

Screen Watch

Hard to reconcile

Whiteys Like Us

8.30pm SBS

In one scene in *Whiteys Like Us*, this reconciliation study circle is divided into two groups as part of a role play: the whites and the blacks. It's not very long before the group of whites splits right down the middle; they can't get on, can't reconcile. In the meantime, the whites have been asking the blacks what they want. The blacks' answer is: "This is your process."

A group of 15 white people, from Sydney's northern beaches, armed with the reconciliation study circle kit and some good intentions, gather in the Manly TAPE for two hours, once a week for eight weeks. One of the circle members speaks of her hope that an indigenous person would gently lead the group away from their ignorance and defensiveness, towards understanding and an ability to reconcile, but realises that all these white people have in this process is each other. It's up to them, they have to do it.

Non-indigenous Australians have to ask themselves what they want from reconciliation. Reconciliation is not the sole province of the indigenous person, but must be owned and taken on by all. It's about the relationships between all of us, and we are all responsible for our part in that relationship. We cannot be passive and wait for reconciliation to come to us. It is an opportunity to be grasped. The task for non-indigenous Australia is a large, but not insurmountable, one — to decolonise its thinking, struc-

tures, processes and relationships.

Reconciliation, while being a statutory process that is due to wind up on the centenary of Federation in January 2001, is a people's movement. This is its strength. Study circles were seen by the Reconciliation Council as a way to promote understanding, and as a way people could take charge of the process of informing themselves of the realities of indigenous experiences of colonisation in this country.

Whiteys Like Us demonstrates the difficulty of that task, the low base from which reconciliation must come. A lack of a sense of history, ignorance combined with strongly held misconceptions, prejudice, and the personal experience of the participants proved to be powerful impediments to the possibility for respectful debate leading to understanding.

Reconciliation is a powerful concept — one with which it is hard to disagree in principle. Yet to achieve reconciliation, there must be fundamental change in two directions: to the legal and institutional structures that govern us, and we have to accommodate a new decolonised relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

The concept of circles is a useful one to explain reconciliation. These people were part of a study circle, and I have previously talked of the whitefella and government circles wanting to envelop and contain the blackfella circle. This is assimilation. We need to learn to allow our circles to sit side by side, overlapping and interacting with respect. This is co-existence.



Difficult road: two of the study group; below, Pat Dodson, who was the inaugural chair of the Reconciliation Council



As this group of people grappled with the realities presented in the material before them, it was clear that a large part of what they wanted was to feel better about themselves, and to feel better about being in this country, that they belong to it. They wanted a kind of therapy. This, again, was acknowledged by a member of the group. There is nothing

wrong with this, perhaps part of the task is to reconcile the self, but it must sit alongside a commitment to understanding the truth of the historical relationship between us, and a will to move forward, not just rearrange prejudices.

In one scene in the documentary, during the role play, a facilitator asks: "When is reconciliation due?" The answer is in about half an hour. They don't manage it in the time limit set for them, and nor will we. Australia has a little less than a year and a half before reconciliation is supposed to be achieved. There are too many outstanding issues: the stolen generation, land rights, winding back the assimilation mindset.

Apart from the few souls who couldn't cope with the squabbling, fits of temper and lack of progress, and left the group, it seems like a small miracle that the group stayed as intact to the end as it did. Perhaps this also demonstrates the power of the concept of reconciliation.

— PAT DODSON

SwitchOff

Kirk

3.30pm Nine

Oh dang, it's the final episode. Wait, this isn't some hitherto unknown spin-off series of everyone's favourite starship captain, James Tiberius Kirk; no, it's a sitcom starring Kirk Cameron, who was allegedly a heart-throb for about 10 minutes in the 80s. Cameron was the oldest son in the saccharine sitcom, *Growing Pains*, which also featured a young Leonardo DiCaprio until he saw sense and left. Unless the star was originally a stand-up comedian, never trust a sitcom in which he or she has the same name as his or her character, because it means anything else is too much of an acting stretch.

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