

Ministry with Ageing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples Embracing Culture, Kin and Country!

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples in Australia comprise of hundreds of separate communities, each having their own distinct set of languages, histories and cultural traditions.

Some current First Nations statistics [source [Australian Bureau of Census and Statistics](#)]:



- 3.3% (approx) of the Australian population identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples, translating to 798,400 in number (ABS 2018).
- projected to reach about 1.1 million by 2031 (ABS2019).
- 81% (ABS 2016) of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples live in major cities, inner and outer regional areas.
- 68% of these are located in the eastern states of mainland Australia.
- 19% live in the more remote areas of Australia. We would be familiar with some of these in the Lutheran communities of SA West Coast, Central Australia and far north Queensland.

Australia's First Nations population has a relatively young age structure

- more than 34% under the age of 15 (compared to 10% of other Australians)
- 16% of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples were aged 50 and over (ABS 2016), while this same percentage of non-Indigenous Australian population was only reached at the age of 65
- As with the general population, the First Nation's population is also ageing.

Traditionally in Aboriginal culture, age has a significant role to play in community and in the kinship system. Being aged demands high-level respect and honour from community. Aboriginal people spend a lifetime understanding this. In particular, when a certain stage in life (not necessarily a specific age) was reached individuals were recognised as an Elder (capital E) of their community.

Elders are highly respected Aboriginal people, held in esteem by their communities for their wisdom (borne of life experiences), cultural knowledge and community service. They are recognised as the custodians (holders) of community cultural knowledge and lore. The practice of consulting with and following the advice of the Elders effectively makes them the authority and leaders of their community.

On becoming an Elder: "[It's a lifetime of working for your community](#)", says one Wiradjuri woman.

Depending on individual communities, both men and women can become Elders, but in others becoming an Elder may be limited to a few men. Whilst referred to as 'Uncle' or 'Aunty', not all who have this reference, necessarily also hold the role of an Elder.

In traditional times, it was the responsibility of Elders take their youth out of the routine life, often for months at a time, to teach them and pass on wisdom, traditional cultural knowledge, lore and practice. In effect this was their education and the learning was ongoing, often well into the latter years of their life as



opportunity presented itself. This 'education' was fundamental to the spiritual, cultural, social and economic fabric of each community, directly contributing to identity and belonging.

In the time following colonisation in Australia, events of the day and political decisions of successive governments significantly disrupted this extensive and intensive knowledge transfer. Notwithstanding this, the experience of intergenerational trauma continues to impact the lives of many today.

As the ageing processes continues, the sense of identity and belonging continues to be a strong call for First Nations peoples. Family as identified by their traditional Aboriginal kinship system becomes increasingly important, as does the spiritual connection to their Country and culture.

In this light, ministry with ageing Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples is likely to have greater impact where a culturally sensitivity approach is adopted and there has been genuine engagement in cultural awareness by those providing ministry. It is important that time is also invested in developing a mutually trusted relationship. Whatever can be done to add a sense of cultural safety, both in the physical and emotional environment, together with an authentic building of relationship (including with family members and carers) can strengthen the connection, in all contexts in which ministry occurs.

References: [Insights into vulnerabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 and over](#)
[Source Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019]

