

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission**From:** Denise Cusack Sister of Our Lady of Sion**Dated:** November 2024**Submission:****What do you know about the colonisation of Victoria and its impacts on First Peoples?**

Having the opportunity to be present at some of the public hearings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission has been a deeply moving experience, heart-breaking, humbling, at times breath-taking. I could not have imagined the scope and depth of truth-telling. What I value most is, the task of recording a true record of the colonisation of Victoria is in the hands of First Peoples. This brings a piercing light on every part of Victoria, every system that has operated in Victoria to this day. I have been with First Peoples in Victoria and Western Australia: who were searching government records to find family; who lived in sheds and camped on verandas, who slept in the rain in parks, while they waited for public housing; people in prison and in more recent years, with five and six year old children learning to read via an intensive program in a government school. I say this only because it is these relationships that are the source of my knowledge of the impact of the colonisation of First Peoples. I read each of the articles in The Age newspaper that were part of the series entitled 'Yoorrook A time for truth'. One of the most moving and disturbing of these for me, was the account written by Marcus Stewart, published on the opening day of Victoria's Justice Commission, March 28th 2022. I was shocked to read that the Ku Klux Klan was active in Traralgon, East Gippsland. I returned to the story a number of times in conversations with different people. In February 5-8 this year (2024) I attended a conference at the University of Divinity entitled 'Raising Our Tribal Voice for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution'. Rev Aunty Janet Turpie-Johnstone gave an address entitled 'The Ongoing Colonisations'. I learned that the colonisation of Naarm now known as Melbourne occurred on a scale and at a speed that I could not have imagined was possible.

What has been your experience learning about First Nations history and culture in Victoria's education system? Do you feel it was comprehensive?

I learned very little about First Nations history and culture in Victoria's education system. I was born in 1947. I attended Catholic schools at the primary and secondary levels. Growing up, I understood that Aboriginal people lived in this country before the arrival of the First Fleet. But I had no real awareness that, in the words of the Uluru statement from the Heart: 'Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs'. The first 'history' book I read, at night school as an adult, was on the syllabus for English Literature Year 12: 'Outcasts in White Australia' by C D Rowley. I started to learn about First Nations history and culture when I began to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Melbourne in the 1980's. In January 1988 Sydney celebrated the bicentenary of the First Fleet's arrival in Botany Bay and Sydney Cove on Bidjegal and Gadigal Country. Throughout 1987 another sister (Sion) and I had many opportunities to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and hear their stories of survival and resistance. Whatever the topic, there was an unspoken tangible grief that was present. It touched me deeply. We drove to Sydney and joined the 1988

Bicentenary Protest with the other 40,000 Aboriginal people who had come in buses from all over the country, and their non Indigenous supporters. This protest had a profound effect on me.

What changes would you like to see in Victoria to promote better understanding and respect for First People?

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is one of the most profound documents that I have ever read. It won the Sydney Peace Prize, an international award, in 2021-2022 'for bringing together Australia's First Nations Peoples around a clear and comprehensive agenda for healing and peace within our nation'. In part, the Uluru Statement from the Heart states: 'We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution'. 'We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise the process of agreement-making and truth-telling about our history'. 'With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood'. I would like to see the Uluru Statement from the Heart being more widely known and better understood by all Victorians. I would like to see: The urgent reforms that are recommended in the report 'Yoorrook for Justice, Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems' fully implemented by the Victorian Government. A Victorian education system that offers all students the experience of learning about First Peoples history and culture. More Victorian schools choose to give all students the opportunity to learn a First Peoples language as a second language. (Mildura Primary School chose to teach the Barkindji language as a second language to all the children in the school.

In what ways do you think non-First Nations Victorians can contribute to the process of truth-telling and treaty?

Engage in self education by reading 'Yoorrook for justice, Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems. Publicly support the recommendations in this report. Upon the release of the true record of the colonisation of Victoria by the Yoorrook Justice Commission take the time needed to read the record. Look for opportunities to make this record known by all Victorians. Publicly support the recommendations in the report. Express support for 'treaty' between First Peoples and the Victorian Government and explain the benefits that everyone will gain - in conversations with family, friends and others. Explain in conversations: First Nations are sovereign Nations. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This is why I support a treaty for Victoria.

END