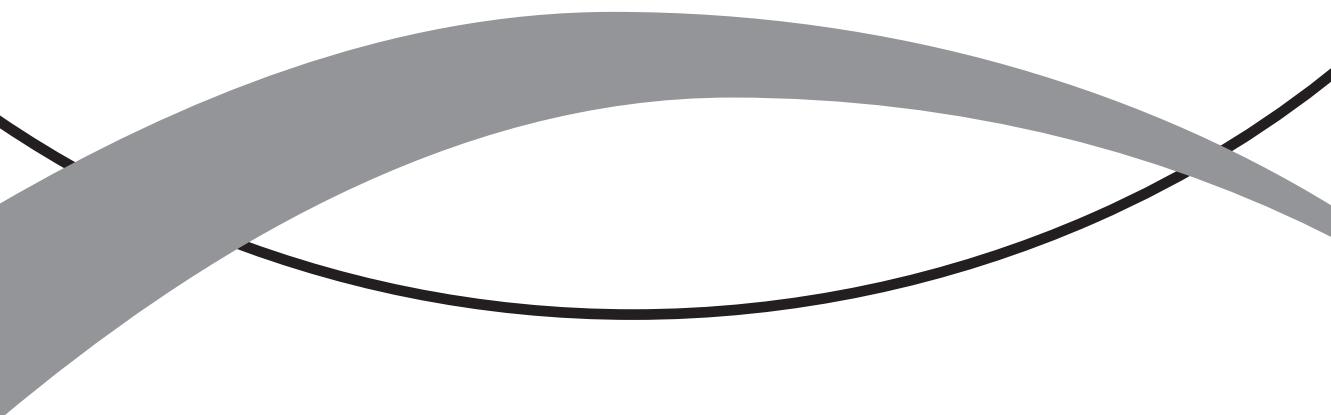


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EXTRACT

SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

Alter-narratives: Indigenous elders reflect

*Rosemary Dewerse seeks wisdom from
Denise Champion and Ken Sumner*

Abstract

This article emerged from a request to Denise Champion and Ken Sumner to contribute their thoughts on the theme of this special issue of *Uniting Church Studies*. They replied with a query in turn: 'Are we being invited to speak as First Peoples out of our worldviews and identities or are we being expected to speak from a Christian perspective, shaped by Christian concepts?' The answer received in response was to bring their voices and their heritage to this conversation. After noting something of the on-the-ground impact of discipleship and evangelism on Denise's Adnyamathanha and Ken's Kukabrak Ngarrindjeri nations in South Australia, this article explores paradigm-shaking queries and observations that arise from their reflection on salvation.

Introduction

Discipleship and evangelism are activities of Christianity that are fundamentally shaped and motivated by one's understanding and theology of salvation. But what if Christianity has been overlayed – imposed – onto the ancient spirituality of your ancestors and is very much a latecomer to your people's ways of knowing? What if assumptions held within Christian worldview are not your starting point for interacting with the story of Jesus and theologies that have emerged since? Is your knowledge to be considered inferior to a now-dominant narrative in these lands now called Australia, and so dismissed or ignored? What if the particular Christian story of salvation that has driven and continues to drive discipleship and evangelism has been complicit in oppressing your communities, making you 'strangers in [your] own land', pressing your language, culture, law, and ceremony to the edge of extinction?¹ Is that story and its outworking up for critique and revision?

Jill Tabart, then President of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), in her words in the Covenanting Statement (10 July 1994) stated:

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.²

¹ UCA Assembly, "Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia," at <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/442>. Accessed 16 February 2025.

² Uniting Church in Australia, 'The Covenanting Statement' (1994) at <https://uniting.church/the-covenanting-statement/>. Accessed 26 September 2024.

A question emerged in the invitation to reflect on Christian concepts: Are First People's insights and wisdom – refined over tens of millennia – welcome through signed covenant into conversation about theology and praxis?

