

Interview with Sandra and Will Dumas by Tanya Riches

Tweed Heads, New South Wales

Abstract

Pastors Sandra and Will Dumas are senior pastors of Ganggalah Church in Tweed Heads, NSW. They are also the Australian Christian Churches' (ACC) national Indigenous Initiative leaders. Pastor Sandra Dumas is a Bundjalung woman and Pastor Will Dumas a Birripi/Dunghutti man. Within this interview they discuss their testimony of how they came to faith, outlining the significant leaders Amelia and Alan Watego in Tweed, and Dick and Yvonne and their experiences in the Australian church, as well as their understanding of The Dreaming and how it interacts with their faith. They explain the historical reasoning behind why Aboriginal leaders in the Pentecostal church today promote revitalising cultural forms.

Interview

Tanya: What are your names for this transcript?

Sandra & Will: Sandra Dumas and William Dumas.

Tanya: Fantastic! And what nation do you identify as?

Sandra: I am Bundjalung I come from the Tweed – the Fingal area. So Bundjalung is a huge nation but the Goodjinburra is my clan, the coastal people of Fingal.

Will: I am from Birripi country that is on my dad's side and my mum's side is Dunghutti which is on the north coast. But I was more reared up, urbanised in the city - but proud to be a Birripi and Dhungutti

Tanya: So when did you become a Christian? Could you tell us a little about your testimony?

Sandra: I became a Christian in 1980 or 1981, I was brought up in Fingal, a very closed community back in my day. so we attended church the AIM (Aboriginal Inland Mission) - a church for the Indigenous community. We were all brought up in church. But I did not know Jesus. I knew Sunday school stories, and I knew right and wrong stuff like that.

But I went on my own journey... and I was 17 just going on 18 when I got saved. So the church that we pastor today is the church that I was saved in – so Aunty Amelia and Alan Watego were my pastors when I got saved. It was very much through my Aunty who was the matriarch in our family who the Christian and had been for a long time. She was the one that led me to the Lord and brought me into the life of the church.

Will: I think I got saved in 1980 and received the Lord in Sydney in Redfern - around about September or October. So that was a great experience and a huge transformation. I was saved under the ministry of Sandra's uncle, Uncle Dick Blair and his wife sister Yvonne. Their denomination was Jesus Only. but then when I got saved and then we got married in 1981 and I was 20 and she was 18 so that was a good time and life.

Tanya: So now, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in your Christian life?

Sandra: Well, as the Word says, He leads us in all truth (John 16:13). He is our guide, our teacher. Will just preached this morning about the role of the Holy Spirit - that you must be born again and be led by the Spirit of God. Without the Holy Spirit I would find it very difficult to live out this Christian walk ... because the Holy Spirit comes beside you and convicts you of life in general but your attitudes; where you can see narrow-mindedly, the Holy Spirit will just come alongside and help you see it is a bit bigger. So the Holy Spirit is really active and alive and our life should depend upon His leading.

Will: Jesus said after the resurrection to the disciples "I must ascend so that the Holy Spirit can come back" (John 16:7). He's a part of the Trinity – Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. He empowers the church - I believe it is not just in the intellectual way but also in the supernatural way. I think the church was birthed in the supernatural ... and it brings transformation and that shift.

You can always know when the Holy Spirit is present. In Ephesians 1:17 Paul says that the Holy Spirit gives you that spiritual revelation and understanding. Not to know what you've seen only but to know what Christ has done for us, 'cause he came with grace and truth. The Holy Spirit never ever praises himself, he always comes to praise Jesus - because Jesus is the one that set the foundation and brings glory to the Father.

Tanya: What does The Dreaming mean to you if you were to put it in your own terms?

Sandra: The passing on of stories. So we learn about not only our own family but our land and our language through the stories, which are passed on. I think some people associate The Dreaming spirituality with demons and it doesn't sit well with a lot of [Pentecostals] but it is just a passing on of knowledge and stories.

It's the knowledge that we needed to know in caring for our land and people, caring for our country. It is passed-on knowledge. That is what I have to do with my kids – pass on not only the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Saviour, but also the knowledge of who they are and what people they were born into; their land, where they come from – our heritage.

Will: Dreaming is, just like Sandra was saying, the passing of oral stories – small stories, but also about certain events; there are some major stories about events that need to be told. God speaks in the Bible; the terminology is expressed in different ways. It might be a pain or telling someone that appears to him (like Abraham) about something. Our forefathers in the Bible – many times they have annals and messages which reveal to them – and they pass those stories on. Angels tell the stories or a person gets a visitation and they then pass it down to the next generation because it is really important.

