

Vignette

Bishop Saibo Mabo

THE TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS are those that lie between the tip of Australia, Cape York and Papua New Guinea. There are many islands in the Torres Strait and there are several different languages spoken there. My island is Murray Island, which we call Mer. It is part of the Eastern Island Group. Our language is Meriam Mir. Thursday Island, the Administrative Centre, is part of the Central Island Group, which has another language. Saibai Is and Boigu Is (my wife's island), which are near Papua New Guinea, are part of the Western Island Group. They speak another language altogether too. We Torres Strait Islanders all speak two languages: Kala Lagaw Ya/Kala Kawaw Ya (Western Island dialects) and Meriam Mir (Eastern Island language). We also speak Torres Strait Creole, which is a bit like New Guinea Pisin.

The Torres Strait itself has about eight Anglican churches on the islands and one at Bamaga on the tip of Cape York. However, there are more Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait than in the islands. For instance, we have one Torres Strait Islander church in Cairns (St Luke's), one in Townsville (St Stephens), and ten congregations in Brisbane. There are also Islander communities in Broome, Darwin, Mackay, Gladstone, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. So Islanders are scattered throughout the whole of Australia. This is because groups of Islanders worked cutting sugarcane and then in gangs building the railway lines right across Australia during the mineral boom of the 60s and 70s. Islanders travelled across Australia with the railways and many of them set up homes in places a long way from their islands. They have developed new Islander communities in cities too. Islanders are community or group people and function best in this manner, so need to come together to preserve their language and culture.

I am Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of North Queensland and bishop for Torres Strait Islander communities or groups throughout Australia. Similarly, Bishop James Leftwich is Assistant Bishop and bishop for the Aboriginal people for the whole of Australia. Apart from my work with my people, I am a member of the Committee of NATSIAC, (the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coordinating Committee), I am vice

chairman of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission. This year I represented Australia at the World Council of Churches Assembly in South America. As well, I am a member of the Synod of North Queensland, the Queensland Provincial and a full member of the General Synod of Australia

Unfortunately, when I became Bishop for the Torres Strait Islanders, I inherited a large problem. A split or schism in the Anglican Church in the Torres Strait Region occurred when the church of the Torres Strait broke away, later splitting up again to form in addition the Traditional Anglican Church and the Independent Anglican Church. These breakaway groups have three bishops and have also created their own priests. So, we find that some families in the Torres Strait are now split in their allegiance. Some are members of the Anglican Church of Australia, others are members of the breakaway churches.

I am trying to bring all Anglicans back to the one church and show the people who have broken away that it is all right to return. Some who have broken away are now seeing that their new church does not have the support that the Anglican Church of Australia can give. Part of my job has been to find a way of enabling these people to come back with dignity.

Because the Torres Strait Islanders are very spiritual people, on some small islands of about 400 people, there may be six different churches with various priests and pastors. I try to be watchful and ready to answer theological questions under discussion. In fact, I submit an article almost every week to the Torres Strait newspaper giving a theological explanation on a current topic of discussion, such as the Gospel of Judas. This is very important work for me; as a bishop I am a shepherd to my people wherever they are.