Aboriginal Missions

The mission system, how life was controlled, and its lasting legacy

A note before you read. This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

What the missions were

Aboriginal missions were church-run settlements established across Australia from the early 1800s to the mid-1900s. They were run by Christian churches, including Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Methodist denominations, and often worked alongside government authorities.

Together with reserves and government settlements, missions formed a system that controlled the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many people were forced or coerced onto missions through dispossession, frontier violence and government policy, all backed by the Aboriginal Protection Acts. Understanding missions is an important part of truth-telling, because their legacy connects directly to other histories such as the Stolen Generations.

How daily life was controlled

On many missions, almost every part of daily life was managed by the mission staff and by Protectors. Where people lived, how they worked, what they ate and how they raised their children could all be controlled. Rations of food and goods were often used as a means of control, and movement on and off the mission was restricted.

Language, ceremony and Lore were frequently suppressed, and children were sometimes housed separately from their parents in dormitories. These conditions are part of the reason missions, reserves and children's Homes are understood as connected parts of the same system, a system that also drove the removal of children.

What the missions set out to do, and what they did

The stated aims were very different from their actual effects on communities.

Protect people from frontier violence	People lost their land, freedom and autonomy.
Provide food, shelter and schooling	Survival was rationed and used as a means of control.
Convert people to Christianity	Languages, ceremony and Lore were suppressed.
Train people for labour and service	Work was often unpaid, and wages were withheld.
Civilise people into European ways	Families were separated and identity disrupted.

Connecting the histories

Missions did not exist in isolation. They were one part of a broader system of Protection and assimilation that also included reserves, government settlements and children's Homes. The same laws and authorities that ran the missions also enabled the removal of children.

This is why the legacy of missions connects directly to the Stolen Generations, to the Bringing Them Home report, and to the reasons the National Agreement on Closing the Gap exists today. Seeing these histories together helps make sense of the present.

Resilience and community control today

The story of the missions is not only a story of control. It is also a story of resilience. Communities held on to family, culture and connection to Country through decades of hardship, and that strength endures.

Today, many former missions and reserves are thriving Aboriginal community controlled communities, running their own organisations and services. This is a powerful sign of resilience and self-determination, and it is an important part of the full story. Recognising both the history and this strength is the foundation of trauma aware, culturally safe practice.

Questions to reflect on

- How does comparing the stated aims of missions with their actual effects change your understanding?
- Why is it important to see missions, reserves and Homes as connected parts of one system?
- How does recognising former missions as thriving communities today shape a strength-based view?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Missions were church-run settlements that, with reserves and government settlements, controlled daily life.
- ✓ Their stated aims were very different from their actual effects on communities.
- ✓ The mission system connects directly to the Stolen Generations, Bringing Them Home and Closing the Gap.
- ✓ Many former missions are now thriving community controlled communities, a sign of resilience and self-determination.

Reference material

- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **Australians Together, history and education resources**
  australianstogether.org.au
- **Find and Connect, records of missions and Homes**
  findandconnect.gov.au
- **Bringing Them Home report, Australian Human Rights Commission**
  humanrights.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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