

United Aborigines Mission

1929 – 2020

Other Names:

- UAM
- UAM Ministries

Details

The United Aborigines Mission (UAM) was established in 1929. Formerly, it was known as the Australian Aborigines Mission. Its missionaries were active in New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, where the UAM established missions as well as institutions for children. All UAM children's Homes had been shut down by the early 1980s. The UAM was wound up at the end of 2020.

The UAM and its antecedents understood mission as the conversion to Christianity of Aboriginal people (Longworth, p.5). In the second half of the twentieth century, the shift in Australian government policy towards assimilation led to challenges for UAM and its institutions. The UAM was “deeply complicit in removal of First Nation children from their parents” (Bishop, 2024).

Even after the closure of the last of its children's institutions, the UAM continued to exist, the corporate body (also known as UAM Ministries) was based in the state of Victoria, as were its archives.

In October 2019, Sharrock Pitman Legal Pty Ltd, a legal firm based in Melbourne, advised the Find & Connect web resource that the United Aborigines Mission and UAM Ministries were in the process of being wound up.

According to the website of the Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission, UAM Ministries' charity registration was voluntarily revoked on 31 December 2021.

The United Aborigines Mission was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families.

National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse

In 2021, the New South Wales, South Australian and Western Australian governments agreed to be a funder of last resort for institutions run by United Aborigines Mission. This means that although the institution is now defunct, it is participating in the National Redress Scheme, and the government has agreed to pay the institution's share of costs of providing redress to a person (as long as the government is found to be equally responsible for the abuse a person experienced).

UAM Records

As of 2025, the only records created by the UAM that are confirmed to still exist is [a collection of UAM records that was deposited with the State Library of South Australia](#) in late 2022. This collection comprises some records relating to Colebrook, Tanderra and Oodnadatta Homes in South Australia, and the Bomaderry Aboriginal

Children's Home in New South Wales.

A former director of the UAM swore an [affidavit in 2023](#) that stated that all records housed at UAM storage facility in Victoria were destroyed in 2020, following flooding. However, the details provided of records destroyed are only a small proportion of UAM records known to have existed.

This page contains [descriptions of records known to have been held by the UAM Archives](#) but the whereabouts of which are unknown in October 2025. These descriptions have been compiled from publicly available sources, such as the publications *Finding your own way* (2005) and *Connecting Kin* (1998).

Documenting the UAM Records on Find & Connect

This section provides some background information about the years of work done by many people to improve access to UAM records for members of the Stolen Generations and their families. Detailed information about this work is contained in [this affidavit to the Yoorrook Justice Commission](#).

In the early 2000s, the UAM was forthcoming in providing access to its archival records, and providing assistance to projects that aimed to improve access to records for members of the Stolen Generations. Dr Karen George, author of the directory [Finding your own way \(2005\)](#) had "extensive contact" with the UAM from the early 2000s until 2008 when she was researching records relating to UAM missions and institutions in South Australia. This included a visit in February 2004 to the home of the UAM archivist, Chris Jones, to review and list the "boxes of records" that were housed at the time in his Melbourne home (C O'Neill affidavit to Yoorrook Justice Commission, 11 January 2023). To assist Dr George's work as a researcher for the [Mullighan Inquiry](#), the UAM archivist agreed to "send a significant amount of boxes of South Australian records" to Adelaide. The Inquiry used the records to investigate and corroborate accounts of sexual abuse at UAM institutions. "The photocopies of records which had been taken during the Mullighan Inquiry process were archived at State Records of South Australia as part of the Mullighan Inquiry records and are inaccessible" (Karen George affidavit, 8 March 2024).

Dr George recalls that the UAM records were "highly detailed, containing many names of children and details of their activities and movements. This included things such as their holidays, schooling and foster placements, among other things".

Dr George was a member of the Find & Connect web resource team, working from 2011 to 2015 as the state based historian for South Australia and the Northern Territory and developing content about institutions and records relating to these jurisdictions. The website's information about UAM records was largely based on George's publication *Finding your own way*, which contains detailed listings of records that she had reviewed years before. Part of the state based historians' role was to liaise with past providers to confirm that the information on Find & Connect was accurate. This engagement also gave organisations an opportunity to collaborate with Find & Connect, providing more information to improve the website's content.

In her attempts to liaise with the UAM for the Find & Connect project, Dr George found that the organisation "became more obstructive as time went on" (O'Neill affidavit, p.5). She had difficulty making contact and getting replies to most emails and phone calls during her employment on Find & Connect.

