

Learning to Dream: an urban Pentecostal embraces his Aboriginal identity

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“At the start of every year, the pastor in a Pentecostal church says, “This is the vision for the day, for the year...This is our vision,” and they go with that Dream. They go, and the churches that they’ve built, have been built on a Dream. And in the Aboriginal world, the whole culture was actually built on a Dream.” David Armstrong.

Abstract

Providing a distinctly Pentecostal voice to the larger pool of literature on Indigenous Australian Christianity, this paper maps some unique relationships between a specifically Pentecostal spirituality and worldview shaped, in part, by the subject’s Aboriginal heritage. As such, the paper contributes to the growing field of studies in Australian Pentecostalism and, with its cross-cultural approach, participates in the larger dialogue on the denomination’s renowned cross-cultural ubiquity. Significantly, the content of the paper itself materializes out of the oral tradition, central to both Aboriginal and Pentecostal cultures. Written in narrative form, and interlaced with autobiographical material and supporting academic literature, the paper tracks the spiritual journey of Wangkumara Pentecostal, David Armstrong. David’s choir ministry, “One Good Day,” is the focal point of the narrative and is the material and figurative expression of the intersection between his two spiritualities.

Introduction

This paper explores the spiritual journey of David Armstrong, a Wangkumara Christian man whose identity is shaped by his experiences and convictions as a Pentecostal and an urban Aboriginal person. It explores the ways that David navigates his two culturally distinctive spiritualities, documenting what he has learned about his own Aboriginal heritage and his growing appreciation for its sacredness. Especially significant for David has been the resonance between Pentecostal and Indigenous emphases on the spiritual realm. Inextricably connected to this, is the way that language, with its cultural and spiritual dimensions, has connected his two worlds. That is, the spiritual nourishment that emerges through the application of language in his charismatic worship (e.g. glossolalia or tongues) is similarly realized in the Aboriginal context, albeit through the restorative process of redeeming traditional language. Anna Hueneker’s study on the relationship between poetic language use and the integration of trauma provides a theoretical grounding for the paper.¹ Additionally, David’s work as founder of the Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir provides a case study and context for the exploration of David’s spiritual journey as an Aboriginal Pentecostal.

¹ Anna Hueneker, “From Politics to Poetry,” *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 10, no.1 (2012): 55-68, DOI: 10.1002/ppi.1250

There is a growing literature on Indigenous Australian Christianity, but few works are written from a distinctly Pentecostal perspective. Therefore, the primary (and culturally appropriate) resource for examining Aboriginal Pentecostal experience is oral. The content for this paper emerges from a series of conversations between David, Shane, and Ingrid, which began with a theological question in view; how has David understood the intersection between the Spirituality of the Dreaming and his Christian faith? It soon became apparent that David's answer was embedded in his biography, and so this was best explored by the telling of his story. Indeed, it seemed wise to convey what we learned by writing up this paper in the shape of its formation, as a story. In fact, this approach suits David's identities as an Aboriginal and Pentecostal man, since both worldviews elevate story. In the Pentecostal setting, testimony is given central place, and in Australian Indigenous culture meaning is explored through the telling of a "yarn."²

Aboriginal people are familiar with the power of story. Our culture is shaped around stories, our history transmitted through them. Stories spoken from the heart hold transformational power, they are a way for one heart to speak to another.... Listening to a story is a way of showing respect, a silent acknowledgement of what the speaker has lived through and where they have come from. Stories can also transform the speaker.³

Both a yarn and a testimony are not simply stories, but stories shaped by meaning; they are interpretations of the past and, as we shall see, express a vision of the future. Yet in telling his testimony, David is at pains to note that the journey upon which his yarn is based is a long way from the finishing line. Thus, the meanings he presently grasps are tentative. He needs more time, and many more conversations with Indigenous Elders and Christian colleagues and friends to flesh out those meanings and to give them depth and clarity. While David's voice is elevated to primary position, where appropriate, academic literature and the authors' extrapolations interlace his narrative. The outcome of this approach is a paper that brings story into the realm of the broader academic literary sphere. The first section of the paper provides some background on David's family and the early stages of his journey of assuming his Aboriginal heritage. The paper then progresses into an investigation of David's Choir Ministry and the role language plays in facilitating connections between Pentecostal and Aboriginal worlds. The final section of this paper offers deeper insight into David's personal navigation of Aboriginal Pentecostal spirituality, including some of the challenges he has and continues to face as he operates in this area. It is important to note that while a genuine attempt is made to represent both Aboriginal and Pentecostal realms in equal light, David's relatively recent ownership of his Aboriginal heritage makes it a work in progress, and his interpretation of Aboriginal world is very much shaped by his Pentecostal worldview.

² Henry Gooren, "Conversion Narratives," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. Allan Anderson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 93-112; Lawrence Bamblett, *Our Stories Are Our Survival* (Canberra, ACT: AIATSIS, 2013); Mark J. Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology* (N.Y.: Routledge, 2017).