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia declares:

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.³

Recognised here is that insight into love and grace through revelation and encounter with Arrawatanha or Winnamaldi – named here using Christian vocabulary as Creator, Spirit, Jesus Christ – was already true for First Peoples before Christian colonisers arrived on these shores. This reflection explores provocations that arise for the Church today if this is true.

Setting the scene

The church is happy with one-liner explanations of the church and of God in Australia. What would be the point of looking at 'pagan' peoples' understanding?! It's something the church would rather not have to do. Let's keep our status quo. Let's stay with the norm. But if I'm part of the other I want to explore what Christianity might look like...from my perspective.⁴

Denise Champion, *Anaditj*⁵

You can't write about something that is not yours or doesn't belong to you. What do we do in this space when we're challenged by these words 'salvation,' 'redemption,' 'saved by grace,' 'justification by faith'? There are some real challenges for Indigenous peoples because if we think differently, then we are ostracised. There's lots of ramifications for being who you are.

Ken Sumner in conversation 29 November 2024

To reflect as Indigenous leaders on the topics of salvation, discipleship and evangelism is to hear that Christianity's categories and conversations are the presumed norm for how we all will think and live. This is the way it has been since the first settlers arrived and began to impress themselves on the landscapes and cultures of this continent, aided by missionary fervour. Aunty Denise and Uncle Ken have both been

³ Uniting Church in Australia, "Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia"

⁴ Denise Champion, edited Rosemary Dewerse, *Anaditj* (Port Augusta: Denise Champion, 2021), 13. 'Pagan' originally simply referred to people living in the countryside. Over time it came to mean those who did not believe in the Christian God and were thus judged less than.

⁵ Denise Champion, edited Rosemary Dewerse, *Anaditj* (Port Augusta: Denise Champion, 2021), 13.

recorded elsewhere speaking to the particular impact on their peoples of the outworking of Protestant understandings of salvation in terms of evangelism and discipleship.⁶

The Adnyamathanha, Aunty Denise's people, were driven off their lands in Ikara Flinders Ranges across the late 1800s and early 1900s by pastoralists and then lost the small holding they had been left with. One pastoralist, taking pity on Adnyamathanha, gifted a small section of 'his' land to the church and in 1931 the United Aboriginal Mission established a mission station there at Nepabunna. Unable to access their traditional food sources and waterholes they were forced into costly dependency upon Christian evangelising zeal. A condition of church attendance was that they had to leave their culture and language at the door; if they did not attend Church, they received no food rations. With the lead missionary, Fred Eaton, campaigning hard for the cessation of initiation rites and mining activity disturbing key traditional sites of gathering, Adnyamathanha elders in 1948 'decided to cease ceremony altogether because it was too hard to live both ways.'⁷ The men, however, continued to refuse to attend church, resistant to loss of identity. As Aunty Denise has noted, the missionaries 'failing to make many inroads reported [to their home churches] that we were beyond salvation.'⁸

For Uncle Ken's people 'salvation' began seventy years before in 1859. It took the very practical form of the establishment of a mission station by the Aborigines Friends Association at Raukkan, their ancient meeting place (called by Europeans 'Point McLeay'), to save them from the voracious encroachment of settlers upon their lands. They lost their rich food sources and, more than that, were torn from connection to Yarluwe-Ruhe (Sea-Country), which had birthed and shaped their Kaldowinyeri (worldview) for many generations. They were denied white man's food rations if they did not attend evangelistic services in the church made famous on the Australian fifty dollar note; their children were taken and separated from them into fenced dormitories to be discipled in the Bible and taught the English language in the mission school. Today as a nation they are known by the word in their language for 'people' – Ngarrindjeri – because missionary George Taplin failed to press beyond their initial response to his question 'Who are you?' to discover their collective identity as Kukabruk.⁹

Preservation of language, culture, law and ceremony has been very difficult and, in some aspects, impossible. For the Adnyamathanha and for Kukabruk Ngarrindjeri their experience of Christian salvation and its outworkings has not been identity-affirming and thus life-giving. Theology set the agenda for practice, so what needs critical consideration?

