
PROPOSAL 5 - COVENANTING COMMISSION - REFORM OF THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM & CASHLESS DEBIT CARD PROGRAM

That the Synod resolve:

1. To acknowledge the discriminatory nature of the Community Development Program, which sees higher requirements placed mainly on First Australians seeking employment in remote areas than on people elsewhere in Australia.
2. To call on the Commonwealth Government to work with First Peoples organisations to develop a new program to assist First Peoples in remote Australia who are looking for work, such as the proposal put forward by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory in May 2017. *This should include reforming the program to move from a punitive, attendance-focused approach towards one which rewards participation in activities that are selected and valued by the community and, in turn, provide skills and experiences which improve the quality of life of all participants and their future employment prospects.*
3. To acknowledge the discriminatory nature of the Cashless Debit Card which mandatorily restricts purchasing choices of people who are unemployed, with up to 78% of whom identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
4. To call on the Commonwealth Government not to expand the Cashless Debit Card trials and instead work with communities on transitioning to a voluntary scheme co-designed with communities that includes holistic and coordinated support services.

Mover: Rev Robert Jetta

Seconder: Rev Steve Francis

Rationale

At its 7th Assembly the Uniting Church formally entered into a relationship of Covenant with its Indigenous members, recognising and repenting for the Church's complicity in the injustices perpetrated on Australia's Indigenous community, and pledging to move forward with a shared future. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress's generous response to this statement, among other messages, called upon the broader Church to take up the mission of reconciliation.

The ongoing and continually renewing nature of the Covenant calls the Uniting Church to continually act to remove the systems and structures of discrimination and oppression in Australia. The Uniting Church works for just, inclusive and equal relationships, recognising the place of First Peoples in Australia.

The National Assembly has committed the Uniting Church to seek social justice for Australia's First Peoples. For example, resolution 82.49 stated that the Uniting Church seeks to:

- (a) Give thanks to Almighty God that "He has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has enlisted us in the service of reconciliation". (IICor.5.18, NEB);
- (b) Declare that for such reconciliation to become fully effective in our own nation there must be the right of every Australian of whatever race, age or sex to live a life of human dignity and equality;

- (c) Call upon the Australian community to recognise the hopes and aspirations of its Aboriginal and Islander people, and strongly support them in their legitimate seeking after social, legal and economic justice and equality;
- (d) Commit itself to a ministry of reconciliation, recognising the injury inflicted on the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia by the injustices and exploitation that have accompanied 200 years of colonisation of their land, and call on all Australian Christians, black and white, to participate in this ministry.

Previous Assemblies and Synods have also expressed concern for the well-being and treatment of people locked out of the paid job market.

- *Community Development Program*

The Community Development Program (CDP) is a Commonwealth Government program that has resulted in discrimination against, and exploitation of, many First Peoples who have been locked out of the normal job market. The CDP commenced on 1 July 2015, replacing the Remote Jobs and Community Programme (RJCP) which ran from 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2015.

The CDP is targeted towards job-seekers, both First Peoples and non-Indigenous, who are living in remote regions and who are in receipt of Newstart Allowance, Parenting Payment or Youth Allowance benefits. The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, has said of the CDP:

“The rate at which jobseekers within the Programme are penalized is around 27 times that of mainstream, predominantly non-indigenous, jobseekers. In practice, these requirements are discriminatory, being substantially more onerous than those that apply to predominantly non-indigenous jobseekers.”

The results of this discriminatory treatment mean that, while CDP participants make up only 5% of people seeking employment nationally, 60% of the social security penalties imposed on people seeking employment and nearly 80% of the more serious penalties are imposed on CDP participants. Related to this, fines imposed on First People job seekers under the CDP scheme are blamed for driving up hunger and poverty in some remote First People communities.

People on the CDP have been forced into Work for the Dole labour immediately, which is not the case with people seeking work on Newstart who are **not** on the CDP. People on the CDP have been given fewer options than people seeking work elsewhere in Australia, such as training, voluntary work or participation in non-vocational support programs.

First people communities and organisations had little say in the design of the CDP and have no genuine decision making power over the type of projects, work and activities that are undertaken and valued and given legitimacy in the program. We therefore commend the alternative proposal of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory¹ and encourage collaboration with similar groups around the country.

¹ <http://www.amsant.org.au/apont/remote-employment/>



- *Cashless Debit Card Program*

The stated purpose of income management schemes including the Basics Card and the Cashless Debit Card trial², is to reduce the harms caused by alcohol and drug abuse and gambling by limiting the amount available to welfare recipients to spend on them.

As part of the 2019-20 Federal Budget, the Government announced a further extension and expansion of the Cashless Debit Card to 30 June 2021. This includes the transition of approximately 22,500 Income Management participants in the Northern Territory and Cape York to the Cashless Debit Card from April 2020.

Uniting Care Australia has called for the trials to be stopped highlighting the inconclusive effectiveness of the scheme and the evidence in some circumstances of increases in domestic-related assaults and police-attended domestic violence associated with the trial. National Director of UnitingCare Australia, Claerwen Little said,

“The Senate has decided there is insufficient evidence to extend the trial elsewhere... UnitingCare Australia calls on it to stop the trial, stop the likely harm and spend the money on something that helps people with problem behaviour.”³

The use of income management cards has disproportionately affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with more than three quarters of cardholders identifying as such. National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Co-chair, Dr Jackie Huggins, said:

“The cashless debit card has fundamentally undermined the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The card shames and stigmatises our peoples for their disadvantage, robs them of their financial freedom, and exacerbates pre-existing social challenges such as financial harassment.”⁴

² For an explanation of the slight differences between the Basics Card and the Cashless Debit Card see: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2017/June/BasicsCard_and_Cashless_Debit_Card

³ [file:///C:/Users/geoffrey.bice/Downloads/MEDIA_RELEASE_Cashless_Debit_Card_Trial%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/geoffrey.bice/Downloads/MEDIA_RELEASE_Cashless_Debit_Card_Trial%20(1).pdf)

⁴ <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/2019/3/26/response-to-govt-plan-to-force-cashless-debit-card-across-nt>

Importantly, Dr Huggins suggests there could be a use for the card system if it were to operate on a voluntary basis, preferring an ‘opt-in, opt-out’ approach.

Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory spokesperson, John Paterson, said:

“Here in the NT, we are tired of the government making decisions without adequate consultation and engagement with us. As with the Australian Government’s current racist and harmful Community Development Program, this new blanket policy of control will further entrench the disadvantage and disempowerment of our people. We call on all politicians to endorse Aboriginal driven solutions on CDP modelling and issues relating to welfare.”

The Australian Council of Social Services identify a list of key issues with the Cashless Debit Card system:

- Blanket approach stigmatises and harms people getting income support
- Inability to purchase various permitted goods and services because of lack of cash
- Encroaches on the right to privacy
- Is not cost effective
- Does not address drug or alcohol addiction
- Does not increase employment
- Does not improve health and wellbeing outcomes
- 75% of people subjected to the cashless debit card did not change their behaviour in relation to alcohol, drugs or gambling.
- 34% of people did not drink, gamble or take drugs prior to the trial, and 43% reported no change to their consumption of alcohol, drugs or gambling.

UnitingCare Australia highlights in its submission to the Senate Inquiry that there are alternative evidence-based interventions available that should be implemented instead that “do not make the mistake of confusing a symptom of the problem with the problem.”⁵

⁵ <https://www.unitingcare.org.au/media-publications/submissions>