

# THE TREE OF LIFE

## OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Tree of Life activity is a Cross Cultural Awareness opportunity that uses a tangible object (the tree) as the basis to explore aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture, Faith and Spirituality. Students may identify the similarities and differences with their own culture.

It take place over a single day, a week or several weeks depending on the structure that is utilised. Each of the steps can be expanded, removed or adapted to your own area. For example, if you have local community members that speak Language, the Languages could be expanded upon and include visits and presentations.

The activity will yield the best outcomes if the Local Community is engaged and consulted in designing and delivering the steps wherever possible. Use the 'Your NATSICC' section at [www.natsicc.org.au](http://www.natsicc.org.au) to find the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Ministry. If there isn't a local Ministry, your local Council will have contact details for the local Language group.



## PREPARATION

When learning and teaching about Australia's First Peoples, it is vital to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, groups and communities in your school community to ensure Cultural protocols are maintained.

Prior to undertaking the activity (particularly the Language section), it is advised that teachers first read <https://gambay.com.au/teachers>. These notes have been complied to support teachers in teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. Additionally, your Diocesan Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Office is an excellent resource and source of advice.



## STEP 1: CREATE A TREE OF LIFE

### Learning Opportunity

Discuss the native trees of the local area and research the various ways that Traditional Custodians used flora and fauna for food, medicine and culture.

### Additional Resources that could be incorporated:

Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment – Laudato Si <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3Lz7dmn1eM> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcP5E2trsX4>

The silhouette of the tree becomes the foundation upon which your activity can grow and form. The other aspects of the activity 'branch' out from this basic structure. Options for construction:

### Wall Display

- Using Black or painted paper, create an outline of a tree in a prominent space within the classroom or meeting room.
- Ensure the tree has a main trunk section with branches forming outwards. Be sure to leave room for individual leaves to be added.

### Plant Pot Display

- Cover a large plant pot with paper or decorations (or ask an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person to paint it).
- Fill the pot with clay, plaster or soil. Avoid using Potting Mix for health reasons.
- Place a fallen branch (without leaves), into the pot and display in a prominent position.

## STEP 2: INCORPORATE TRADITIONAL ART

### Learning Opportunity

This activity is an opportunity for students to research and discover the techniques used by the Traditional Custodians of their area. You could invite a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artist to explain the various symbols and painting techniques traditionally used by the local people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork has, for thousands of years, used symbolism to display deep and complex concepts that are interpreted through the lens of culture and spirituality learned from Elders. Each symbol carries meaning and significance. Artists have used these traditional techniques to paint bible stories and express their Christian faith.

### Art Activities:

- Art and Faith Activity: Renowned Aboriginal Artist Shirley Purdie shares her story and explains how her faith is depicted in her artwork. A number of activities for students to complete are included - <http://bit.ly/shirleypurdie>
- Paint Individual Leaves: Download the leaf template from the 2019 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday resources at [www.natsicc.org.au](http://www.natsicc.org.au) and invite students to use their newly acquired knowledge to depict their own faith. Once dried, these leaves can be placed on the tree. Alternatively, students can paint large gum leaves. Students could share their stories of faith and use of Traditional Symbols with the class or group.

## ACTIVITY OUTCOMES

By using the Tree of Life as a base, the students will have explored the areas of Traditional art, language and faith systems and will have explored their own faith journey through a different lens. The Tree of Life can be displayed throughout the year to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in various celebrations and events. Examples could be Christmas, Sorry Day, Reconciliation week or NAIDOC.

## STEP 4: LANGUAGE

### Learning Opportunity

The Language aspect of the activity highlights the linguistic and cultural diversity that exists in this Country. When learning and teaching about Australia's First languages, it is vital to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, groups and Communities in your school community.

**Listen to Languages:** : Gambay First Languages Map - <https://gambay.com.au/map>

**Language Groups** - <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>

The International Year of Indigenous Languages is a United Nations observance in 2019 that aims to raise awareness of the consequences of the endangerment of Indigenous languages across the world, with an aim to establish a link between language, development, peace, and reconciliation.

### Language Activities:

- Learn about the local Traditional language by either inviting a Traditional Custodian to work with the class or group or researching online (using the links provided above).
- Ask the students to find words that are linked to the tree - roots, wood, trunk, bark, branches, leaves, etc. Put these words on your Tree of Life display.
- Research Traditional words for Christian terms – God, Creator, Amen etc.

## STEP 5: FAITH

### Learning Opportunity

By reflecting on quotes by Deacon Boniface Perdjert and St John Paul II, students will gain a better understanding of the role that spirituality and faith play in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics. They will also be able to draw correlations to their own faith systems.

**Activity Resources:** <http://www.natsicc.org.au/a-tribute-to-deacon-boniface.html> and <http://www.natsicc.org.au/st-john-paul-resources.html>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics knew God thousands of years before the arrival of the first Missionaries. He spoke through the birds, the tress and the other animals. Deacon Boniface Perdjert - Australia's first Permanent (and Aboriginal) Deacon speaks of this knowledge in a beautiful and relatable way.

Saint John Paul II, when he spoke to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics in 1986, acknowledged the deep spiritual connection that Australia's first people have to the Creator. Both Deacon Boniface and Saint John Paul II give us an opportunity to explore the relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics have with God from different Cultural perspectives.

### Faith Activities:

Using the links above students can:

- Select a quote from both Deacon Boniface and Saint John Paul II and find the similarities
- Write a quote that speaks to them on an A4 piece of paper and place near the Tree of Life
- Using the text of St John Paul II's speech in 1986 or Deacon Boniface's story, explore the key messages and discuss ways in which they speak to Australian society today
- Create a blog expressing the impact that the messages of both Catholic leaders have had upon their own faith and relationship with God. Perhaps the blog could be hosted on the school website or social media account.