

Over 100 Gather for 5th Annual First Nations Encounter Day in Townsville

More than 100 participants from Catholic ministries across Townsville gathered with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, leaders, and community members to engage in a powerful day of deep listening, connection, and reconciliation at the 5th Annual First Nations Encounter Day.

Held on Friday, 23 May, the day began with a smoking ceremony and a Passing the Flame ritual, led by First Nations Elders in the grounds of St Teresa's Catholic Church, Garbutt. Participants then processed into the church for a time of prayer and song.

Local community leader Trudy Clarke welcomed attendees and explained that this year's event was planned and led by local First Nations leaders. The 2025 theme, "Passing the Flame: Strength, Vision and Legacy," focused on sharing stories of local initiatives that are transforming lives and empowering individuals to break cycles of poverty and violence.

Keynote speakers included:

- Uncle Bradley Henaway – prison ministry leader and advocate for justice and men's healing.
- Aunty Evelyn Lymburner – mentor in correctional facilities and leader in reconnecting people to Country.
- James Bacon – facilitator of Men's Behaviour Change programs in domestic violence.
- Carl Lymburner – leader of men's healing groups.
- Judy Geary-Eckersley – pastor and educator leading pathways for First Nations people to enter the teaching profession.
- Irene from H.O.M.E (Helping Our Mob Everywhere) – supporting young people through training, employment, and advocacy.

In the afternoon, participants joined yarning circles, providing space for continued deep listening and dialogue to progress leadership and reconciliation, aligning with this year's National Reconciliation Week theme: "Bridging Now to Next."

Attendees included local First Nations people, parishioners from St Teresa's, Bishop Tim Harris and diocesan clergy, as well as representatives from Mercy Partners ministries such as St Patrick's College, Mater Hospital, and Mercy Community Services. Also present were members of religious congregations including the Sisters of Mercy, Holy Spirit Sisters, and the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, along with groups such as St Vincent de Paul, Mercy Associates and the House of Prayer.

The event was sponsored by Mercy Partners, who provided financial and administrative support. Mercy Partners Director Cath Bartolo offered a vote of thanks to the local First Nations leaders and the St Teresa's community. She reflected that "through the presentations and discussions, it was evident that the healing, liberating, and life-giving mercy of God had been present."

The Encounter Day was proudly sponsored by Mercy Partners, a multi-charism multi-ministry PJP. Mercy Partners originates from the mercy of God and working in partnerships.