Another indication of a change in approach at UAM in terms of providing access to its archives is the [form](#) it required people to sign before requesting access to their personal records. The organisation set the following conditions for accessing UAM records:

1. that UAM has no obligation to ensure that any information which it has in its records is found;
2. that you release UAM from any action, suit, claim or demand in respect of any act or omission of UAM and its servants and agents in respect of the subject of your inquiry.

George again attempted to make contact with the UAM about its archives in 2015, when she was working for Link-Up SA. In May 2015, the UAM archivist, Chris Jones, replied to an email to advise that the council of UAM Ministries closed the archives to public access in 2009. The Doncaster property where they had been stored was sold in 2011. Jones stated that the UAM records were "in storage and not readily accessible" (Exhibit CO-2,

O'Neill affidavit).

In December 2015 the UAM archivist, Chris Jones, emailed Dr George again and stated that the UAM council did not accept that the organisation held records matching the information that she had compiled for the *Finding your own way* directory (2005) and in the course of her work as a research historian for the Mullighan Inquiry. "The council does not accept that the records they hold contain the level or amount of information claimed ... Missionaries kept very few if any records in the course of their work" (Exhibit CO-3, O'Neill affidavit).

In September 2018, the Find & Connect project met with Kath Apma Penangke Travis, whose mother was a resident of Colebrook Home in South Australia. Dr Travis advised that the UAM archives were now housed in a two-storey unit in Techno Park Drive, Williamstown North. When she lived in that area of Melbourne, Travis had noticed a UAM sign on the building and, knowing the organisation's connection to her family story, wanted to know what was inside.

Kath Apma Penangke Travis went to the United Aborigines Mission office day after day for months on end, in the hope of finding someone who could locate records about her mother. The "office" was a dingy ground-floor unit in an industrial area of the Melbourne suburb of Williamstown. It was the UAM's only known location, but there was never anyone there (The Guardian, 23 September 2023).

On one of her visits in 2017, Travis encountered Chris Jones and told him of her connection to the UAM. Jones let her in, "And then he went into one of the rooms and he came out with the admissions register record of my mum" (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2023).

Dr Travis was aware that her experience talking to UAM staff and getting access to her mother's records was very different to that of many family members of people in UAM institutions who could not access their records. Throughout 2018 and 2019, Dr Travis, in consultation with Find & Connect and Public Record Office Victoria, made several approaches to Chris Jones, proposing a digitisation project, at no cost to the organisation, to ensure the preservation of and access to the UAM collection. These efforts were not successful.

How big was the UAM archival collection?

Despite the UAM's statements about its archives not being as extensive as the collections described on Find & Connect, we continued to publish the information prepared by Karen George when she was the state-based historian, as it was based on reliable sources, and we had not been advised of any transfers or destruction of the records.

Documents in the National Archives of Australia from 1997 also refer to UAM once holding extensive archival records, described as "one of the most significant collections of records relating to indigenous Australians outside government custody" ([NAA: B899, 1997/203, p.56](#)). Government archivists visited UAM Archives in East Doncaster in October 1997 and reported that the collection comprised approximately 120 commercial archive boxes, including 6 boxes of loose photographs, central administration records of the UAM, copies of the UAM publication *United Aborigine Messenger* and *Australian Aboriginal Advocate*, and records relating to UAM missions and children's homes.

Another historian who used UAM records in 2007 for her PhD thesis, when they were stored in a garage in suburban Melbourne, described the collection: "One wall of the garage was taken up by cupboards running along the full length of the wall. These cupboards were stacked from floor to ceiling with labelled boxes of documents" (Affidavit of Catherine Bishop, 1 February 2024).

Winding up of the UAM

In 2019, through contact with lawyers in New South Wales representing former clients of Bomaderry, a former UAM institution, Find & Connect was advised that some UAM records were in the custody of a legal firm in

Victoria, Sharrock Pitman Legal. This firm advised us in October 2019 that the UAM was in the process of being wound up and had not been operational for years. Sharrock Pitman Legal advised that UAM had no records except for two registers in their custody.

In October 2022, a representative of Sharrock Pitman Legal advised Wattle Place, the Find & Connect support service for New South Wales, who were seeking access to Bomaderry records, that the firm no longer acted for UAM Ministries and no longer held “any admission records or similar”.

In December 2022, a representative of UAM transferred a small quantity of records relating to institutions in SA and NSW to the State Library of South Australia (SLSA). These records are described on [this page](#). The records deposited with SLSA are only a small proportion of the UAM records known to have existed.

At this time, UAM advised SLSA that the records it was transferring to them were the only records that still existed, due to the flooding that had occurred at the storage facility in Williamstown in 2020, resulting in records there being contaminated and needing to be destroyed.

