Mission Australia

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Engaging with Indigenous Australians: Principles, practices and learnings

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Background
Mission Australia is a mainstream non-denominational Christian organisation which delivers a range of community, employment and training services in every Australian state and territory. Its suite of services can be grouped under six headings: Children, Youth, Accommodation Support, Community, Employment and Training. In 2004, its close to 280 services supported over 220,000 Australians.

No organisation delivering these services in Australia could be unaware of the social and economic outcomes being experienced by Indigenous Australians at the aggregate level, including:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social and economic wellbeing</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<td>Life expectancy</td>
<td>20 years less for Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians.</td>
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<td>Infants and children</td>
<td>Indigenous infants are around 4 times more likely to die before their first birthday than non-Indigenous.</td>
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<td>Completion of year 12</td>
<td>Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over are half as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to have completed Year 12.</td>
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<td>Employment and unemployment</td>
<td>Unemployment is 2.8 times higher among Indigenous Australians compared with non-Indigenous.</td>
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<td>Average gross household income per week</td>
<td>$364 per week for Indigenous Australians</td>
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<td>$585 per week for non-Indigenous Australians (2001 Census)</td>
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<td>Suicide rates</td>
<td>Indigenous rates are three times that of non-Indigenous.</td>
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<td>Prison rates</td>
<td>Indigenous people are 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be in prison.</td>
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<td>Household tenure</td>
<td>32% of Indigenous Australians fully owned or were purchasing their home compared with 67% of non-Indigenous Australians (2001 Census).</td>
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As an organisation committed to enhancing the wellbeing of Australians, the familiar statistics indicating the entrenched disadvantage of Indigenous Australians, coupled with the urgings of personnel from across all levels of the organisation, called for a deeper and more explicit level of engagement with Indigenous individuals, families and communities.

Some initial principles were developed to underpin this engagement:

- There is a great diversity of living situations, cultural values and social expectations of Indigenous individuals and communities across Australia.
- We (Mission Australia) have much to learn in exploring how we might best work with Indigenous people and communities.
- We (Mission Australia) need to travel slowly and respectfully.

Survey of Mission Australia Services

An important first step in Mission Australia's deeper engagement with Indigenous communities was to identify its current level of involvement. This included surveying managers of its community services. The findings of this survey include:

- Over half of the services had 10% or more of their clients who were Indigenous. The vast majority of these services were generalist (mainstream) services.
- A small number of services had very high rates of Indigenous clients including:
  - All Northern Territory services with 90%+ Indigenous clients
  - A Cultural Youth Leadership Program with all clients Indigenous
  - A post release program with over 75% Indigenous clients
  - An early intervention children and families program with 20% Indigenous clients
  - A Youth Drug and Alcohol service with 18% Indigenous clients.

The survey showed that the type of assistance sought by Indigenous clients from Mission Australia was very broad, and included: counseling, meals, accommodation, legal, mental health, literacy, alcohol and other drugs, family breakdown. The social problems underlying the request for assistance were even more diverse and included: grief and loss, intergenerational unemployment, alcohol and drug addictions, problem gambling, domestic violence, truancy, poor mental health, homelessness etc.

In addition to its work in the community services area, on average 4% of Mission Australia Job Network clients were Indigenous, with some sites having over 20% Indigenous clients. It has recently secured four of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) new Indigenous Youth Consultant positions. Mission Australia has also been running the Structured Training Employment Program (STEP), which aims to train and employ Indigenous job seekers, in a number of states. In South Australia STEP involves a partnership between Mission Australia, Australia Post, the University of South Australian and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and the program won South Australia’s Training Initiative Award in 2004.

The survey and other examples of Mission Australia’s worked showed that the organisation was already involved in supporting Indigenous Australians. The question was clearly not whether we should be involved but how might we make the best possible contribution? It
showed that support needs to be comprehensive and that some of our services already have a lot of learning.