We all have different ways how we express our Dreaming ... 'Cause it isn't just about a culture of race ... God says in the book of Joel that old men should have dreams and young men should have visions, so that explains to us. It is exactly telling stories, the things that our kids need to know – what is right and what is wrong.

Tanya: Are there any significant traditions or cultural celebrations from The Dreaming or from Aboriginal culture that you consider really important and that you would want your children and the church to continue?

Sandra: One of the things we've learnt was our five "principles" or our five "stones" - which is language, law, kinship, identity, and the dances. We need to pass that on that to our kids.¹ But we're always weighing up, whatever cultural practice, weighing it up with the Spirit of God.

Dance is what we do as ceremony. It's important to know what they are doing – or what they are entering into - what is this ceremony about?

Tanya: Would Welcome to Country be one of the ones that you want to be part of?

Sandra: Definitely! Always respect, always acknowledge, when you are on your own Country - but also in other people's Country as well. [We] don't go in there thinking just because [we] are Aboriginal, [we can] walk on someone else's land. You have got to be honourable no matter where you are. We had one instance (and I won't say any names) where a person came into another person's land and saw some cutting of trees and made comments. But the people of that land said "no, we have had permission to do what we do." The other person didn't like it and

¹ This is listed as "family, land, law, language, and ceremony" within Brett, Mark and Paulson, Graham. *Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through Aboriginal Eyes*. Colloquium, 45 (2). pp. 199-209. Available at Link: https://repository.divinity.edu.au/1672/1/Brett_M_Five_Smooth_Stones_BUV_edit.pdf

actually put a curse on these people ... it was dishonourable. You just don't go doing that. It is their land, they have been entrusted to do the teaching and conduct the practices they have on their land.

You can't apply what we learn or do here on to someone else's Country. So we would pass on to our children respect, really - you not only honour your local Elders but honour those in other lands and other Countries as well. And don't apply what you know to someone else's land. Because what is permissible there might not be here.

Will: Yeah. And I think having the didjeridu is one of the good customs from our traditional way of doing Christianity. Playing the didge. Certain places have different traditions in relation to that but still, the didjeridu is a great custom to have.

Tanya: Mainly for men?

Will: Yeah. It is not any way demonic because it comes down to the person who plays it! If they are Christian then they are expressing God with that sound that comes through. I believe the instrument brings healing to the soul and to the land. It reinforces what God has given. That instrument can prophetically really bring a change and bring reconciliation.

Sandra: We bought [our son] Malachi a set. He has learnt some dancing from here from our [Bundjalung] area but we bought him a set of clap sticks from Wills' area from Dunghutti and we said to him this is the sound of the comfort of Dunghutti. This is what you have got to respect as well, this is part of who you are.

Tanya: So the didjeridu is often considered more national and then you have local sounds as well. Are there any things that you wouldn't want Christians to naively take into church worship; that you would be more concerned about?

Sandra: I think a lot of Indigenous people are still quite scared of smoking ceremonies. We haven't got a problem with it - as long as what they are doing is honourable or honouring back to God. I recently got asked could a smoking ceremony take place in a church? I explained the essence of a smoking ceremony as where they gather local produce (whether it be pinecones or trees or leaves) from that land, and they burn it. It is part of a Welcome and creates a connection to the land. Then the smoke, they say, is to scare off evil or quarrelsome spirits. So at the end of the day, so in that sense, they are honouring God by saying "devil we don't want you here in our midst, we want a good meeting (or whatever it might be)."

But the church has looked at it and thought "oh this is demonic." Well no, it is not. But anything can be distorted; anything can be brought into demonic practice. No matter what we do. So I

opened their eyes a bit more and said well if a man stands in a white robe and swings a cantor around - that is okay?

Will: Yeah in a Catholic context.

Sandra: Yeah. But he can swing that around and it is acceptable but yet an Aboriginal man who has a smoking ceremony, this is called “demonic,” – but what is the difference? They are both saying the same thing. One is saying we want the Spirit of God in this house and he swings the cantor around. The Aboriginal man is saying we don’t want a quarrelsome spirit.

Tanya: Perfect.

Sandra: Yeah, that is what I think. It is not an evil practice. So have a look and see what the practice is. What is happening - is it honouring? Is it dishonouring?

Will: What could be considered “bad” doesn’t mean to say it is “evil.” Like when the Lord told Adam he could touch every tree and acknowledge good and evil, He said but this is the one that you eat. So he always pointed out, somethings can be “good” but it doesn’t mean to say it is right to do.