⁶ See, for example, Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," in *Location-shaped Theologies*, edited by Rosemary Dewerse (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2024), 13-15; Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, *Yarta Wandatha* (Salisbury: Denise Champion, 2014); and Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan, "Kungan Kaldowinyeri: Listening to Creation and to Story on Kukabruk Ngarrindjeri Yarluwe Ruwe," *Uniting Church Studies* 26.2 (December 2024): 23-26.

⁷ Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 14.

⁸ Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 16.

⁹ Rosemary Dewerse, Ken Sumner, Julie Martin, Melissa Neumann, Max Kowalick, Gillian Powis and Daniel Phan, "Kungan Kaldowinyeri," 23-26.

Reflecting on salvation

Ken: Terms like ‘salvation’ are judgemental terms. They’re terms that make a pre-judgement upon who you are – your character, your appearance, what you have materialistically. I’m looking at the photos on the wall here [in the board room of the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology] of Raukkan and Oodnadatta. The photo of the latter is of an older lady and two children. I know Christians/missionaries would be saying they need saving, because they are black, because of the way they look, the way they’re dressed. ‘Salvation needs to happen here,’ when in fact they were probably content in their own world, their own land, their own country, within themselves.

Salvation is an interesting word that conjures up some form of judgement. Why does it conjure up some form of judgement when Jesus teaches us not to judge?

Denise: For some reason in the church that’s part of their story that you’ve got to be saved. They’ve perpetrated a story about what we need to be saved from and who the saviour is.

The concept of salvation we have to struggle with because it implies, and it has always been implied, that we have to change and become something else. We cannot stay the same; we have to change. It’s like being on a conveyor belt and having a cookie cutter cutting out the same cookie. Every saved person has to look like this. Every saved person has to sound like this. Every saved person has to mimic their teachers. I really don’t agree with the word ‘salvation’ meaning we have to change and become something else.

Rosemary: *So Jesus isn’t asking you to become Jewish or a whitefella, but to fully live into your own identity?*

Ken: Yeah. Missionaries talk about being made in the image of God. ‘Let’s make humans in our image.’ But what colonisation has done is it says, ‘You’ve got to be like me.’ The invader says, ‘You’ve got to be like me. You’ve got to sip tea like I sip tea. You’ve got to hold a knife and fork like I hold a knife and fork. You’ve got to dress like me, sound like me.’

When Creator says, ‘Let’s make man in the image of us,’ I’m going, ‘My Kukabruk Ngarrindjeri story is about being made in *that* image, not the image of the Scot or the Irishman. Not in the image of the missionary. Not in the image of George Taplin.’ That image presented a racial superiority. That image created a welfare system. That image created a set idea of what it means to gather as church. If people understood what the good news is, and what’s not the good news, then we’d have a different dynamic happening. This is not a resistance against Christianity per se, but it is a resistance against this whole manner of things I’ve spoken of. It’s not a resistance against a story that is good and real and true and delivered in a way that builds and develops. That’s a different story than the one that’s been presented for two hundred years.

I wouldn’t have needed [rescuing by] Jesus if the guys that came along as missionaries did their job properly. I wouldn’t have had to go through that process because there was a story already there. They tried to remove that story of who I am, my identity, my ancestral heritage. They interfered with me being heir to my ancestors.

Denise: For us God has always been there in the person of Arrawatanha. We've always known that. We've never been separated from Arrawatanha-Most High. We were given stories by our ancestors and by Arrawatanha to learn how to live with one another in peace and harmony and to learn how to live with our environment, and to live with Creator, knowing Arrawatanha was always there.

Everybody has a form of the truth. We've all got our own form. Often, we will argue and be in conflict, because whose truth is truth? Arrawatanha is that third person in the picture all the time. Through the stories that have been given to us to live by truth is always being revealed, but we've not learned to live by them very well.

I've been thinking about when Jesus came. He said he came not to do away with the law but to fulfil it. The Old Testament is their Old People's story. We've got our own Old People's story. What does 'fulfil the law' mean for us? I think it's very important that we do understand this, now that we have the freedom to think for ourselves and reconstruct our own worldviews again, because our societies were decimated and we're having to do a lot of reconstructing. To reconstruct our worlds again, that's a huge thing to undertake. But we do need to do that.