As one manager expressed it:

*We have learnt over the years that you can set up any number of services to target Indigenous communities. Even if they’re staffed and run by Indigenous workers, it doesn’t mean they will be willing to participate. Things need to be taken slowly, and done in consultation with, alongside the Indigenous community elders. They need to see a reason to access the service, and be comfortable with how it is presented and how they are treated.*

**Two case studies of working with Indigenous communities**

The following case studies are from two Mission Australia initiatives, one operating in regional New South Wales and one in metropolitan Brisbane. Both have been developed in response to an identifiably need being experienced by Indigenous communities. Both are relatively small local initiatives and are not in any way meant to ignore the need for important systemic policy and program responses. They do however highlight the fact that both systemic and local responses are required and the difference the latter can make on the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

1. **Koori Link, Orange, New South Wales**

The town of Orange, in central west New South Wales, has a population of approximately 35,000 people of whom 1,393 people (or 3.9%) identified as being of Indigenous background at the 2001 Census. This represented an increase of 353 people (33.9%) since the 1996 Census. Significant numbers of the Indigenous population have relocated from other more remote communities further west as well as other parts of the state. This has meant that some do not have local connections or community knowledge and that the community is not necessarily cohesive.

Mission Australia has been delivering a range of community and employment services in Orange since 1997. This has included a particular focus on youth and family services. In 2004 Mission Australia was asked to take over the auspice of the *Koori Link* program because of our previous work in the sector and our standing in the local community. Difficulties had emerged with the previous auspicing arrangements.

*Koori Link* is a service for Aboriginal families and young people which has been developed under the Commonwealth funded Stronger Families Initiative to provide Aboriginal young people and their families with flexible support that targets their needs. It uses a strengths based approach and provides support, training and skills development, advocacy, mentoring, case management and referral.

*Koori Link* aims to enhance family relationships, and support families and young people to gain access to both mainstream organisations such as Centrelink and Indigenous-specific support services in their community. Mentoring, advocacy and support for example, are provided to clients who need to access agencies such as the Department of Housing and Centrelink. It also provides centre-based family mediation, a living/work skills program and
financial assistance and support. The service is increasing its focus on early intervention programs especially parenting programs and community development initiatives.

*Koori Link* also aims to strengthen the links between Indigenous people in Orange. This is particularly important given that many are new to the community and have few links with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members.

The program has established both Men’s and Women’s Groups in order to build up the social and support networks clients have at their disposal. The Women’s Group meets regularly, undertakes various activities such as arts and crafts, links with other Women’s activities in the region, as well as having presentations from various services in the area. These are held in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

The Men’s Group also meets regularly, largely for the opportunity to connect and ‘yarn’. Other activities have included a trip to Bourke to get back in touch with their land and culture. The Group is also looking to begin mentoring some local Indigenous young people.

The staff of *Koori Link* are co-located with other Mission Australia community services, including youth and accommodation services. This has helped not only with referral processes between programs but also to build up a strong staff complement where skills and expertise can be shared and there is a ready support network and sounding board.

Whilst the program has not been running for long, key outcomes to date have included an increase in the number of self referrals, as well as those from other agencies. Staff, at the request of clients, are now involved with them in a number of co-case conferences with various services. This enables more effective advocacy to occur. This is complemented by formal monthly meetings with agencies (eg Housing) who are now experiencing an increase in *Koori Link* clients. These meetings are another opportunity for advocacy. A MOU with the Department of Education is also being developed so that the program can also work in schools to support Indigenous young people.

Key components in what has already been achieved include:

- The capacity of staff to network within the community
- The diversity and breadth of networks established.
- The ability to advocate for clients and their families and to refer them to a range of agencies.
- The co-location of services promoting cross referrals, and stronger networks for staff learning and support.
- A history of working in the Orange community.

The major challenges for *Koori Link* have been:

- The length of time taken to develop positive networks within the community as the program had previously been unsuccessfully auspiced by another agency. This lead to community concerns and questions regarding how long the program would be around and required a period of time to build up a level of trust that the program was here to stay.
• The diversity of groups within the local Indigenous community.
• The high level of mobility of some of the population.

