



An occasional newsletter for Covenanters

Special Edition: Language 2008

Friday 14 November 2008

Dear Covenanters,

From time to time an item comes across my desk that strikes a chord. What follows is part of LANGUAGE EDUCATION NEWS Vol 2, No 15, 13 November 2008. <http://www.languageseducation.com/news.htm>

It focuses on Indigenous Languages. Language is the key to understanding another culture. Failure to understand our Aboriginal brothers and sisters and the resulting crisis in health and education has much to do with the failure of even part of the white population to learn an Aboriginal language and thus communicate with some understanding. Language is also the key to maintaining a culture and thus it is not surprising that those endeavouring to destroy that culture should prohibit the speaking and learning of the language. The North American experience echoes our own.

It was significant that at the recent Minister's Conference in Darwin the celebration of Indigenous Languages was made manifest in the tower of Bibles at the front that were in language. We also saw the relocation of the *Centre for Indigenous Scriptures to Nungalinga College*. This year celebrated the complete translation of scripture into Kriol and among smaller Australian language projects the New Testament into Djambarrpuynu, the language spoken by the people of East Arnhem Land.

But it should come as no surprise that Australian languages are under threat. So one act of covenanting may be "the challenge to learn an Australian language". That was a challenge delivered at the opening of our recent Presbytery & Synod. You can show your support by signing the petition. You can show your support by buying a CD of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu's songs and listening to the "haunting, lilting voice and lyrics sung in three Indigenous languages which few Australians understand."

And finally I cannot agree more with Jirribal tribe elder and educator Ernie Grant when he talks about "teachers lacking important cultural insight". I have been there myself and thank my Aboriginal friends who patiently taught me new things and gave me new wisdom and insight. On the other hand when Ministers of Education or any government bureaucrat or politician make blanket decisions of a professional nature for schools that counter the wisdom of research, the wishes of communities and the professionalism of teachers on the ground you know that it is not only teachers that may lack "important cultural insight"!

Please read prayerfully the items below.....
Palya, Peter

Saving endangered languages

Shaunnagh O'Loughlin

Australia's Indigenous languages are disappearing at an alarming rate, taking with them enormous amounts of knowledge and culture. Unique stories and songs are being lost as community elders die, but Monash University researchers are working with one community to preserve ancient traditions.

Thirty years ago almost 260 people spoke their traditional language in the community of Yanyuwa at Borroloola, 970kms south-east of Darwin.

Today, only a handful of community members remain fluent -- the last custodians of ancient songs, stories, customs and land ownership that are bound up in the vocabulary of the endangered language.

Dr John Bradley and Dr Amanda Kearney from Monash University's Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, have worked with the community for much of that time and are working with Monash digital animators Tom Chandler, Brent McKee and Chandara Ung to digitally capture the community's oral traditions. Most of the remaining Yanyuwa speakers are elderly -- making the need to capture the language urgent.

"When you lose a language, you lose a lot more than words. You lose spirituality, concepts of spirituality and cultural values, as well as particular views of ethics and morality," Dr Bradley said.

Read more at

<http://www.monash.edu.au/pubs/monmag/issue22-2008/research/song-title.html>

Indigenous Languages Petition

Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages

Over the last few years a number of language speakers, linguists and language workers have identified the urgency of the issue of supporting indigenous languages. In response a petition to the Federal government has been put together,

Please follow the link below to either print out a hard copy or sign this petition online in support of indigenous languages.

http://www.fatsil.org.au/component/option.com_joomlapetition/Itemid./catid.1/func.viewcategory/

For more information regarding the status of indigenous languages please head to the Ngapartji Ngapartji website; <http://www.ngapartji.org/content/view/19/79/> or to the Transient Languages and Cultures blog; <http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/elac/> and here is a great essay that was on Radio National recently <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2008/2410952.htm>.

Native American tribe focuses on the young to keep language alive

Dan Frosch, International Herald Tribune, 17 October 2008

At 69, her eyes soft and creased with age, Alvena Oldman remembers how the teachers at St. Stephens boarding school on the Wind River Reservation would strike students with rulers if they dared to talk in their native Arapaho language. "We were afraid to speak it," she said. "We knew we would be punished."

More than a half-century later, only about 200 Arapaho speakers are still alive, and tribal leaders at Wind River, Wyoming's only Indian reservation, fear their language will not survive. As part of an intensifying effort to save that language, this tribe of 8,791, known as the Northern Arapaho, recently opened a new school where students will be taught in Arapaho. Elders and educators say they hope it will create a new generation of native speakers.

"This is a race against the clock, and we're in the 59th minute of the last hour," said a National Indian Education Association board member, Ryan Wilson, whom the tribe hired as a consultant to help get the school off the ground. Like other tribes, the Northern Arapaho have suffered from the legacy of Indian boarding institutions, established by the federal government in the late 1800s to "Americanize" Native American children. It was at such schools that teachers instilled the "kill the Indian, save the man" philosophy, young boys had their traditional braids shorn, and students were forbidden to speak tribal languages.

Read entire article at:

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/10/17/america/17arapaho.php>

Northern Territory Education Union says bi-lingual education boosts performance

ABC News Mon Oct 27, 2008

The Northern Territory Education Union says the NT Government is ignoring international evidence that bi-lingual education improves academic performance of students.

The Education Minister Marion Scrymgour has announced all schools would have to teach in English for the first four hours of the day starting next year.

She says it does not spell the end to bi-lingual education as students can still study culture and language in the afternoons.

But the union's Olga Wrzesinska says making English compulsory for the first four hours of school every day will be disastrous for indigenous education outcomes.

Ms Wrzesinska says international research shows students enrolled in bi-lingual schools consistently out-perform those in non bi-lingual schools.

Read more at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/10/27/2401913.htm>

Aboriginal prodigy steals the night at Australia music awards

Rob Taylor, Reuters, Oct 20, 2008

Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, a blind Aboriginal man hailed as the greatest voice Australia has ever recorded, carried the night at the country's top music awards, despite most awards going to a 17-year-old schoolgirl.

Blind since birth, Gurrumul, 37, speaks almost no English, but has become a sensation in his homeland, with a haunting, lilting voice and lyrics sung in three indigenous languages which few Australians understand.

"He captures a very particular feeling that is part of Yolngu culture, about pining but at the same time feeling happy, about longing for your land but not worrying about it," spokesman Michael Hohnen told Australian media.

The acutely shy Gurrumul, a self-taught outback guitarist who plays his instrument upside down, stunned crowds at the annual Australian Record Industry Awards night on Sunday,

winning best independent release. Critics have described his voice as having "transcendental beauty." Others compare it to "slow rain."

Read more at

<http://www.reuters.com/article/musicNews/idUSTRE49J05P20081020?sp=true>

Teachers urged to bridge culture gap

The Age, October 22, 2008 (AAP)

Teachers need to understand indigenous culture to help raise the education levels of Aboriginal children, according to leading indigenous educators.

Jirribal tribe elder and educator Ernie Grant, of far north Queensland, said some teachers misinterpreted certain behaviour by indigenous students because they lacked important cultural insight.

"It can be simple things such as not looking at the teacher," Mr Grant said. "Some avoid eye contact because in their culture it's rude to look an adult in the eye ... but that's a basic example. There are far more complex cultural differences than that."

Mr Grant said English was a second language for most indigenous students, and teachers should give explanations more than once and in different ways.

As a cultural officer in the Tully region, Mr Grant holds workshops educating teachers on the land, language, culture and the part family play in the lives of indigenous students.

Read more at

<http://news.theage.com.au/national/teachers-urged-to-bridge-culture-gap-20081022-569x.html>

Shalom

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