sup> He considered the government’s expectation that Aboriginal people ‘will choose’ assimilation disingenuous:

Although the present wording of the policy – ‘seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community’ ... the policy does not envisage Aborigines exercising this option, nor does it make any provision for them in case they wish to opt out of the assimilation programme.<sup>71</sup>

Albrecht proposed returning judicial authority to Aboriginal communities and instituting executive councils of both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous staff on each settlement to take over management from missions.<sup>72</sup> The missions’ evangelistic and pastoral roles would nonetheless continue; churches would still be heavily involved in ‘proclamation of the Gospel’ and social and economic programs in these communities.<sup>73</sup>

The United Church in North Australia also clarified its objectives for the 1971 conference. It saw itself as an adviser, advocate and mediator. Importantly, the church’s role of ‘preparing’ Aboriginal people – the purported reason Aboriginal people had been segregated from white Australia under assimilation – was dropped, as they acknowledged Aboriginal people might not wish to ‘become involved’ with white Australia at all:

The aim of such development is to ensure that Aboriginal communities have the opportunity to make true and free choices as to their place within the Australian society ... It is their right to decide whether they wish to become involved in

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68 Leary, ‘Developing’, 3.

69 Albrecht, ‘Social Change’; Albrecht, ‘Aboriginal Advancement’.

70 Albrecht, ‘Social Change’, 62.

71 Albrecht, ‘Social Change’, 51.

72 Albrecht, ‘Aboriginal Advancement’, 64.

73 Albrecht, ‘Aboriginal Advancement’, 8.

the wider community. It is their right to decide the extent and form that involvement should take should they decide to belong to the wider community ... Real decisions can only be made on adequate knowledge of what is possible and an appreciation of the implications involved in their decisions. It is the task of the Church to offer this help and to persuade the larger community to recognise the issues involved in Aboriginal development.<sup>74</sup>

At the 1971 conference, missions confirmed that the only way Aboriginal free choice could be ensured would be a full devolution of authority from missions and governments to local Aboriginal organisations and government agencies. Yet, contrary to Hasluck's 20-year timeframe of 1961, the conference resolved that 'no timetable [could] be set' for this devolution as this was a matter for Aboriginal people.<sup>75</sup> Now that missions were no longer conceived as urgently 'preparing' Aboriginal people for 'inevitable' contact with (secular) white Australia, there was no need to estimate a timeframe for change. Of course, this also effectively allowed missions to reserve the right to remain and continue indefinitely (many are still operating in some form today), claiming to do so according to the wishes of Aboriginal people.

The following year (1972), however, the Finke River mission did set an end date in a statement for the Lutheran General Synod. Perhaps this was in reaction to the Missions Administration Conference's resolution that there could be no timetable and the fear that missionaries might linger longer than necessary:

There has been a marked emergence of the Aboriginal people in the spiritual and material spheres of life. This would indicate that the present policy of helping the Aboriginals to regain their lost dignity by encouraging them to make their own responsible decisions is meeting with success. These developments challenge the Church to recognise that the Finke River mission has reached that stage in its history when the aim of all mission work is being achieved, namely to establish an indigenous church. This means that ultimately functions and work carried out by white staff must be transferred to the Aboriginal people themselves ... In the centenary year of 1977 it may be possible to hand over the major proportion of the work at Hermannsburg and on the Run to the Aboriginal people.<sup>76</sup>

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74 NTRS 56, box 4.

75 NTRS 56, box 4.

76 Albrecht, *From Mission*, 42.

Linking Aboriginal people's self-determination in secular matters to their progress in the spiritual realm, they suggested that the achievement of the Indigenous church was so imminent that full authority in the community could be given to Aboriginal people by 1977 (though even this short-term target was not achieved).

## The Indigenous church and the self-determination era

The final Missions Administration Conference took place in 1971. In September 1972, it was replaced by the Church and Mission Authorities Advisory Conference. From 1973, this conference was held quarterly with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and various churches and other territory and federal government departments.<sup>77</sup> Aboriginal representatives were no longer invited to contribute. Ironically, the formal arrival of 'self-determination' as a Commonwealth Government policy in 1973 meant that Aboriginal people on missions lost the conference as a site for airing grievances and raising their concerns. Rather than this single channel, they were instead to consult with a plethora of government agencies while the mission agencies continued their close relationship with the Northern Territory Administration.

The churches continued their efforts towards establishing authentic, self-determining 'Indigenous churches'. Building on the relationships established through the Missions Administration Conferences, in 1973 the MOM, CMS, Anglican Diocese and United Church in North Australia co-founded Nungalinya College in Darwin (later joined by the Catholics) to develop an Indigenous leadership.<sup>78</sup> Its first principal, Keith Cole, described its objective in terms of the Indigenous church theory: training Aboriginal people for 'ministries within the indigenous church' and the precursor to 'the final move in [Aboriginal parishes] evolution from missions to churches'.<sup>79</sup> In 1974, the United Church in North Australia compiled its most comprehensive statement on self-determination in a report entitled *Free to Decide*, based on discussions with Aboriginal leaders across its missions. Its conclusions resonated with

77 NTRS 559, box 78; NTRS 56, box 4.

78 Emilsen, 'The United', 16.

79 Cole, *A History*, 143.

the missions' fresh concern for authenticity; it claimed Aboriginal people had told them 'we do want help, but not on terms which deny us the freedom to be Aboriginal people in an Aboriginal environment'.<sup>80</sup> The official histories of the Finke River mission and the CMS in the Northern Territory are both titled *From Mission to Church*, reflecting the prominence of the Indigenous church theory to their authors' understanding of the mission.<sup>81</sup> As Albrecht explained in the foreword, the movement from 'mission to church' meant Aboriginal people taking responsibility for church life, expressed in their own languages, cultures and systems of governance.<sup>82</sup>

This Christian self-determination policy grew out of a Christian assimilation policy conceived as a movement towards an Indigenous church. It focused primarily on the mission churches but flowed into 'secular' spaces. Missionaries shaped 'self-determination' towards Christian and evangelistic ends. Yet their concern, first and foremost, for the local and 'authentic' Indigenous church, meant that their 'self-determination' was often limited to local Indigenous groups and privileged Aboriginal people who had embraced the missionary faith. Missionaries often rejected pan-Aboriginal movements associated with self-determination (some expressing frustration that Aboriginal people with non-Indigenous heritage might represent local communities in the Northern Territory). They also resented the coming in of consumer goods and alcohol to communities, seen as destructive of traditional culture. Many expressed nostalgia for a pre-assimilation mission time, which they saw as marked by authentic relationships, cultural richness and freedom from bureaucratic interventions. Missionaries' Christian self-determination could, in some ways, be understood as a kind of Christian neo-protectionism, with missionaries envisaging their role as protectors of Aboriginal culture and local communities, and as mediators between Aboriginal people and outsiders, much as they had done in an earlier protectionist era.

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80 United Church, *Free to Decide*, 45.

81 Albrecht, *From Mission*; Cole, *From Mission*.

82 Albrecht, *From Mission*, x.

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This text is taken from *Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia: Histories and Historiography*, edited by Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/ISA.2020.02](https://doi.org/10.22459/ISA.2020.02)