2. Employment & Training Services, North Stradbroke Island, Queensland

North Stradbroke Island is at the southern end of Moreton Bay, about an hour by car and vehicle ferry from Brisbane, Queensland. At the 2001 Census it had a population of approximately 2,400, of whom 14% were Indigenous compared with 3.1% for the whole of Queensland. Sixty percent of those of Indigenous background were in the ‘working age’ range of 15 to 64 years. Close to 100 Indigenous residents aged over 15 years were employed, including some in the Community Development Employment Projects program. In 2001 the unemployment rate for Indigenous residents was 13.6%, more than double that of non-Indigenous residents. Whilst this is a high figure it represented only a small number of people (15) – eight of whom were aged 15-24 years, three who were 25-34 years and four who were 35-44 years. There were also a significant number of residents aged over 15 years who were not in the labour force.¹

There are a number of Indigenous organisations on the Island and one of the main goals of the Indigenous community has been to help keep young people on the Island and to establish viable local industries that support this. Despite its relative proximity to Brisbane some members of the community have often felt isolated and quite daunted about trying to access supports and employment on the mainland.

Mission Australia has been operating as a Job Network provider in the suburb of Stones Corner, on the mainland adjacent to North Stradbroke Island for seven years. About 12 months ago staff became aware that residents on the Island were not being well serviced by any of the Job Network providers in the Employment Services Area. The residents’ sense of geographical isolation and the need for them to travel to access services and employment contributed to this.

Around the same time local Indigenous leaders and the Island’s Nunukul Ngugi Cultural Heritage Corporation were keen to establish a sea cucumber processing plant on the Island as a means of creating local employment. Sea cucumber are commonly found in northern Australian and are exported to Asia. Under Queensland legislation only Indigenous people are able to harvest sea cucumbers.

In discussions between local leaders and Mission Australia, the need for a reliable well trained workforce of local residents was identified as a key need and an area in which Mission Australia could contribute. These discussions took place in the lounge room or in the outdoors on the Island, rather than the potentially more daunting office environment on the mainland. A connection was also established with the local Centrelink office which operates as an outpost on the Island for two hours a day, in order to strengthen the connection between income support and Job Network services on the Island. A very simple but key strategy was for Mission Australian Job Network staff to go to the Island to engage

¹ This includes people doing home duties, those who are retired, voluntarily inactive or permanently unable to work.
and sign up those registered as unemployed, rather than requiring them to travel to the mainland. The available Jobseeker Account funds were creatively used to help jobseekers on the Island develop the skills they needed for the processing plant, including for example completing the Certificate of Shipboard Safety. The funds were also used to assist in the purchase of diving gear – a key equipment requirement. Mission Australia maintained weekly contact with jobseekers and regular contact with the employer, in order to deal quickly with any issues that might arise and to support the jobseekers as they moved into employment. The Corporation was also able to secure funding from the Commonwealth Government to assist in the establishment of the plant itself.

Over the 12 month period, 14 jobseekers have been placed, 11 of whom are completely off Centrelink benefits. Mission Australia is now placing both Work for the Dole clients with the processing plant, with the goal of helping them into secure employment. There also appears to be a significant opportunity to increase the market for the sea cucumbers over time, which will potentially generate more jobs within the community. The Corporation also won the 2005 CADET Training and Employment Small Employer of the Year award. The establishment on North Stradbroke Island of a viable local enterprise employing a significant number of Indigenous employees has the potential to make a major contribution to the wellbeing of Indigenous individuals, families and community as well as the whole Island community both now and into the future.

This initiative highlights the importance of:

- Local leadership
- Relationship development
- Collaborative efforts
- Bringing together organisations and individuals with complementary skills and resources – eg Indigenous organisation’s knowledge of the local community and Mission Australia’s expertise in supporting jobseekers into employment
- Flexible approaches

These learnings are familiar from many examples around Australia but they highlight that relatively ‘easy’ strategies such as taking a service to where people are, can make an enormous difference.

For Mission Australia staff the main challenges of this work have been:

- Operating in new environments – both culturally and physically
- Thinking laterally to make things happen which may not be ‘the everyday’
- Keeping lines of communication open
- Not assuming that employment issues such as Occupational Health and Safety requirements are universally understood
- Monitoring outcomes

Staff however, have found this quite exhilarating and creative work which builds on their core competencies and skills in supporting jobseekers, whilst simultaneously having an immediate impact on the community. Members of the Indigenous community are now
looking to develop an eco-tour project which will again require a local workforce and Mission Australia will look to support them in this initiative.

