

Interview with Pastor Ray Minniecon by Tanya Riches

Sydney, NSW

Abstract

Pastor Ray Minniecon is a descendant of the Kabi Kabi nation and the Gurang Gurang nation of South-East Queensland. Ray is also a descendant of the South Sea Islander people with connections to the people of Ambrym Island. He runs the “Scarred Tree” ministries at St John’s Anglican Church Glebe. His pastoral ministry has included supporting members of the “Stolen Generations,” a term which refers to the tens of thousands of Aboriginal children who, from the late 1800s until the 1970s, were forcibly removed from their families by government agencies and church missions. His father, Sterling Minniecon, was the first ordained Aboriginal Pastor in the Assemblies of God denomination, Australia.

Interview

Ray: My name is Pastor Ray Minniecon. On my fathers’ side I’m from the Kabi Kabi nation in south east Queensland. On my mothers’ side, from the Goreng Goreng nation, which is around the Bundaberg area. I also have connections to Ambrym Island, Vanuatu, from my grandfather who was taken from west Ambrym. Actually my name “Minniecon” comes from that island. So it’s very tribal over that way. Oh and finally, I also have a great-grandfather on my mother’s side who was taken from Pentecost Island. So that’s my heritage.

Tanya: So that’s Aboriginal and South Sea Islander? Where is Pentecost Island?

Ray: Yeah. Pentecost Island is also in the Vanuatu area, Melanesia. He was forcibly removed, like my other grandfather, and brought over here to work in the sugar canes, as a “blackbirder;” the name given for the slave workers of Queensland, Australia, there. Over sixty thousand South Sea Islander people were taken from all of those major islands in Melanesia and Polynesia and brought here to Australia to help in the sugar Industry.... To develop the economic development of Queensland. They owe us big time!

Tanya: So I guess we've covered your country and land. When did you become a Christian, and could you tell us a little about your testimony?

Ray: Yes. I was brought up in a Christian home. My father was an itinerant evangelist and a pastor amongst our people. To understand that, you have to understand that we were brought up under the Aboriginal Protection Acts - and they were quite brutal acts. I don't think this country's come to grips with the brutality of those acts. But so in my understanding of my journey, I'd be a third generation follower of the teachings of Jesus.

There was a young white female Christian, I think she belonged to the Brethren church, I'm not quite sure, but her name was Florence Young. She came from New Zealand, [along with] her two brothers - her family had a cane farm in Bundaberg, my mother's country. And this farm had around about two hundred Aboriginal and South Sea Islander people. My grandfather could have been a part of that, one of the number of slaves they had on their farm.

And she decided she would bring the gospel to our people at that moment. I can only call it a sovereign act of God, rather than something that came out of a Christian rally, or a Christian event or service or anything of this nature. But she came amongst us, my people there in Bundaberg, and the sovereign act of God took place, and many of our people in that area became Christians, followers of Jesus. And through that she actually began to teach them how to read and all that kind of stuff, she had an education program there too. So that's where, I guess, where my father learnt to read and write, 'cause we didn't have access to good education in those days. And she started the South Sea Evangelical Mission.

It started in Bundaberg. And it went all the way through Queensland. She was quite an astounding lady, one of those, you know, young white females that never get recognised in this country by the church. And she also established in the Solomon Islands in particular, the South Sea Evangelical Church.

Tanya: Right. Wow.

Ray: All because of this missionary work that started here in Bundaberg, in my country.

Riches: Amazing.

Ray: So when I look at that history, I say that's when I was born again. That's when I became a Christian.

Riches: Yeah.

Ray: She didn't do all the justice things, telling the government they shouldn't have slaves, and all that sort of business. But, once again, the sovereign act of God - in His own way, His own journey - He worked in very mysterious ways to perform His will amongst the South Sea Islander people of that time. They look back to that place in Bundaberg as the birthplace of Christianity amongst a lot of our people.

Riches: That's beautiful. So, you mentioned your father, Sterling Minniecon?

Ray: That's right. He was the first Aboriginal pastor to be appointed under the Assemblies of God... to a little mission up in far north Queensland on the Atherton Tableland, at a little place called "Pinnacle Pocket."

Tanya: Oh, okay! And, so, was he pastor during the revivals?

Ray: Oh yeah... but, you know, it wasn't only in that particular place. Everywhere we went, we had church. Dad always had that evangelical passion and that zeal to bring the gospel to our people right throughout the country. So I was brought up on the gospel - in our lounge room, in the backyard, on the streets, or in the communities. Wherever the Lord had led my father, we were there, to do his will.

So that's...how we became Christian, and that's where Dad had his biggest impact in terms of the ministry, while we were under the Aboriginal Protection Act at that time.

Tanya: Right, wow.... Am I allowed to ask... what did that mean for you, practically, to be under the Act?

Ray: Well, I would suggest you read the Aboriginal Protection Act as a policy, in terms of what we could and could not do, because it was a very restrictive Act. It placed us on these missions and on these reserves. Because of the Act we could not interact with our people, we couldn't...

speaking our language. We were, you know, forced to live in these places without adequate resources or adequate... other things. Yeah. So you need to understand that Act, in order to understand the power of God working amongst us... 'cause [God] is all we had... the government wasn't there, the church wasn't there... the whole of the community was against us, the only person that was for us was God himself.

Tanya: Yeah. Amen. So that kind of leads into the next question - what is the role of the Holy Spirit in your Christian life?

