PROTOCOLS FOR A WELCOME TO COUNTRY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Recognition of Aboriginal traditional ownership of Country through a formal process is called a ‘Welcome to Country’ and an 'Acknowledgement of Country'.

WHY CONDUCT A WELCOME TO COUNTRY

The Welcome to Country is a right of the local traditional custodians and owners. Arranging a Welcome to Country ceremony is an act that recognises and acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of the land and demonstrates respect for Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples.

As Linda Burney MP observed during her speech for the 7th Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture:

“In observing the protocol of acknowledging country, we are reminded of three things.

Firstly, that Australia is a country of many layers. The most ancient layer is that of Aboriginal Australia. Hundreds of Nation states….This is a map which should be as familiar to all Australians as the eight states and territories. Sadly it is not.

Secondly, acknowledging country reminds us of the great gift Aboriginal culture and survival bestows on us as a nation.

Thirdly and most urgently, acknowledging country reminds us of unfinished business. This relates to the rights and social justice outcomes - or lack of them - of the first Australians.”

Ceremonies and protocols form an essential part of Aboriginal culture. Valuing and respecting Aboriginal ceremonial practices is pertinent to increasing understanding and mutual respect. Appropriate cultural engagement seeks to observe protocols and the sharing of cultural practices.

Improving relationships between the local Aboriginal community and the broader community through ceremony, observing protocols and the process of collaborative negotiation is essential.
WELCOME TO COUNTRY CEREMONY

A Welcome to Country is conducted by the traditional Aboriginal custodian, owner or Elder who welcomes and blesses people to their land. The person or group conducting the ceremony may do the following:

- A welcome and blessing in the local traditional language
- A welcoming song
- Smoking ceremony
- A traditional dance
- Didgeridoo performance or a combination of these activities

WHEN TO CONDUCT A ‘WELCOME TO COUNTRY’

A Welcome to Country occurs at the opening of an event and is usually the first item on the program. A Welcome to Country should be performed at events such as:

- Openings
- Graduation ceremonies
- Assemblies
- Special Masses
- Special luncheons
- Retreats
- Speech nights and other significant meetings

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY
(CAN BE GIVEN BY A NON-ABORIGINAL PERSON)

An Acknowledgement of Country should always occur after a Welcome to Country or as the first item in the Opening Ceremony if a Welcome to Country is unable to be performed. Where the name of the local Aboriginal language group is known, it should be used. Where it is not known, a general acknowledgement is given.

An Acknowledgement of Country is an act that is respectful and is recognition of traditional Aboriginal protocols. Acknowledging Country and the Traditional Owners or Custodians is one way in which all Australians can show respect for the local Aboriginal people’s culture, heritage and ongoing relationship with the Land.

An ‘Acknowledgment’ might be, for example:

“I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians and owners of the land we’re gathering on today.”

“As we take our next step we remember the Aboriginal people who first
walked this land”

“I would like to begin by acknowledging the [insert name] people and pay my deepest respect to their Elders, past present and future and acknowledge their ongoing spiritual connection to this Country “.

You may wish to establish your own wording to reflect the local context.

PLANNING A WELCOME TO COUNTRY

The following points will assist you in planning the process for a Welcome to Country by the Traditional Owners or Custodians on whose land the event is taking place.

- Identify the traditional owners or custodians of the land on which you stand (where the event is being held).
- Identify who will be performing the Welcome to Country and what are their roles?
- The person should be contacted and invited to clarify and discuss details for the Welcome to Country, including timeline for the event.
- Exchange emergency contact details.
- Clarify how they will be recognised for their time and commitment, including the fee for service (most people would like to be paid on the day).

It is important for the traditional owners or custodians to be comfortable with the arrangements for an event.

WHO CAN HELP ME FIND THE TRADITIONAL OWNERS OR CUSTODIANS?

There are many Aboriginal people employed within your region. For example, in Catholic schools, local Aboriginal organisations, State government and Australian government organisations and other service providers.

A Welcome to Country cannot be given by an Aboriginal person who does not have traditional ties to the land on whose Country the event/occasion is taking place.