³ Sally Morgan, Tjalamina Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina, *Speaking from the Heart: Stories of Life, Family and Country* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2010), ii.

Does colour matter in church?

While David was born in Rockhampton, 1969, he spent most of his childhood in Warwick, where, in 1970, his father planted a church. In 1980, David's family returned to Rockhampton and spent the next ten years attending a contemporary Pentecostal Church. Although there was general segregation between White and Indigenous congregations, David's early days at church were characterised by his family's belief in the unity of White and Indigenous churches, so his family chose to attend a predominantly non-Indigenous congregation.

Even with my Aboriginal background, we went to a White church. They had this idea of segregation back then; that there should be a 'Black' church and 'White' church. But my family just believed in the one church. I grew up as a Christian, and we used to say that we didn't see Black or White or whatever colour. Our church was focussed on people's souls and this is how my story, my spiritual journey, was shaped from the early days.⁴

David admits that his growing up in a predominantly Western cultural setting where, for him, neither 'colour' nor heritage had any bearing on 'soul-saving', meant matters of his own dual-heritage did not present a particular case for reflection in his early life. As a young adult, soul-saving was the primary objective, and following his father's course, David enrolled into a Bachelor of Ministries course which he undertook at Commonwealth Bible College, Katoomba, from 1990-1992. Nevertheless, it is possible that David's early experiences of attending a 'White' church as a person of mixed-descent sowed the seed for his long-term interests in cross-cultural ministry and his pursuit of the elevation of Indigenous culture within Pentecostal world.

In 1996, David moved to Canberra working in ministry roles in suburbs including Campbell and Chisholm. David's work "with almost every other culture" helped him learn "a lot about...different nationalities," and in part, prepared him for the many years of intercultural ministry that lay ahead. David recalls the following story when referring to his first significant experience of ministry with Indigenous peoples;

'Soul-saving' was the vision inspiring my early ministry and a high point occurred after intensive prayer. We had spent a year praying for our suburb and for our church to grow, and no one had come except a couple of people from other churches. I said, "go back to your churches, we want brand new souls!" Then we put up a jumping castle at the shopping centre and next thing, thirty or forty Aboriginal people turned up. The visitors made amazing connections with one another that day, saying to each other's families "you know our kids are related – we're related!" It was about 15 years ago now, and many are still in the church. We dedicated about thirty-five to the Lord in one day.

⁴David Armstrong, "Interview with David Armstrong part I," interview by Shane Clifton, Alphacrucis College, Parramatta, January 22, 2018.

As David began to work more closely with Indigenous people, David found himself navigating a complex ministry due to cultural difference and socially embedded disparity, a result being that neither he nor his fellow pastors felt that they were making real connections with Aboriginal people. Reflecting on his early experiences of working within an Aboriginal and Pentecostal cultural setting, he states;

My running away from it was because...it's a very difficult area and anyone I've seen as being involved in it has either been shot down in flames...it's just very, very difficult – there's so many opinions about how to help our Aboriginal world, and so few people who are really getting their hands dirty...

Despite feeling inexperienced, David felt a strong calling to seeing Aboriginal people come to the Christian faith. This calling was given new vigour when, in 2010, he moved with his family to Mount Druitt, situated in the western suburbs of Sydney. The move marked a material and symbolic beginning of a new era in his spiritual journey. Foremost, it represented the onset of an intentional seeking-out of his Aboriginal heritage and his exploration of the relationship between the Dreaming and Pentecostal spiritualities. A preliminary step in this process was David's study of demographic statistical data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Communities;

When I came to Sydney I started doing a lot more research like in terms of statistics...I went to the chief statistician down there in Sydney and I talked with her and I started to get all of the statistics - the health statistics, the education statistics – all these things that I knew. I had basically grown up with it all, but I never realised it was so bad, and that deeply affected me.

Compared to most other suburbs in Sydney, Mount Druitt is relatively poor, and there are noteworthy socio-economic disparities between Indigenous people in comparison to the general population of the larger Blacktown precinct. According to the Blacktown City Social Profile 2016 Report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities,⁵ ATSI people experience disparity across a spectrum of socio-economic areas. Housing security presents a compelling case for example, whereby 10% of the population owned their dwelling compared to 22.7% in the entire Blacktown precinct; 21.8% were in the process of purchasing, compared with 42.5% in Blacktown, and 64.1% were renting compared with the respective 29.4% . Low-income households are represented among 27.2% of the ATSI population compared with 17.9% in Blacktown City. A lower number of ATSI peoples hold formal qualifications (19.3%) compared with Blacktown City as a whole (39%). Other areas where ATSI populations experience relative disadvantage are in the areas of health (including life expectancy and addiction); homelessness, employment security and social security (including a lessened sense of belonging and sense of trust with others).⁶

Despite the obvious disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the Blacktown precinct, and the area's overall socio-economic disadvantage, Mount Druitt is a neighbourhood where many feel

⁵ Blacktown City Council, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities: A Social Profile*. (Blacktown: Blacktown City Council, 2016): 1-29.