Terms like salvation and redemption are not typically part and parcel of our everyday language.

Ken: Jesus is not mentioned in Kukabruk history, stories. Jesus is not a physical presence in my society. But after contact or invasion or colonisation I think Jesus can be present spiritually in creation, so there's certain things about creation and about our Ngaatji system where there's little glimpses and big glimpses of Jesus present as we understand and read the Bible stories. To suggest that that story is superior to my story, well we have an issue if that's the case. If you're saying that this story of salvation and human sacrifice is above my story, with some records being 65,000 years old...to say this other story is superior, is the only one, then that's problematic because I don't see that it's superior to my story. And I don't see that my story is superior to anyone else's. For some reason we in the Church can't accept that though.

Denise:

...it is important that when you hear *Muda* you resist passing judgement. These stories in early whitefella missionary minds were heathen, demonic, and therefore culturally unsafe, and we were [in the interests of our (Christian) salvation] forbidden to tell them. If you are still seeing our stories in that way, please stop. When you hear *Muda* embrace the fact that it is a different way of seeing, knowing and understanding Creator. It is my inherent and inherited knowing from *Arrawatanha*, the Most High, and our ancestors.

Arrawantanha inha Muda ngungangakpala. The Most High gave us this *Muda*.¹⁰

I often hear echoes of the Bible in our *Muda*, like the one that sounds like the later Christian story of resurrection. Artapudapuda (a little grub) and Aramburra (the Trapdoor Spider) were debating what should happen to the body when the body dies. Artapudapuda said that when the body dies it will return to the ground from where it came and that's where it will stay. Aramburra said that when the body dies it will

¹⁰ Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 5-6.

return back to the ground from where it came and after three days its spirit will rise. After arguing a long time they agreed to go with Artapudapuda's version, but they came to regret it because it meant they could never see their loved ones again.

Adnyamathanha people have always believed in an afterlife, that life doesn't stop at death. We go to Kindyarra, a waiting place – some people think it's like heaven. The old stories recount how once an Adnyamathanha person dies their spirit would travel across country down to the water of the Gulf. In the action of travelling across country it would pick up dust. Their spirit would dive into the water and come up squeaky clean. There would be people waiting – generally the ones who had given birth to you and cared for you – who would then escort you to Kindyarra. Everyone goes to Kindyarra; we have no concept of a hell to be saved from.

The church has to recognise that Indigenous knowledge of good and evil was always here, however. It was always here in the oral traditions. It was written in our paintings, songs, carvings. The oral traditions were always here, and our people always passed on the knowledge of good and evil.

Ken: Is it good and evil or good and bad? Even in my culture there's no concept of hell. So what do we do about that? Even the term 'devil'. There's some bad people around. There's always been good people and bad people. There's been bad people who've practised bad stuff like sorcery. There's always been good and bad in that regard, but to actually make hell a location or a place... The concept of a place like the description of hell is not part of my peoples' tradition or understanding. When someone did do something wrong, punishment was dealt with here and now. It was either a spear in the leg or death, whatever the issue was, so that it was dealt with in the here and now because it was important for that person when they died that their journey to the next life would be free of any unresolved issues from this sacred life on earth and to ensure a protected and safe journey to the next life. Punishment wasn't something like hell where you go forever. That's a bizarre concept.

For us who have been evangelised that's the story we're given – if we're not saved, we're going to hell for eternity where there will be gnashing of teeth – so there's stark differences from the culture not having a concept of hell to the Christian story having a place like hell. Why would the Christian story, if it's a good story, have something like hell? It's a bipolar experience or story. It's this, then this. But if it's such a good story, why does it have a place like hell in it when my story doesn't have a place like that? There's some beautiful stories of my people and culture, but there isn't a place like hell. There's just good people and bad people, good choices and decisions, and bad choices and decisions. I don't want to be blaming anyone else for my shortcomings, my bad decisions – 'Oh look the devil made me do it.' It releases me from all responsibility if that's the case. I can go and do the most terrible crime and ask for forgiveness and I still enter the kingdom.

