

Lowitja & Jerry

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on July 12th, 2026 as part of NAIDOC Week – Matthew 13:1-9)

This past week you may have heard the words - 50 years of deadly and wondered what it is all about.

Today makes the final day of NAIDOC week.

NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. NAIDOC Week is a week of celebrating our first peoples and their cultures, communities and achievements. It began as a movement for justice, growing out of the Day of Mourning in 1938, when indigenous leaders, including William Cooper, called for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their human rights. It is now a time of celebration, remembrance and advocacy.

The theme this year is 50 years of Deadly. To indigenous people the word deadly means - awesome, excellent and strong. More than that it speaks of resilience, resistance in the face of opposition and injustice.

In honour of NAIDOC Week and the celebration of 50 years of deadly, I would this morning like to introduce you to two indigenous Baptist leaders and tell you a little of their story.

Whilst their stories are quite different from each other, they are not dissimilar to those of many of their generation and whilst they include some terrible stories about life as indigenous people in this country, I think they are also people of hope and inspirational for us.

I have over the years met both of these people and found both of them charming, caring and wise.

Lowitja O'Donoghue¹ was born in 1932 on a cattle station in South Australia to an Irish pastoral lease holder and Aboriginal mother, one of six children who were never publicly acknowledged by their father. He, in 1927, had handed over the two eldest children to the United Aboriginal Mission. When she was two years old, Lowitja and her two older sisters, were removed from their mother and placed in the Colebrook Home where she met up with her older siblings and was given a new name (Lois) and a new birthdate of August 1, 1932. She would not see her mother again for another 33 years. Unlike others she was relatively happy living at the home and received a good education, graduating with her leaving certificate. At sixteen years of age, she was baptised.

At sixteen, like girls her age, she was sent out to be a domestic servant to a white family. Lowitja wanted to be a nurse though, and she after two years, began work as a nursing aide. She then applied to be a student nurse in Adelaide, but they would not admit indigenous women. They would however admit her, if she signed away her aboriginality, something that she refused to do, and which led her to participating in organisations which worked for the rights of indigenous people. After some representations to people in power, she was finally admitted to train as a nurse, becoming probably the first indigenous person to be admitted. After about 10 years she became a charge nurse.

¹ Most of this was taken from her Wikipedia page

In 1962 she went as nurse with Baptist Overseas Mission to Assam India. War there cut that short and she returned to Australia. Again, she was probably the first indigenous person to serve with Baptist Overseas Mission overseas.

Upon her return she began her public service career as a Aboriginal liaison and welfare officer, it is at this time she found out her real name was Lowitja and that her mother was still alive. She was the founding chair of the National Aboriginal Conference and then chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee (ATSIC). During that time, she presented the groups response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. She was the first Aboriginal Australian to address the United Nations. She was part of the team negotiating with the government on Native Title. She was the first indigenous person to give an address as part of Australia Day celebrations in 2000. The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, sought her advice in the lead up to the Apology to the Stolen Generation in 2008.

In 1998 she was declared a National Living Treasure. She listed Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Don Dunstan and Paul Keating amongst those who inspired her.

She married in 1979 but had no children. Lowitja, a woman who spent her life working for the health and wellbeing of all, but particularly her indigenous brothers and sisters. A woman who took the seed of God's love and spread it throughout the country and as far as India.

Jerry Jangala was born a few years later than Lowitja, in 1935 and a little further north, in the Northern Territory. He grew up in the bush with his family, hunting and learning the traditional ways of his people. A life he described as happy and where they had all they wanted, where he learned to survive in the desert and where to find water. He was initiated as an Aboriginal man at Wave Hill. He travelled around Alice Springs, Yuendumu, Tennant Creek, Wave Hill before settling in Lajamanu which is North West of Alice Springs, basically traversing the Tanami Desert and mostly on foot. He did not encounter a white person until he was a teenager and riding in trucks was scary as it seemed to him that the bush was moving toward him and he and the truck were standing still! He helped build some of the buildings in Lajamanu for which he received food rations but no pay in return. In describing his life, he said - 'our life has changed, and it has become easier, but not everything is better. Our old life was a good life, we were free, healthy, and strong and we should not forget that.'² Jerry is now an elder and Pastor in Lajamanu and was awarded an OAM for his serviced to the indigenous community through the Baptist Union of the Northern Territory. He paints, makes boomerangs, is a teacher, a law man, a mentor for his people and helps academics understand the Warlpiri culture. Currently the Baptist Mission of Australia is, with his help, writing his biography, from nomadic hunter to community elder and Christian Pastor.³

Another indigenous person who has spent his life spreading seeds of God's love in his community.

² Taken from an article 'Jerry Jangala' in Tracks.

³ Baptist Mission Australia project

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Two very different people, two very different lives but two people who served both their God and their people all of their lives.

So, on this last Sunday in NAIDOC week, let us celebrate and honour these two people who have during their life been fellow Baptists spreading love, standing up for justice and the rights of their brothers and sisters. Might we too go and do likewise. Amen.