

Why an 8-sided church is unnamed

On Mornington Island, Cape York Peninsula, there is an eight-sided church with no name.

It will soon have a name — in remembrance of a prominent Aboriginal who led many of his people to Christianity. But it is considered bad form to mention by name a departed loved one, in speech or in writing, until a certain period after death.

The church was dedicated last year by the President of the Unitarian Church in Australia, the Rev Winston O'Reilly, and the story of its construction is worth repeating.

Two years earlier, the existing church on this Aboriginal settlement had been destroyed by a cyclone. The Aborigines, assisted by white Christians, raised the money for its replacement.

When the Rev Ron Smith, North Queensland presbytery officer, visited the settlement to discuss the design, Aborigines asked if they could have a round church, to accord with their custom.

Mr Smith said that they could, but the cost might be prohibitive. He suggested an octagonal design as an alternative.

Mornington Island elders thought about this, and were enthusiastic.

An elder explained that there were six clan groups at Mornington, each of which would have a side of the church. The seventh side would be for the entrance and the eighth (the sanctuary) "for God."



Rev Winston O'Reilly

Mr O'Reilly performed the dedication holding hands with an elder in the sanctuary area.

A piece of rock, from the traditional territory of each clan, had been placed at the respective sides.

An Aboriginal explained the progression of Aboriginal spirituality and its fulfilment in their new faith.

RELIGION



By ALAN GILL

He said: "We see the earth as our mother, so we have brought a piece of our mother earth into the house of our father, God."

Mr O'Reilly, for whom the cause of Aboriginal advancement is dear, was a fitting person to preside at last week's press conference at which the World Council of Churches' report, Justice For Aboriginal Australians, was launched.

In television interviews the Queensland Premier, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, criticised the report (which he boasted that he had not read) for lack of reference to spiritual values and the "salvation of souls."

Actually there is an entire chapter devoted to Aboriginal spirituality.

Mr O'Reilly told the press conference: "Unless we understand what that spirituality is and how significant it is to Aboriginal people in affirming their own identity and in claiming their self-respect and dignity, we shall have descended to the level of mere patronage."

One of the recommendations in the report is that the denominations hand over church property as an act of reparation.

This is already being done in many traditional mission areas. There was an amusing note when discussion turned to the urban situation. Canon Robert Butters

Chairman of the (Anglican) Australian Board of Missions, fielded a reporter's potentially tricky question with a joke about the prayer of humble access in the Holy Communion.

The prayer begins: "God whose property is always to have mercy." Cannon Butters felt it was sometimes mistranslated as "God whose mercy is always to have property."



Mr Foley

The composition of the WCC team continues to arouse controversy on the grounds that the countries from which they came — Costa Rica, East Germany, Zaire, Pakistan, Britain — are, for the most part, hardly shining examples of democracy.

This is a difficult question to answer.

At one point in the tour, Miss Elizabeth Adler, head of the Evangelical Academy in East Berlin, offered to withdraw, in tears, because her presence might compromise the mission's credibility.

Dean Lance Shilton and others, while not wishing to minimise the shocking statistics revealed in the report, feel the emphasis on preservation of Aboriginal culture, self-management of affairs, and Aboriginal land rights unwittingly espouses a form of voluntary apartheid.

There has been particular controversy over the role of Mr Gary

Foley, chairman of the ACC's Aboriginal Advisory Committee.

At last week's press conference a reporter with an American accent began his question with: "sir, you sound like a very angry gentleman," which is what Mr Foley is.

Foley is not a man famous for his tact, and at an earlier news conference during the team's visit, spiced his conversation with references to "whitemail," "this fellow Christ," and not entirely favourable comparisons between Christianity and Aboriginal tribal religion.

Perhaps with this in mind, some of the more conservative church organs, who have no love for the WCC, have been examining Foley's past.

The current issue of the evangelical Anglican newspaper, Australian Church Record, which circulates mainly in Sydney, carries a letter from the editor of Today magazine, concerning an exchange of correspondence, five years earlier, in which Foley had written:

"Christianity has brought more misery and suffering to the people of the world than any other single disease in the history of mankind..."

In the long run the decision to recruit Mr Foley may well bring credit to the ACC rather than the reverse.

A senior officer of the council offered the explanation: "Gary Foley is angry, but he has lots to be angry about. He has human failings, as have we all, but possesses leadership qualities, drive, energy, and is willing indeed eager to work with us."