Action now to reconcile differences

All Australians need to raise their voices against the widening inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous citizens, said Adelaide Catholic school students as they reflected on Reconciliation Week held last month.

St Ignatius’ College student Georgia De Conno said she witnessed firsthand the many inequalities between the two cultures and was determined to do something about them.

“We take things such as food, health, education and employment for granted, which creates a huge gap in inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians,” she said.

Georgia spent 11 days with her school immersed in an Indigenous community on Bathurst Island earlier this year.

“Reconciliation Week means a lot to me,” she says.

National Reconciliation Week (NRW) was celebrated across Australia between May 27 and June 3 to commemorate the significant reconciliation milestones of the successful 1996 referendum and the High Court Mabo decision in 1992. Catholic parishes and schools across the Adelaide Archdiocese took part in various prayer services, liturgies and events to mark the week.

Mount Carmel College students Talera Golien-Davey and Waniki Gidumba-Moore said 2014 reconciliation theme of “walk the talk” meant more action was needed to end the rhetoric.

“It’s important that all Australians speak out against injustice and have a deeper understanding of Australia’s past history and look towards a united future,” said the teenagers, who attended a unique Indigenous leadership program run by the Catholic Education Office (CEO) in the days preceding Reconciliation Week.

The Yelakkia Yellarkarni (meaning Today Tomorrow) program involved 64 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from 11 Catholic secondary schools across the diocese joining together in Adelaide from May 18 to 23.

Dr Roma Alesis, CEO Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Team senior education adviser, said the “Y’I” leadership program would continue through an online forum and follow-up educational events and meetings planned for later this year.

Dr Alesis said Yelakkia Yellarkarni was an important initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools because it enabled networking while raising self-esteem, building cultural identity and creating a sense of belonging.

“This is a unique space in Catholic education for the students to do this,” she said.

“Most of the students who attended are one of the few Indigenous students within their school, so this is a way of connecting them in a forum where they are dominant, while providing them with a skill set to be proud of their cultural heritage and to be leaders of the future.”

The group attended Tacondi College to focus on cultural identity, community, racism, prejudice and resilience building.

They visited the University of South Australia’s Mawson Lakes campus to investigate post-school pathways and met with two Indigenous lecturers. Students also connected with community elders and were involved in a moving ceremony on the final day.

“The program has helped me be more proud of who I am and not worry about the racist remarks people say about me because...what they say and what I know about myself are two different things,” said Ristrevor College student Davin Ferraira. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College student Hamish Miles said the prospect of attending university no longer felt so daunting following Yelakkia Yellarkarni. “I think that it isn’t that scary now because I am going to have support around the uni to help me succeed, which I think is very amazing.”