⁶ Ibid.

a sense of belonging and enjoy a distinct community spirit. Residents feel that they have ease of access to community facilities, work and services. Furthermore, there is a consensus that community centres and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are sound, and cultural programs (such as those facilitated by the Blacktown Arts Centre) play a central role in the community.⁷

David articulates that his move to Mount Druitt, his subsequent exposure to the revelations of ATSI demographic data, and his real-life observations of social disparity, provided momentum for his pursuit of a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture and history. Interestingly, in the context of Pentecostalism's strong emphasis on the future, David's 'looking back' as a Pentecostal signified a unique approach in his ministry praxis. It was a step into the challenging territory of exposure to a world shaped, in part, by intergenerational displacement, trauma and cyclical socio-economic disadvantage.

David's 'looking back' revealed certain degrees of indifference and, in some instances, resistance from Pentecostal leaders. That is, on a number of occasions, David heard his colleagues say, "Look, I'm just trying to get [Aboriginal people] saved now; I want to deal with them now." Thus, David faced challenges navigating "the old stuff", because, in his words, "Pentecostals are so prophetic in terms of wanting the new thing, wanting souls, wanting to build, to actually deal with the Dreaming – and some of them may have dealt better with it than me."

David's quest to 'know' the Aboriginal world saw him traversing two epistemological traditions. Similarly, Roberta Dods' study on "Knowing Ways/Ways of Knowing," provides some context on the differences and resulting tensions between Traditional and Western Knowledge systems.⁸ She argues that while Western cultures operate within the "world of 'learning'" paradigm in which knowledge is formulated in "a set of denotive statements", Traditional cultures operate in "notions of 'know-how'"... "knowing how to live," and knowing "how to listen." Thus, the emphasis in Aboriginal ways of Knowing, unlike its Western counterpart, is "*the way things are done.*" As such, Aboriginal ways of Knowing (as is true also in other contexts) is based upon practice. In this way, 'traditional', knowledge moves beyond the mere diagnosis and "application" of truth criterion and becomes a matter of "competence."⁹

Familiar with Western approaches to 'learning', David undertook reading about Aboriginal worlds pre-contact and Aboriginal-White encounter histories at Windsor Library and the University Library at Quaker's Hill. David describes this process as valuable, but "forced research." His preference for 'learning' is through experience, "I like preaching, I like just getting up, moving in the spirit, getting saved, you know...." It is important to note that while David's growing up in a predominantly Western cultural setting meant that he was naturally familiar with typically western approaches to 'learning', his natural preference for 'doing' aligned itself more closely with traditional notions of 'knowledge'.

⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁸ Roberta Robin Dods, "Knowing ways/ways of knowing: reconciling science and tradition", *World Archaeology* 36, no. 4 (2004): 547-557.

⁹ Ibid, 547. For more reading on Indigenous knowledge systems, see D. Michael Warren, L. Jan Slikkerveer, David Brokensha and Wim Decherig, *The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (United Kingdom: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995).

David points to his trip around Australia in 2010 as a significant starting point in his journey of knowing Aboriginal ways, particularly Aboriginal worldview as manifested in what is more commonly referred to as 'the Dreaming'.¹⁰ Consequently, David's interaction with Dreaming worldview challenged him to think about how his Christian faith interacted with Aboriginal spirituality. During his travels, David grappled with situations where Aboriginal Pentecostal communities appeared to reject their culture because of their fervent commitment to the Pentecostal Christian faith. Consequently, David felt that his own work in this space would be seeking to explore how Aboriginal and Pentecostal worldviews might intersect positively. Back at home, David's engagement with non-Indigenous Pentecostal leaders revealed that the general understanding of Aboriginal history, contemporary experience and disadvantage, and deep spirituality was underdeveloped (almost non-existent). Worse, there was a general sense (even among his fellow Indigenous Pentecostals), that Aboriginal spirituality was demonic. But David himself had begun to see deep meanings in some aspects of the Dreaming. David was unable to resolve contradictions in these outlooks overnight, but felt "God's push" upon him to step into a space where he could facilitate genuine dialogue and interaction between Aboriginal culture and Pentecostal faith.

Is language redemptive?

In November 2010, David and his wife, Angela, established Initiative Church in Mount Druitt, Blacktown. With a vision to see the Church embrace "Aboriginal culture," David actively sought ways to embed Darug language into the fabric of his ministry practice.¹¹ A culturally significant starting point was David's inviting Blacktown Elder, Uncle Greg Simms, to open Initiative Church with a Welcome to Country;

A guy [Greg Simms] got up, used clapsticks, did a bit of language, and someone said, "that's not real language," something like that. Like with Pentecostals, they say, "that's not real, that's just made up." It was the same argument that they used against our Pentecostal language, "that's not real language," and so instantly, that got me thinking, 'what is the real language and who are the real Darug people?'

