

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION



Kerrie Wehbe

National Close The Gap Day (16 March 2023)

Why is *Closing the Gap* important?

For the most part, Australians have the privilege of experiencing one of the highest life expectancies of any country in the world. However, this is not the case for many minority groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who can, on average, expect to live up to eight years fewer than non-Indigenous Australians. This difference is due to the reality that First Nations people in Australia experience higher rates of preventable illnesses (such as heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes), socio-economic disadvantages (such as access to safe and affordable housing, racism, disproportionate rates of incarceration), and impacted life outcomes overall as a result. (Source: ANTaR, 2023 (*Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation*)) (<https://antar.org.au/issues/closing-the-gap>)

This year we will all have an opportunity to support an important social justice initiative on a national level when we are asked to vote 'yes' or 'no' regarding a First Nations 'Voice' to Parliament being enshrined in the Australian Constitution. In the Uluru Statement From The Heart, Australian First Nations representatives stated a desire to claim their rights and assert their communal authority to change unjust structures that deny them their capacity and agency to live fully human lives – to close the gap. It is hoped and expected that establishing a permanent and influential 'Voice' will do more than treat the symptoms of disadvantage; it will assist in breaking the whole cycle of disadvantage for our First Nations people over time.

As bearers of Jules Chevalier's charisma (which sees the love of the heart of Jesus as the solution to society's ills), we can act justly by informing ourselves of the truths in the current debate about the 'Voice'. We can also tell others how important the 'Voice' is in ensuring no one is left behind.

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It's very much about respect. It's about acknowledgement. It's about a journey that's continuing to unfold. (Bishop Gauci, Darwin, 2022)

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