Subsequently in 2023, the UAM’s David Reid swore an [affidavit for the Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) stating that the destroyed records comprised “federal office files” and that “very few files produced by the NSW, SA and WA offices were in the archives in Melbourne. Those which did come to Melbourne were mostly copies of correspondence relating to the operations in those states. The federal office did not have files for the children’s homes run by the Mission in NSW (Bomaderry) and SA (Colebrook) as these were State Council responsibilities”.

Reid’s description of the records at Williamstown does not match the scope and amount of records described by Karen George and other public sources. Documentary evidence of the flooding and the clean-up provided to the Yoorrook Justice Commission shows an amount of records that is much smaller than that described by Dr Travis who was at the site in 2017 and reported seeing a room “just full of boxes, and shelves of papers, boxes and files” (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2023).

Gallery



The newsletter of the United Aborigines Mission March 1938

Description: This is a copy of an image in the Lap  rouse Museum Collection.



View of four of the five cottages from the west. In the foreground is the site of the original cottage dormitories

Description: This image shows some of the cottages of the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home.

More info

Chronology

- Australian Aborigines' Mission (c. 1894 - 1929)

- **United Aborigines Mission (1929 – 2020)**

Related Entries

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- [Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home \(1908 - 1988\)](#)
- [Nepabunna Mission \(1931 - 1977\)](#)
- [Fitzroy Crossing Mission \(1952 - 1987\)](#)
- [Mount Margaret Mission \(1921 - 1975\)](#)
- [Sunday Island Mission \(1899 - 1934\)](#)

Date: 1929 - 1934

- [Sunday Island Mission \(1937 - 1964\)](#)
- [United Aborigines Mission, Halls Creek \(1957 - 1967\)](#)
- [Warburton Mission \(1933 - 1977\)](#)
- [Wotjulum \(1934 - 1937\)](#)
- [Oodnadatta Children's Home \(1924 - 1974\)](#)
- [Gnowangerup Mission \(1926 - 1973\)](#)
- [Djurain Mission Children's Home \(1950 - 1954\)](#)
- [Ooldea Mission \(1933 - 1952\)](#)
- [Colebrook Home \(1927 - 1981\)](#)
- [Finniss Springs Mission \(1939 - c. 1961\)](#)
- [Gerard Mission \(1946 - 1974\)](#)
- [Kali Boys' Hostel \(1971 - 1972\)](#)

Kali Boys' Hostel was run by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) under the control of the South Australian Department of Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs and its successors.

- [Swan Reach Mission \(1926 - 1946\)](#)
- [Tanderra Girls' Home \(1952 - 1973\)](#)
- [Cosmo Newbery Mission \(1953 - 1973?\)](#)
- [Derby Hostel \(1956 - 1994\)](#)
- [Fitzroy Crossing Hostel \(1956? - 1976\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Cosmo Newbery Native Settlement \(1951 - 1953\)](#)

The United Aborigines Mission lent one of its missionaries to the Western Australian Department of Native Affairs to act as Officer-in-Charge of Cosmo Newbery Native Settlement.

Resources

- United Aborigines Mission, *Challenging the almighty: 100 years of trusting God in the work of the United Aborigines Mission*, 1994
- [Bessie Ejai interviewed by Mary Anne Jebb in the Bringing Them Home after the Apology oral history project](#), 22 July 2010
- [Allan Rees interviewed by Colleen Hattersley in the Bringing them home oral history project \(2000\)](#), 25 August 2000
- [Kathleen Mack interviewed by John Bannister in the Bringing them home oral history project \(2001\)](#), 16 January 2001 - 18 January 2001
- [Interview with Lois Quadesmith, by Yvonne Choules](#), May 2001
- Longworth, Alison, [Was it worthwhile? An historical analysis of five women missionaries and their encounters with the Nyungar people of south-west Australia](#), 2005
- United Aborigines Mission, [The United Aborigines messenger](#), 1929 - 1987
- Morgan, Margaret R, *Mt Margaret: a drop in a bucket*, 2007
- [UAM Ministries website](#), 26 March 2018

Records

Records

- [Schenk Family Papers \(1921 - 1999\)](#)
 - [Records of Warburton Mission: 1949-1967 \(incomplete\) \[manuscript\] \(1949 - 1967\)](#)
 - [Warburton Mission \(1958 - 1961\)](#)
 - [United Aborigines Mission records known to have existed \(1920s - 1980s\)](#)
 - [United Aborigines Mission, records deposited with State Library of South Australia \(c. 1908 - c. 1976\)](#)
 - [Annual Reports of the Aborigines Protection Board \[Aboriginal Affairs Board\] \(1939 - 1969\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/united-aborigines-mission/>