David's reflections on Uncle Greg's 'Welcome to Country' marks something of a turning point in his journey. Until this time, David had not put much thought to the Welcome to Country nor the instrumentality of reviving traditional language;

Even [for] me... when I was in Canberra, I wouldn't deal much with it...because it was a government speak, a bit like the sorry - the sorry apology - it was government speak; it seemed like the best the government could deal with.

¹⁰ Bain highlights that while the Dreaming has been a topic subject to various interpretation, it is most commonly understood as 'basic to understanding Aboriginal worldview.' See, Margaret S. Bain, *White Men Are Liars: Another Look at Aboriginal-Western Interactions*, (Alice Springs: SIL, 2005): 18.

¹¹ Darug was the language spoken in what is now known as the Sydney basin. Some linguists have referred to it as the 'inland dialect' of Sydney. It has similarities to the Dharawal and Eora languages. It is likely that all dialects were slightly different versions of the same language. See Richard Green, "Reclamation process for Darug in Sydney using song", in *Re-Awakening Languages: Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous Heritage*, ed., John Hobson et al., (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2010): 182; Jakelin Troy, "The Sydney Language Notebooks and responses to language contact in early colonial NSW," *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 12 no. 1 (1992): 145-170.

Nevertheless, in spite of David's reservations with this 'government' vernacular, David considered Uncle Gregs' Welcome to Country an essential first step in building a church that honoured Darug culture in a Pentecostal Christian setting. As illustrated, this particular Welcome to Country had demonstrated the agency in language to unite and divide. It encouraged David to think about how language would inform his understanding of the spiritual world and, in turn, how this would shape his ministry at Mount Druitt. David recalls how "illiterate [he] was on Aboriginal language back then," recollecting that he "didn't even know Darug was the Aboriginal language of the land." In the early days, somewhat ironically, David thought Darug simply referred to the suburb of Dharruk in which he was ministering (due to the phonetic naming of the suburb after the local language) and prayed that God would draw people to the physical area.

David's experience of hearing Darug language made him think about Pentecostalism and the Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues. As a Pentecostal himself, David was aware of the spiritual dimensions embedded in language, its intrinsic connection to culture and its instrumentality in communication and connection. The link between language and culture is reinforced by the work of Anna Huneke, who states that "language is a cultural system."¹² David's statement below reinforces the centrality of language in the Pentecostal context;

This is where spiritual dimension comes in; because my study on Azusa Street and Pentecostalism was that, Pentecostals have always believed in language. We speak in tongues, we believe in tongues of men and tongues of angels, we believe in static speech and tongues interpretation, but we also believe in languages and so when Paul went to different places and spoke to the Jews in Hebrew or spoke in Aramaic, he spoke in the languages of the area. It was for communication of the Gospel.

There are obvious and substantive differences between Aboriginal languages and Pentecostal glossolalia, not the least of which is that the latter is not generally considered to be a language, per se (although, as we shall see, David takes a different view). But David's emphasis on the commonality between the two derives from the importance of Aboriginal language and Pentecostal tongues for identity and spirituality. Pentecostalism in most parts of the world is a religion for people on the margins, and tongue speaking has its origins in African American spirituality.¹³ While 'language' provided a figurative mechanism in David's exploration of the intersection between Pentecostal and Indigenous spirituality, its material application was realised in David's establishment of the Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir in 2010 – a subsidiary of Initiative Ministries. To this day, the Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir, comprising members between three to sixteen years of age from a mixture of Christian and non-Christian families, plays a formative role in the community of Blacktown and beyond – a statement of, and living testament to the enduring culture of the first nations people of the Western Sydney precinct.

As will be explored, David's choir ministry would operate within the interstitial space of his two worlds, figuratively and in real terms, bringing together two worldviews and their associated cultural practices. Music making provided a setting where language could be used poetically – a context for elevating metaphor and imagery

¹² Huneke, "From Politics to Poetry," 66.

¹³ Wolfgang Vondey, "The Making of a Black Liturgy: Pentecostal Worship and Spirituality from African Slave Narratives to American Cityscapes," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (July 2012): 147–68, <https://doi.org/10.1558/blth.v10i2.147>.

that would intercede beyond some of the cultural and political complexities of mediating between two spiritual traditions. With a vision to “empower people for one good day through dreaming, healing, leading,”¹⁴ song writing emerged as an appropriate method providing “a common point of intersection” between his two identity markers.¹⁵

Written in 2010, David’s first song was inspired by his conversations with several Elders over his years of travel, and embodied a Dreaming vernacular that would undergird the choir’s unveiling vision and repertoire. His conversations had revealed, “It was unanimous that Dreaming was important” and thus, he “got on the piano and wrote the [following] song which [his] son Jonathan arranged beautifully.” In his words, the song was composed while he started “along [the] journey of dealing with the Dreaming of [his] past, Dreaming of [his] present and [his] future.”

