

## Resolution of Council

**29 June 2026**

**Item 15.5**

**20th Anniversary of St Vincent's Church "Message Stick Mural"**

Moved by Councillor Weldon, seconded by Councillor Arkins –

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) 30 July 2026 marks the 20-year anniversary of the Redfern St Vincent's Church "Message Stick Mural";
- (ii) the mural, which was highly controversial at the time, depicts part of Pope John Paul II's 1986 Alice Springs Address to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and serves as a permanent memorial to Aboriginal history at the church;
- (iii) 2026 also marks the 40th anniversary of this Address from Pope John Paul II. The Address was the first time the Catholic Church publicly declared its support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, calling for greater inclusion in the Church, and respect for Aboriginal culture, history and connection to the land;
- (iv) the Aboriginal community in Redfern has strong ties to St Vincent's Church. From 1971-2003, parish priest Father Ted Kennedy fostered an environment of inclusivity for all – opening the doors to the First Nations community, providing support, lodging, food and refuge against ongoing police violence. The original Aboriginal Medical Service operated out of a building given to the community by the North Sydney Sisters of Mercy at the church;
- (v) Father Kennedy preached the importance of reconciliation, the need to acknowledge the truth of the atrocities committed against First Nations peoples, and the unacceptable silence of the Catholic Church. Over the 30 years of Father Kennedy's leadership at St Vincent's, the church had become a home for the Aboriginal community;

- (vi) Shirley Smith, known to many as Mum Shirl, was a significant influence for Father Kennedy, working with him to support the First Nations community and teaching him the need to fight for justice;
  - (vii) the arrival of new priests in 2003 saw a shift in attitude away from the inclusive environment championed by Father Kennedy. The priests were appointed by Cardinal George Pell, and were missionaries of the Neocatechumenal Way – a program of Catholicism known for its conservative structures;
  - (viii) during this time, these conservative priests subjected churchgoers from marginalised communities to discrimination, bullying and withheld Holy Communion;
  - (ix) the “Message Stick Mural” was painted without the current parish priest’s knowledge, as part of the community’s protest against the current administration. It was an effort brought to life by the community of the church;
  - (x) the group snuck into the church the day before Mass was scheduled to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s Address. The paint was dry by the time people arrived at Mass the following day – surprised by the mural that appeared overnight. Father Frank Brennan, a priest who had worked with Father Kennedy, called for the congregation to stand and bless the mural, noting its permanence as a memorial to Aboriginal spirituality;
  - (xi) many contributed to painting the mural, including prominent First Nations artists. The mural depicts part of Pope John Paul II’s Address inside a tree of hands, alongside native Australian wildlife;
  - (xii) the instillation of the mural represented a reclaiming of the church for Aboriginal people – and served as a permanent reminder of Pope John Paul II’s call for the Catholic Church to include, support and respect their culture; and
  - (xiii) the mural has been restored 3 times, funded the first 2 times by parishioners and most recently from parish funds. The mural remains on display today as a reflection of the Redfern Aboriginal community’s history, activism and connection to St Vincent’s Church;
- (B) Council further note:
- (i) the significance of the “Message Stick Mural” at Redfern’s St Vincent’s Church in Sydney’s Aboriginal history; and
  - (ii) the significance of the Redfern precinct, including the St Vincent Church’s “Message Stick Mural”, the historical sites of the Aboriginal Medical Service, Aboriginal Housing Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service, in the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples fight for self-determination; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to the parish priest of St Vincent’s Church, Father Paul Smithers and Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP in recognition of the 20th Anniversary of the “Message Stick Mural”, noting it’s significance and permanence in Sydney’s Aboriginal history.

Carried unanimously.

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