Needling alter-narratives

Denise:

Faith was forced on Aboriginal people. Nobody asked us. It wasn't a free choice for us to become Christian...

We could ask: Why do I need Jesus? We've always known that Arrawatanha-God was in this land. We've always been part of the sacred community. I'm intrigued that there's this other story that happened halfway around the world. I'm intrigued that the coloniser took this story to every country in the world, forced it on the First Peoples and forced them to live the colonizer way, which is not a good way to live. The word 'coloniser' is another word for enslaver of others because you have power and control over them. I equate this word 'coloniser' as sin because you have total dominance over others...

First Nations people always knew the concept of sacrifice. We had a practice in killing an animal to feed our community that we will always pay homage or give thanks to the spirit of the one who gave life. This is about gratitude for a life given. Early Church history gives us the image of Jesus on the cross, making what he has done visible. What I see is Jesus giving his life to set us free from those who would enslave us. Because the coloniser way is so strong we're only just beginning to understand what it is like to live as free people, even in terms of Christianity.¹¹

Ken: The story of the colonised Jesus is not a good story. It's not the good news, so it doesn't become the good news. It becomes something else because attached to it is all these problematic things – control, coercion. There's slavery, there's massacres – all these terrible stories that's associated with the colonised Jesus story. I'm happy not to have that story, the colonised Jesus story, as part of my thinking, because no one's done anything about it. No one's corrected anything. No one's going, 'We've got to change this. We've got to change this story because we've done this, this and this with this story.' No one's done that. They keep pushing this colonised Jesus story to the point where denominations have built their empires. I struggle with that.

Rosemary: *I note that there has never in fact in church history been only one definition and understanding of salvation, despite the impression from Protestant mission teaching that there is.*

Denise: When it comes to salvation, we have to be finding other words and concepts to use. That would usher in a change from the way things have been done in the past.

Sodzo is the Greek word for salvation, from which is derived *soteria* – to provide recovery, to rescue, and to affect one's welfare. I like those words 'provide recovery,' 'rescue,' 'affect one's welfare.'

The Psalmists when talking about salvation tell us that God is a safe place. I would rather talk about that these days than use the word salvation.¹²

I like the word 'transformation.' Today we have the freedom to rediscover Jesus for ourselves in our own culture. The one thing I know about Jesus, as I read the scriptures, is that Jesus came to set free and to transform. Paul's writings talk a lot about transformation, rather than change.¹³ I suppose you could say

¹¹ Champion with Dewerse, "Reimagining God and the Church in Australia Through an Adnyamathanha Lens," 16.

¹² See, for example, Psalm 46 or Psalm 91:1-2.

¹³ For example, Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Ephesians 4.

that transformation is the same as change. Within my culture, however, I don't have to change anything, but Christ has come and influenced my life in such a way that it's transformed me. I'm the same person but different.

Ken: Restoration is always a concept that has to happen in relationships and in creation. It's a continual thing. I think it's one of the pinnacles of relationship with people and creation.

Denise: I like that word restoration. I like it better than salvation.

I'm wondering how much influence the Doctrine of Discovery had on constructing a worldview that meant that people had to change...

Ken: A huge influence I think, because it created a particular narrative that everybody else needed saving and you could do whatever you wanted with them and their land.

Denise: We need to talk about the influence of the Doctrine of Discovery and the Western colonial system that came in and changed everything, including our spirituality.

If Second Peoples bring salvation to the table, what are First Peoples bringing? We need to highlight how difficult it is to try and bring a decolonised understanding [into discourse like this], because what we've ended up with is a very very colonial understanding.