Dreaming was about the Past.

Dreaming was being aware of the present.

Dreaming was about the connections between the past, present and future.

David’s journey of coming to know the Aboriginal world more deeply had so far revealed that Dreaming was “the answer to disempowerment,”¹⁶ and second, that redeeming Darug language could facilitate deeper understanding of Dreaming worldview in his choir ministry. Nevertheless, this was no easy task for David, and, reflecting on the virtual extinction of Darug language, laments;

For an Aboriginal person looking at history it’s very difficult, because the last 200 years was total wipe-out. And they tried to, even with the Darug people there’s stories of them cutting out the tongues to stop the language, so it’s difficult research...

While the past was important in David’s understanding of the contemporary Aboriginal world, David actively sought to implement a culture of ‘future’ thinking in his choir ministry that would provide the basis for the creation of new ‘dreams.’ David’s emphasis on ‘dreaming of our future’ might also be considered an expression of his Pentecostal identity;

See most of our Pentecostal stuff, and even for me, I’m dealing with the present and the future and I think I try to, with my writing I tried to put that into context...that, even with the choir, singing 300 times we’re kind of building a new dreaming, from the Songlines and stuff that they’re singing on, from Thursday Island down to the Twelve Apostles ...they’re literally dreaming new dreams for their families.

¹⁴ Tanya Riches, “Aboriginal Australian Pentecostals taking the initiative in Mount Druitt’s urban Songlines”, *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith*, 2, no. 1 (2014): 45

¹⁵ Ibid, 38.

¹⁶ Armstrong, “Deadly Wonders: Celebrating Positive Families”, (Pre-published Edition, 2017), 10

Several writers have highlighted the psychological importance of language as a tool for trauma recovery. Anna Hueneker, a daughter to Russian Jewish and German emigrants and immigrants, writes about the way in which intergenerational trauma can be integrated or transformed through the phenomena of language-based metaphor and imagery. Psychotherapists believe that the human psyche is configured around associative and imaginative process and responds most favourably to relationship and poetic communication. Language is thus the instrument through which trauma is “integrated”, and is most profoundly done so through one’s native tongue.¹⁷ Obvious parallels between the writings of Hueneker and David’s choir ministry practice are observable. That is, by reviving a language intrinsically tied to culture (as with all languages), language, through restorative processes, becomes an instrument for healing. As such, David’s decision to sing in Darug language was deliberate, as articulated by him below;

The only reason we’re [singing in] Darug is because it is the language of the land, so we [decided upon using] the language of the land we’re on.... A lot of our choir kids aren’t Darug, and they said to me “*Why should we sing Darug?*,” and I said, “because we’re honouring our Elders past and present of the land we’re on.” I hope that it will be encouragement for them to learn their own language from where they are from. But, our kids are born [on Darug] land, they go to school on this land; they have probably lived on the land for most of their life, because our people do not travel that much.

On the other hand, David’s reflection on the spiritual dimension of language from a Pentecostal perspective implies parallels between the spiritual fulfilment that comes through speaking in tongues, and the spiritual fulfilment that David anticipated and later experienced through redeeming traditional language in his Choir ministry;

The Pentecostals - they believe when they speak in tongues, they would speak in languages. It is more recent that people have stopped somehow believing in speaking other languages and those interconnections it creates with the spiritual world. I suppose as Pentecostals we believe too. We believe in the supernatural, we believe to be following the Spirit....we believe that the Spirit is leading us and guiding us - it’s really cool.

At the outset of his choir ministry, David asked a Darug speaker to visit the choir to teach the children ‘one liners in language.’ While Darug provided a linguistic basis, the application of this traditional language in the choir was similar to David’s experience of language use in Pentecostal world. He recalls;

When we got a Darug speaker in, who worked with the education department doing some stuff in the schools...he taught our kids some language, just one-liners in language. One-liners are a common feature of our Pentecostal language...like when you hear tongues interpretation, or when you hear prophesies, a lot of them are one liners, “Go forth!” Alan Davies [an AoG National Executive member at the time] prophesied over me when I was about eleven or twelve and for about five minutes he said, “Go, Go, Go, Go, Go!” Just one word – for five minutes! And so the people tried to stop me. And I was talking to him

¹⁷ Hueneker, 55-68.

the other day actually because he's involved in this Indigenous initiative fairly heavily and, I said, "you prophesied over me to 'go.'" So, when people try to stop me and say "hey just wait, just wait, just wait" I just keep going, I just believe that that is.... the power of Pentecost – the language and the communication of that...the word. I think that is why the Pentecostals have connected [with each other], because of language - that deep language and passion.