Some principles of working with Indigenous communities

Much has been written and said about the complexity of working with Indigenous individuals, families and communities. This complexity coupled with the likelihood of making mistakes, cannot be an excuse for inactivity on the part of mainstream organisations such as Mission Australia. The above examples, coupled with many others from our work with communities, highlight that local and relatively small initiatives can make an important difference to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. Mission Australia still has much to learn in its work with Indigenous communities but some of our learnings to date are:

- Relationships will be a cornerstone – both at an organisational and individual level. Our front line staff highlight the importance of taking a ‘slow approach’ when working with Indigenous clients and communities in order to develop trusting relationships and networks. This is a crucial component of engagement and the process will not necessarily be any faster if staff are Indigenous. The process begins with an awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural traditions and practices. It requires a sustained and long-term commitment and may need to address wariness due to previous negative experiences eg short-term programs, one-off funding, high staff rotation.

- Developing partnerships - Many Indigenous organisations and communities have worked extremely hard to achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous people. In some situations, this has not seen positive outcomes for the community due to a lack of knowledge and experience in accessing non-Indigenous services/organisations who are able to provide assistance, resources and skills to support the community. In light of this, non-Indigenous organisations need to redefine how service delivery occurs. Establishing partnerships with Indigenous communities that build capacity within that community is a positive step in this process. These partnerships can take various forms depending on the needs of the community. The simple reaction to working with Indigenous communities is often to employ an Indigenous person, however this is not always the best means of assisting a community with addressing their needs.

Staff who have lead a range of initiatives with Indigenous communities highlight the following key issues in the process of developing partnerships:
- Listen & Observe – communities are aware of what their needs are and often do not communicate these needs in a way that is understood. Needs are often overlooked by service providers because they fail in listening and observing.
- Sharing knowledge is a primary step in engaging Indigenous communities. Service providers are often reluctant to engage other service providers in assisting to address the needs of the community.
- Communicating effectively is critical to engaging communities and individuals. Time must be taken to listen and observe. Whilst this is occurring leading questions need to be asked to gauge the depth of knowledge and access. This information is then the basis for the establishment of the partnership.
- When looking at developing the partnership, non-indigenous organisations also need to
identify how they can assist to develop real capacity within the Indigenous community. This may take various forms and include such areas as:

- Skills development – tender writing, research, industry qualifications
- Mentoring and support
- Auspicing service delivery aspects of a contract
- Developing business opportunities

- Holistic and strengths-based responses are needed which acknowledge and reinforce the importance of Indigenous culture. Indigenous clients are often dealing with low self-esteem, lack of confidence and, in some cases, limited or no knowledge of their culture and history. Building a strong sense of cultural awareness is an important factor in their personal development. Holistic responses may involve working with the individual, extended family and community.

- Program Flexibility - Indigenous communities and individuals, like their non-Indigenous counterparts, are not homogenous. As a result, programs and practices that have achieved a high degree of success in one location may be difficult to replicate or need local input to ensure they are appropriate. Mission Australia staff indicate that Indigenous specific support/services may be an appropriate model for some individuals, while others prefer ‘mainstream’ options. Neither should be the sole method of delivery. Often very simple strategies, such as going to where a client is, will make a significant difference to the outcome achieved.

- Multi-party collaborations will often be required to address the diverse and complex needs facing Indigenous communities, including Indigenous and mainstream organisations, Governments, philanthropic organisations and business. This will often require an organisation or individual to play a facilitating role.

Conclusion
The social and economic outcomes being experienced by Indigenous Australians at the aggregate level are a significant challenge to any mainstream non-government organisation committed to enhancing the wellbeing of Australians. Systemic responses are required but local initiatives can and are having an impact on the lives of Indigenous individuals and their communities. There is a growing body of work which highlights some of the key principles and practices of mainstream organisations working effectively with Indigenous communities. Many of these principles and practices have been recurring themes for a number of years and many are relatively straightforward. Whilst engagement remains challenging, for both the communities themselves and the mainstream organisations who work with them, it remains work which is central to helping to create a more equitable Australian community.