

Passing the Flame: A warm witness to reconciliation, healing and hope in Townsville

As Reconciliation Week 2026 drew to a close under the national theme “I’m in”, the Passing the Flame gathering at St Teresa’s in Townsville offered a compelling expression of what reconciliation can look like when it is lived in community. Warm, grounded and deeply relational, the day brought together elders, leaders, families and people with lived experience to share stories of truth, healing and hope.

Held in the newly established St Teresa’s parish and coinciding with the feast of Pentecost, the event carried a strong sense of spiritual significance. Just as Pentecost speaks of courage, renewal and being sent out in hope, Passing the Flame reflected a community being strengthened to listen deeply, lead locally and carry forward a more life-giving future.

At a time when Australia is being invited to consider what it means to say “I’m in” for reconciliation, the gathering offered more than a slogan. It revealed reconciliation as relationship, responsibility and shared commitment, expressed not only in words but in the courage of those willing to speak honestly about their lives and in the willingness of others to listen.

Bishop Tim Harris joined the community to mark the significance of St Teresa’s becoming a personal parish in its own right, speaking about the greater authority and responsibility that comes with local leadership. His presence underscored the importance of listening deeply to community realities and building a future shaped by trust, participation and shared purpose. The gathering was a demonstration of synodality – walking together and listening to one another.

At the heart of the day was the men’s healing group, led by Karl Lymburner, whose members shared powerful accounts of hardship, healing and change. Karl spoke of leadership grounded in culture, legacy and responsibility, and of a long commitment to strengthening families and creating safer, community-led pathways. Jerrad Hoffmann, a Juru–Jirrbil man with South Sea Islander and Australian heritage, spoke as a father and victim-survivor whose story reflected both the reality of harm and the strength found in accountability, identity and healing. Chaston Nicholas, a proud young Bwgcolman man from Palm Island, shared a story of reconnection, describing how support through Passing the Knowledge, headspace and HOME helped him rebuild his sense of self, reconnect with his son, and embrace a healthier vision of fatherhood.

Other speakers extended that story of healing and responsibility. Doug Wong reflected on the importance of being heard and accepted. Cassandra Brown, Social Inclusion Coordinator at headspace Townsville, brought the perspective of grassroots advocacy for young people, speaking to the power of genuine connection, social inclusion and community-led support in helping people make positive change. Krista Hobbs, a proud

Kalkadoon woman and First Nations Education Adviser, spoke about culture, truth-telling and the role of education in strengthening identity and opportunity for young people. Aunty Jennifer Guise, a local Elder for Change and senior counsellor, brought the perspective of intergenerational survival and cultural strength, drawing on family histories shaped by the Stolen Generations and a lifelong commitment to supporting women, children and community healing.

A recurring theme across the day was fatherhood, alongside the deeper call to become present, protective and life-giving within families and communities. Speakers described the hard work of breaking cycles of trauma and neglect, and the hope that grows when people are given the chance to be seen, supported and accountable to one another. In that sense, reconciliation was expressed not only as a national aspiration, but as something lived intimately in homes, relationships and daily choices.

What emerged throughout the gathering was a steady and unmistakable sense of truth-telling, connection and renewal. The stories shared were honest about pain and disadvantage, yet they were equally marked by resilience, dignity and the possibility of a different future. These surely are the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

That spirit was strengthened by the work of Trudy Clarke and Fr Emene Kelemete, whose gifts for building relationships helped link people, stories and opportunities beyond the room itself. Through gentle encouragement and practical connection-making, they helped ensure that the flame kindled during the day would continue to travel outward into other communities and conversations.

Passing the Flame revealed a community unwilling to be defined solely by wounds of the past. Instead, it highlighted the strength that emerges when people are truly listened to, when culture is honoured, and when healing is approached as shared work. In that way, the day offered a public witness to resilience, faith and the power of local community to shape its own future.

As the Church in Australia continues its journey of reconciliation, gatherings such as Passing the Flame offer a reminder that grace often takes shape in local, grounded acts of hospitality, listening and courage. In Townsville, that flame was carried in stories of survival, fatherhood, culture and care — and in the invitation for others to step forward, join the work and help keep it burning.

Article by Kate Garrone from Mercy Partners, the proud sponsor of Passing the Flame.