For David, the repetition of the word 'Go' saw its transformation from a simple word to a phrase embedded with spiritual meaning. David drew on this experience as a model for his song writing, whereby the repetition of words would elevate the agency of language as a vessel for spiritually loaded meaning-making, as in his song, "Gawalawa Nulawala" (Stop and Rest Together);

Gawalawa Nulawala

Gawalawa Nalawala

Gawalawa Nalawala in Jesus

Warami Wellamabamiyui

Warami Wellamabamiyui

The rhythmic structure of "Gawalawa Nulawala" (Stop and Rest Together) is reminiscent of a typical Pentecostal worship style, where the repetition of single words or phrases emphasises the agency of language in its capacity to embody spiritually loaded meanings, and facilitate opportunities for genuine spiritual reflection. Gi Walawa Nalawala in Jesus means, "please stop here and rest in Jesus." The refrain Warami Wellamabamiyui means, "It is good to see you wherever you have come from."¹⁸ By singing this welcome in Darug, the choir draws upon a vernacular that is inextricably linked with the land and the Indigenous spiritual realm, thus enabling the children to observe their shared Indigenous heritage;

There is a link with the language and the land. We're honouring the Elders past and present. There's a major link with honour. Language, land and the Spirit are all connected.

Building upon his original "Dreaming" composition, David co-composed a song with fellow Pastor, Greg Stigter. The song is written using both Darug and English words, thus creating a hybrid vernacular embracing both Indigenous and Pentecostal linguistic themes. The centrality of the 'Dreaming' theme is a mechanism to address disempowerment in relationships and a strategy to enable the choir children to "create meaningful cultural

¹⁸ Tanya Riches expands on the meaning of this song and others sung by the choir in her chapter, "Dreaming Urban Indigenous Australian Christian Worship in the Great Southland of The Holy Spirit," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, eds., Monique M. Ingalls, Amos Yong (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 60-77.

connection...by enriching understanding of Indigenous cultural heritage and identity, and support the revitalisation of Indigenous language.”¹⁹

Nangami Buruwa

Dreaming – Nangami Buruwa – Dream long

Dreaming, Dreaming, Dreaming, Dreaming

Dreaming of my past, Dreaming of my present,

Dreaming of my future.

Healing, Healing

Leading, leading,

Nangami Buruwa, Nangami Barawul,

Nangami Buruwa, Nangami Buruwa.

David’s reflections on the song sheds light on meaning embedded in the language and the rich dialogue that emerges from a dual Aboriginal-Pentecostal worldview:

‘Nangami’ means ‘Dream’ and ‘Buruwa’ means ‘far’...dream far and lift. And so, when our choir sings that, they act like birds. Lifting, but dreaming far – a little bit like our Spirit, our Pentecostal spirituality, not just dreaming about today, but also dreaming of the future, but not just dreaming of the future, but what about eternity? It’s this bird’s eye view of ‘all of life’ because most people only live for the moment. A lot of people say “Aboriginals only live for the day” but when they’re really dreaming, they’re thinking about how things were made but also about death and dying and eternal issues.

Words such as ‘healing’ and ‘leading’ are central within the Pentecostal vernacular due to their prominence in Biblical writings. Many personal testimonies of individuals ‘coming to faith’ as Pentecostals feature some reference to divine ‘healing.’²⁰ Likewise, ‘leading’ in one’s church and community is a typical feature of an established Pentecostal believer. In the Aboriginal world, both ‘healing’ and ‘leading’ have strong application in reconciliation discourse. Thus, both ‘healing’ and ‘leading’ point to the applied relevance of language in the choir ministry as a restorative tool. David notes that the singing of Nangami Buruwa facilitates “positive interaction” amongst choir members and their families, along with “empowerment” for Elders who are consulted for language-use and cultural knowledge.²¹ As such, the integration of Darug language and Christian themes facilitates the kind of restorative processes that Hueneke writes about in her text.

¹⁹ Armstrong, “Deadly Wonders”, 10.

²⁰ Candy Gunther Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹ Armstrong, 4.

David's reflection on the song throws light on Aboriginal notions of Dreaming as an eternal phenomenon – a concept that is not bound by Western notions of time or space.²² Although the song is not a traditional Dreaming in itself, David draws inspiration from "The Wonder of Dreaming"²³ through the vehicle of language as a poetic mechanism. David provides further reflection on the song's enabling power below;

It's like a one-word story. Buruwa implies the lifting of the evil spirit, because wherever we go to the kids...not just the kids but the adults are always talking about evil spirits...

What do we do with the Spirit and the spirits?