Tanya: Do you think blood ceremonies would be one ceremony that you would be more nervous about?

Sandra: Yes definitely.

Will: Look, I think once [people] start going deep into sacrificial things... I think it has to do with atonement. So in the Old Testament they did those ritual things - and in other cultures or foreign countries as well - they worshipped their gods through sacrifice. So in other words they originally got it from the truth; God gave sacrificial practices. Everything came from the main vine. God taught Abraham. All that was a shadow for every culture - until Jesus on the cross provided that sacrifice. So cultures use those similarities. But then Satan gets in or evil gets in and corrupts it and it reverses itself. Instead of giving worship to Jehovah or God the Father or Jesus it actually goes to their foreign gods. Where Satan corrupts it, it becomes a curse instead of a blessing.

Tanya: Because it doesn’t result in freedom, it results in being bound?

Will: Well it’s something that they worship you see. So everything stemmed from the beginning. It should be a righteous and pure and beneficial practice; [used] to get man to come to God and give praise and adoration. Jesus was that perfect lamb.

- Tanya: So ... how do you think about the relationship between your culture and your Christianity?
- Sandra: I think one of the biggest journeys I have been on personally is growing up in the AIM church. They were the church for the Aboriginal community and believed they were missionaries to the Aboriginal community. They were all over the nation. But one of the things they taught was that when you walked through the church door you left your Aboriginality - you came in and you were a Christian. So it separated things - it was like a dancing act - we are one foot in and one foot out. So you lost your identity and that sense of who you are.
- [But] Christ called you - no matter what culture you come from, background, ethnicity, he created you who you are and he expects that you will express who you are. You give glory back to him in language, in song, through your land, and through your people. But we weren't taught that. So it has been a relearning of my identity as an Aboriginal Christian.
- I am very much Aboriginal but I am also very much a Christian woman as well. And you can't separate that. For a non-Indigenous person [often] they don't understand. Recently a person said to me "I heard this message about this black women in America who said that I am not black, I am a Christian, I am a child of God, I am a woman of God and that is how it should be. Christ doesn't see colour."
- And I said yep, okay. That is true. But you know what? I wouldn't say that because of my journey and where I have come from. I am an Aboriginal Christian woman and I will say it proudly because I gain my identity back in who I am in Him. I am very proud of being an Aboriginal woman and want to express that because half our problem in our nation, is lost identity... A whole intergenerational trauma has been passed on because of lack of identity.
- Tanya: Pastor Will, do you have anything that you would say in regards to how you think about the relationship between your culture and your Christianity?
- Will: Well, for example, Moses was taken from his roots. He was a Hebrew boy and then he was taken to a foreign country land. It is like the Stolen Generation. Being grafted into that Egypt lifestyle and culture. If nothing has been stolen from you (from who you are) you actually don't understand. But when something is stolen from you ... if you have never experienced something being stolen from you, you can never understand reconciliation in that context.
- Sandra: Even our Elders in the church were brought up under that banner - their identity was very much Christian. "Oh no, we can't have the didge in the church" or "no we can't do this or that" ... and it was because it was taught to them that it was evil. No, it is not evil to be born who you are. It is who you are in Christ. And without that identity there is a shortfall in your life, there

is a big shortfall. Moses went back and actually, he felt a connection with the Hebrew people and knew that they were his people. It is so very much like us.

Will: It is regaining who you are to actually discover that God made you who you should be. It is not what the institution tell you about the way you should form yourself. 'Cause you can get lost in that and become what they want you to be instead of what God tells us to be.

You know Moses was considered a race of people that he shouldn't have been, yet God still turned that around for good. So everything lost can be turned around for good. Really, when we understand the journey that we are all in, we begin to gain our identity. Once Moses understood his past or where he was from - because there was a crisis situation that hit his life - but God was actually causing that to happen. Once he began to discover that he wasn't Egyptian that is when he really began to go into the strength of the calling of his life.

Tanya: Did your church have a similar approach to Aboriginality, Will? Did you all leave your Aboriginality at the door? Was that the kind of the way they framed it, or was it different?

Will: I don't think I left any of my Aboriginality. I didn't much understand those dynamics. But I think what really helped me to become pretty much who I am was Jesus, and what he became to me. Like the woman at the well - she was a Samaritan "half-caste," you know, yet Jesus never said that. Looking from the natural point of view, from a traditional custom, they weren't allowed to mix between a Jew and a "half-caste" Samaritan.