It would be good for us to bring our own stories. I have to continue to put forward our thoughts about our Yura Muda (worldview). Ngalakanha Muda (Big Wisdom) is basically the salvation story but told in a different way. That story goes way back before the church to the beginning of creation. It's always been about restoring from the things that restrict us. If we talk a lot about goodness, freedom and justice, there's no time focus on people's flaws or badness. Look for ways to affirm people's goodness. Language is very important in this. It's one thing that carries culture. It's one thing we want to hand on to young people as a legacy.

Ken: That question about bringing something to the table, for me it's important because when Congress drafted the Preamble to the Uniting Church constitution we brought stuff to the table that was rejected. We brought stuff to the table that people were still trying to stop being brought to the table. We managed to get the Preamble through but not without its struggles and difficulties.

It's about being prepared. As Māori put it, we have to stand in our mana [God-given dignity], in our own spirituality, in who we are.

What I bring is what comes from me and my people. It comes from my land. That's what I'm bringing. What they are bringing comes from somewhere else. It's not of this land.

Denise: We're restoring the integrity of the gospel when we do something like this.

It's good that we have found our voice. *Yeshua*, the basis for the names Joshua and Jesus, signifies freedom from what binds or restricts, and what brings deliverance.

Ken: I think we have a story that can rescue the dominant culture. But, you know, it's always a battle for minorities. The dominant tells their story. They create a narrative. They develop institutions. They continue to tell their stories. They establish learning places that develop a particular mindset. As a minority we don't do that...but the story that I'm trying to develop has the potential to rescue some of the dominant people, maybe.

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Denise Champion is an Adnyamathanha woman from Ikara Flinders Ranges, South Australia. The first Aboriginal woman ordained in South Australia, holding an Honorary Doctorate from the Adelaide College of Divinity, she is Theologian in Residence at UCLT, a college of the University of Divinity, author of *Yarta Wandatha* and *Anaditj* and co-lectures the unit 'Yarta Wandatha' with Rosemary. In 2024 Aunty Denise won the NAIDOC South Australian Scholar of the Year.

Ken Sumner is a Kukabruk Ngarrindjeri korni (man) from the southeast coast of South Australia. He is the State Development Officer for the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in South Australia. He has many years of experience in leadership within the UCA nationally and locally, including key involvement in the process that brought to life the Preamble to the Constitution. Ken co-lectures the unit 'Kungan Kaldowinyeri' with Rosemary for UCLT.

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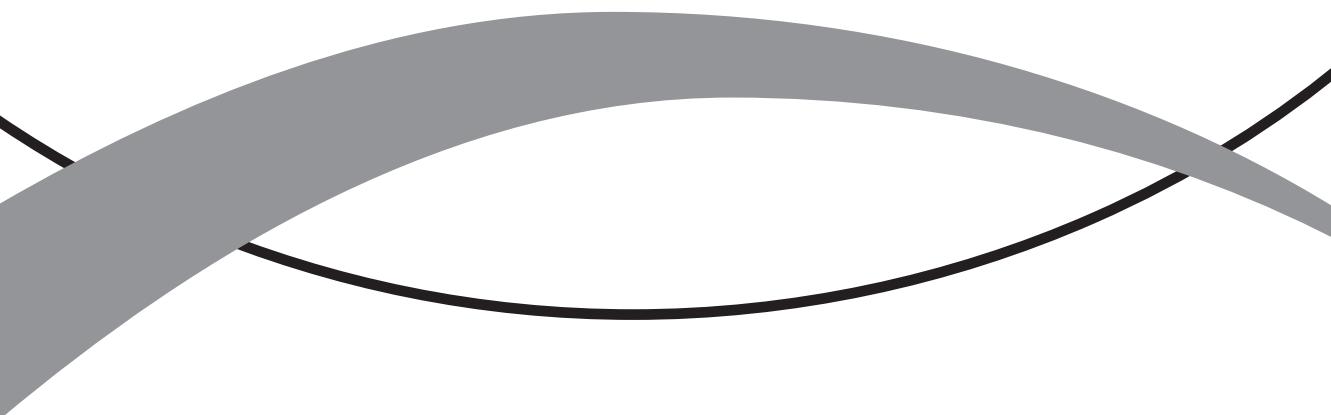
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