One of the challenges that David has grappled with in trying to elevate Aboriginal culture in a Pentecostal setting has been the tendency for Aboriginal Pentecostals to associate ceremony and other traditional practices with 'evil spirits'. David's studies of Pentecostal and Charismatic Ministry over the years had reinforced to him that "deliverance ministries were very strong in...Pentecostal world."²⁴ Although, as a Pentecostal himself, David believes in the presence of evil spirits, his observations of the association of smoking ceremonies with 'evil spirits' caused him concern;

Smoking ceremonies seem to raise the biggest issues. Even still now. On Australia day, we are going to have a smoking ceremony next to our Choir and so I get blamed for all of the 'evil' that could happen to our choir after the ceremony, all because the smoke blows over them... And I've said, 'listen, the kids got sick because the parents are smoking in front of them, and they're not just smoking tobacco - tobacco does bad stuff to their health - they're smoking ice, you know. That's the smoking ceremony I'm against.

When David hears the kids or others around him talk about 'evil spirits' he encourages them to also think about the angelic realm, arguing that in every culture there is 'good' and 'evil';

Wherever we go, the kids and adults are always talking about evil spirits. I've just said, 'Okay there are evil spirits, but what about angels? There are angels as well you know.... for every demon, what about the angels? Why can't we celebrate them?' Every time you talk about angels there this sense of angelic presence in the Holy Spirit.

To reconcile his own position on issues within Aboriginal Pentecostal world, David draws wisdom from

²² Bain, *White Men Are Liars*, p.18

²³ Armstrong, 10.

²⁴ Pentecostals take the New Testament encounters of Jesus with demons literally, and their emphasis on healing is often associated with deliverance ministry. They tend to spiritualise psychological and social problems, and thus deliverance ministry is connected to their understanding of personal and social transformation. There has been a tendency to understand the spirits spoken about in animistic religions as being demonic. But there is also a more progressive stream within contemporary Pentecostalism that takes a more nuanced view of discerning of spirits, recognising commonality (and difference) between Pentecostal and other experiential spiritualities. See, Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000); Donald E Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

both Indigenous and Biblical principles. That is, by speaking to two or three Elders on any given issue, David engages in the Aboriginal oral tradition of 'Knowing' and situates this practice within the Biblical precedent of having two or three witnesses;

The Bible says two or three witnesses. So, I've tried to [talk with] two or three Elders, so whenever I'm talking about our Darug or our choir and what I think of their spirituality, I always try talk to two or three. I don't just talk to one person, because everyone has different opinions about their spirituality. When I talk about spirituality and Dreaming, I have to go to specific stories – [for example], I talk about the Dreaming of our Elders.

David feels that the heightened preoccupation with 'evil spirits' in some Aboriginal Pentecostal contexts is an outcome of over simplistic understandings of Aboriginal world. Dodson, Elston and McCoy's study makes a strong case for the pressures that Aboriginal Christians feel to become "assimilated" into typical forms of "faith expression" when they join the Christian church, making them feel "compelled to leave their culture 'at the door'" and thus isolating them from traditional social, familial and spiritual values.²⁵ Similarly, David articulates that the act of superimposing Pentecostal "theology onto [Aboriginal] world" is detrimental to holistic understandings of both Aboriginal world and Pentecostal worldview;

There is a lot of stuff we can't understand – it's mystery. One of the problems was... one of the things I first saw when I started to research stuff were over simplistic attitudes towards our Aboriginal world and even the stories. Immediately, people try to make a correlation. 'This is this' and 'this is this', and so from the start I said, "this is an over simplistic approach." Either, it's all evil so keep away from it, or so simplistic that [it becomes] this story: 'there's a frog over here, and that must mean this.' It's basically putting our theology onto their world.

While David is at pains to avoid simple answers, he is a self-described 'passionately, Pentecostal Christian', and turns to the Holy Spirit for guidance on deciphering the complex intersection of his two cultural heritages;

We deal with the evil spirits but we [also] look to the Holy Spirit and deal with the Dreaming that way, in that the filter of all of those stories has to be...it can't [just] be the pain and the sadness and the loss, even though they are living on the grief side. They are living in ...it's...their world is so sad.

When asked how David differentiates between the Holy Spirit and 'evil spirits' he points to the spiritual gift of 'the discernment of Spirits'.²⁶ While he feels this has guided some of his decision-making, David also states that there is "wisdom in the multitude of counsellors"²⁷ and therefore relies on the prayer of those around him for wisdom of discernment.

²⁵ Patrick L. Dodson, Jacinta K. Elston, Brian F. McCoy, "Leaving Culture at the Door: Aboriginal Perspectives on Christian Belief and Practice," *Pacifica* 19, no. 3 (2006), 250.

²⁶ Armstrong refers to the scriptural reference found in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 "distinguishing between the spirits."

²⁷ See: Proverbs 11; 14; Proverbs 15:22 and Proverbs 24:6.