But he went to her and said "the water you drink, you will always thirst all the time" - and what he is saying is, if you keep living the way you are, you are never going to know who you are or where you should be or where you should be going. But with the water I give you, you begin to discover what your true identify and purpose is. I think everybody has got to come to Jacob's well. You know, to have an encounter with God. Once they have that, they never forget where they have been - but they discover their destiny and their plan of life and where they should be going.

Tanya: So maybe if you could share a little bit about the ACC Indigenous Initiative?

Sandra: So roughly eight years ago, the ACC formally pulled Aboriginal missions out of the missions department and said this is our nation and these are the first nations people of this country, they are not a mission. The Indigenous Initiative was formed under Pastor Wayne Alcorn's leadership with the hope that they would have an Indigenous representative from every state who would then be able to work in their communities, and work with their states towards bringing reconciliation, closing the gap and being a resource. All those type of things.

So Pastor Will and I are now the national leaders and we have an Indigenous rep in just about every state. We haven't got one in Tasmania but the one that we do have is brilliant and will certainly step aside when we have a leader down there. So we come together twice a year to formulate strategies on how we are going to influence and resource the ACC. We have really stepped up our marketing in the sense of doing videos and bringing in awareness and understanding of Indigenous Australia.

So last year we did a NADOC video which was so well received, it went nationwide, not only in our church or movement but was actually used as a resource in other churches. We explained the intent of NADOC and that it was birthed out of the justice movement, and how the church was very much involved in it. There was a man of God that led it, William Cooper, who brought it to fruition. Then we challenged our church, and put it back to our movement and our people that it was the church back then – so why is the church silent now? The church needs to step forward in closing the gap on many areas.

Will: We hope that in the future, it can raise up another generation who have a different focus and approach, which is cultural awareness. The Initiative helps non-Indigenous people to understand and embrace the importance of Aboriginal leadership.

We are looking at the next 10 years in our movement, and asking what is it going to look like? So this is a starting point to try and get some education and understanding for our next generation leaders to actually grab a hold of what is in this nation.

The gaps are pretty wide, because of our people's education in our ACC movement. It is over 100 years as a movement but the sad thing is it never really gave our Indigenous and Torres Strait Island people the initiative to take leadership roles.

But we're saying now: Be on executive boards. Be in all those major positions and take roles in our movement. Back in the 60s and 70s they never allowed all that. Even though they are the most faithful people supporting our churches in Queensland and different places. But so why can't we have Indigenous people on the executive leadership?

That is what is going to bring a real shift and change.

Tanya: OK! What knowledge would you want to pass on to Aboriginal Christian leaders say in 5 -10 years if they were reading this transcript, what would you want them to know?

Will: We would want them to know that we have people that have foresight. We have our historic women and men that laid the foundation in the 60s and 70s and made the change in our government political arena as much as within the churches. I would like them to see that we are

part of history making. I would like them to know that sometimes people that are the forerunners don't get understood properly. This is only a platform, a foundation we can lay, to let those people know in 5-10 years' time that there were people labouring, working and ploughing, bringing a change, you know, for the coming future generations.

Tanya: Oh and for women - you know - if there is an Aboriginal Christian leader reading this in years to come in the library somewhere, what would you want her to know?

Sandra: That she can be all that she has been called to be. There have been lots that have gone before us who have laid their life down, paid the price, for where we are even today.

Even like my Pastor...even though she didn't identify herself as an Aboriginal leader, she was very active in our community. She was consistent, she was always there, she was faithful and she is known for that. Mention her name today and she is known for her consistency and faithfulness in our community. She was a leader that went before us. So, for those who might read this in 5-10 years I pray that we have been the leaders that God has called us to be. Inspirational to so many younger ones that they would choose life, that they step into the calling that God has for them.

Will: Hope for the future. When they face whatever challenges in their world.

We can learn from our ancestors and those that have been around for a long time. This can encourage them for the future. It gives our women the faith to be courageous and to stand up for righteousness. They can have that liberty - of being a voice, not just as mothers but actually as the backbone of the church! Traditional culture (our custom) or even our denominations can limit the women from actually being in the top. So I would like to see that.

Sandra: One last thing I would say ... even in the frustration or in a time where things aren't happening or moving, remain kind, remain sweet, remain loving. Even during those times of frustration where you are not being heard or you can't see the change happening. In five years' time we pray that there would be great change. But if not, then remain humble, remain in God, be kind. Yeah.

Tanya: Awesome, thank you.