Reflections on David's Journey

Importantly, David admits that his understanding of these matters is still developing, claiming that, “for me, it’s still a journey. It’s still very early days.” Along this journey, a valuable lesson that David has come to understand in time, and a reason for his reliance on the Holy Spirit and conversations with numerous Elders, is that there is no ‘one-way’ to approach ministry outreach, considering the cultural, social, geographical and historical factors that distinguish various Indigenous people groups across Australia. While David admits that an ongoing factor for him is that he still “does not know how to deal with some things,”²⁸ he has sought to establish a ministry that he feels is “contextually appropriate to the Mount Druitt land” using music as a “common point of intersection” between Pentecostal faith expression and Darug culture.²⁹ As illustrated, David’s preliminary ‘learning’ journey provided context for his development of an “urban Aboriginal Pentecostal theology” that would speak into a Western Sydney suburban context.³⁰ David joyfully points to a scenario that for him, illustrated the embodiment of his Choir ministry fulfilled - “to empower people for one good day through dreaming, healing, leading,”³¹

We’re singing mostly uplifting types of songs; we’re singing ‘*Buruwa*,’ which means lift. Once, some of our choir children were interviewed. I did not know what they were going to ask them. The interviewer asked one of the girls, one of the eleven-year olds in our choir, “What does *Buruwa* mean?” and she said, “Lift! Everywhere the Choir goes we sing ‘*Buruwa*’ and we just believe we see all of the evil spirits lift off people!” It was so cool hearing her say this, because she was speaking to a national audience about the story in this song.

As a mixed descent Aboriginal person, raised in a predominantly Western cultural setting, David’s identity renegotiation from ‘Pastor’ to ‘Aboriginal Pastor’ has raised some resistance. He claims that some Aboriginal leaders have viewed him as ‘a ring- in’ – a perspective that he understands and admits to, since he has so much to learn. On the other hand, non-Aboriginal Pentecostal pastors have also struggled to understand his journey;

I worked with a lot of guys... but they never saw me as an ‘Aboriginal Pastor.’ But these last seven to ten years since, [as] I’ve specifically worked on this level, I’ve realised how difficult it is for our fellas, because I’ve just been a pastor, and so once I began to be seen as an Aboriginal pastor, I realised what these other guys have gone through.

Despite setbacks, David finds comfort in both cultures’ embrace of a shared openness to the spirit realm. He thinks that the wider church can learn much from an oft marginalised Pentecostal and Aboriginal spirituality;

²⁸ Armstrong, “Interview with David Armstrong part II,” interview by Shane Clifton at Alphacrucis College, Parramatta, February 13, 2018.

²⁹ Riches, 38.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 45.

Some Christians imagine spirituality as one hour on Sunday morning between nine and ten o'clock, or ten and eleven; you know, like a church service. Aboriginal spirituality is not a service; spirituality is actually a life. It's all integrated.... [Likewise] in Pentecostal spirituality, you don't stop being in the spirit, you walk in the spirit, you're continually in the spirit. And even with the digeridoo playing, it's a drone, it's continuous. So I always think of the way they don't de-compartmentalise 'this is spirit, this is soul, this is body', do you know what I mean? Everything's spiritual.

David is upfront about the limits of his knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture, but nevertheless feels compelled to be an agent of healing. And while he knows Pentecostals share in the history of Aboriginal oppression, he believes that Aboriginal Pentecostals can take part in the processes of 'dreaming, healing and leading' that are needed to respond to the intergenerational trauma and cultural and spiritual disenfranchisement that resulted from colonisation.

David celebrates the fruits of the work he has done in ministering to Aboriginal peoples, including the significance of reviving a language that has been suppressed and silenced in decades prior to David's choir ministry. David notes that many in the Blacktown area have started identifying as Darug;

They used to say, the Darug language is dead, there's no more Darug people left, but in the last 20 or 30 years the Darug people started saying, "yeh I'm Darug," and they're probably Whiter than you!

David continues to face substantial challenges as he navigates differences between Aboriginal and Pentecostal cultural traditions. While differing worldviews and 'ways of Knowing' between the two cultures demand careful treatment, David is also at pains to ensure that he avoids paternalistic attitudes and practices, as is still the case in some areas of the non-Indigenous sphere. That is why it matters that David is an Aboriginal man taking a leading role, rather than White Pentecostal leaders. Similarly, David feels a strong urge to combat attitudes of indifference to Aboriginal suffering and loss, leading by example through his ministry to Aboriginal individuals and families. Reflecting on his journey so far, David emphasises the power in language to keep himself going, making a strong case for its powerful and enabling qualities in connecting people to the spiritual world, and for the spiritual nourishment that emerges through its use;

...When people try to stop me and say, "hey just wait, just wait," I just keep going, I just believe that's the power of Pentecost – the language and the communication of the word. I think that's why the Pentecostals have connected because of that language - that deep language and passion. You might find most Aboriginal fellows...quiet... [yet] they're not necessarily quiet but they're passionate – they've got passion in their spirituality.

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