Ray: Well I mentioned that move of His Spirit...to me, when I look back on that moment, I think it was the birthing place of the Holy Spirit's movement amongst the people... particularly through Queensland... because you have this incredible spiritual move of God throughout that particular state in all of these Aboriginal communities. Not all of them, but, you know, most of them anyways had what you would call a charismatic or a Pentecostal influence through there. That's the flavour that a lot of those people took. In those days, in my memory anyways, it was people like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts - it was more the Pentecostal side of things. And so these people, like my father, and all the others, were trying to get as much understanding of those things as they could. So that they could preach the gospel adequately 'cause we didn't get to go to Bible College or anything. But they... just knew the Bible, and they knew the Spirit.

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

Ray: I mean, you can't do what I do, I can't do what I do if it wasn't for the Holy Spirit. That's just simple, that's it. It's that real, it's just that raw. If it wasn't for the Holy Spirit, I mean, if ... I used Aboriginal rationality, who would want to be a Christian, as an Aboriginal?

After two hundred and thirty years of rejection and exclusion and racism and all from the church, who'd want to be an Aboriginal Christian? It's just dopey, it's a foreign religion, and still is. If it wasn't, I think, for that lady, and the ways in which the Spirit moved at that time...I think if a denomination came then, we might not have had the same, same experiences... with God, rather than with an institution like the church. Because the church was really not part of our life, at that time. Missionaries [were] amongst us, but not the denominations that they came from.

Tanya: So, moving to Aboriginal culture – what does The Dreaming mean to you? And is 'The Dreaming' even a term that you would feel comfortable using?

Ray: No, it's an English word. It really demeans the incredible depth of the Aboriginal spirituality, its theology. It's something that, you know, jars against the realities of what we experience as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who practiced our... I wouldn't call it a religion... but practiced what we believed in terms of our relationship with our land, of our relationship with each other, our relationship with our environment, and our relationship with our Creator. If that's what The Dreaming can be summarised as, [then] perhaps, that's what The Dreaming means. But I just find the word difficult.

Any English word that tries to describe this incredible spiritual - as well as political, as well as philosophical - understanding, it just doesn't come anywhere near to explain it, or to understand it, or to comprehend its power, its grace.

But biblically, you could almost say, for me, The Dreaming could be taken from John 1:1. In the beginning was the word, well in the beginning was the dreaming. The Dreaming was God, was with God, and The Dreaming became flesh and dwelt with us. That to me would be an easier way to express that, in terms of a biblical or theological juxtaposition, I guess.

Tanya: Sure. Is there a word in your language, so from Bundaberg or from Kabi Kabi country - is there another better way to say it on land?

Ray: Once again the translation back into English is always a big challenge. So once I say a word then I've got to explain the word, or...

Tanya: Yeah, okay yeah, so it kind of needs to be referenced with Aboriginal concepts.

Ray: It needs to be referenced. That's why I like to use the biblical reference because it does have those theological deeper understandings.

If I was to choose an English word that would be much more appropriate and more inclusive, I would use the word 'story.' And then story becomes much more - what we would call community orientated or relationship orientated, because we're all part of the big story, and we all have a story... and we all participate in the story.

So in the beginning was the story... the story was God, the story was being told by God...so that would be a much deeper theological understanding from an English translation. But it has to come back and reference itself through that particular scripture, because I haven't found any other... notion, or any other book, or any other philosophy that can come anywhere closer to my understandings of what The Dreaming is trying to explore or explain.

Tanya: So, this is really a bit controversial within the Pentecostal community. Less so I imagine for someone like yourself, perhaps. Are there significant traditions or cultural celebrations that you consider important to participate in as an Aboriginal man and as a Christian?

Ray: I wish there were, but you've got to understand the Aboriginal Protection Acts... demolished a lot of those traditional practices, and we're now trying to recover that which has been destroyed. I can go onto someone else's land... I mean [participate in] some of our more traditional cultures which have got a lot of these ceremonies. But that's *their* ceremonies not my ceremony. I can participate in those... but they're not from my country. All of our traditions, ceremonies, are really land-based. They're about making sure that we [are] true custodians of the land in which our Creator has given us, and it's our responsibility to look after that.

... But, that's the reality of it. We just can't go into someone else's country and practice their traditions and ceremonies, unless they invite us in to participate. Usually those bigger ceremonies are places where you share your ceremonial understandings and traditions and theologies and all of those kind of things ... we call them corroborees today but they were really big ... you know, if you wanted to use the language, that was church.

Tanya: Yeah sure, maybe our modern-day conferences!

Okay.... And are there any of those traditions or cultural celebrations that you wouldn't expect, or you would advise Christians not to participate in? ... And why?

Ray: The question is loaded, really, it's a very arrogant question. Because it puts Christians onto some kind of higher plane here, that we can't participate in all these "paganistic" kind of things. So I find it a little arrogant. The question really is "why *don't* Christians participate in those kind of things, and what's the problem they have?!"

Whatever it is that we do, that wouldn't be [the problem]. And the Bible does, you know, give us some understandings around some of those things there.

But once again, the Bible is written for a different, for a different group of people, it's not our book. Our bible is already there in the land, it's written and created for us. But, look, yeah like I say, it's not a question that would be easily, you know...

Tanya: It's a hard one to answer well. But have you ever come across community pastors ... so Aboriginal pastors that would recommend their congregation not attend or participate in cultural ceremonies?

Ray: I've heard of some of those kind of restrictions, and that's sad to me. And once again it depends upon the particular pastor. It's not him that really bugs me, it's the person who has come in here, the outsider that's come in there and influenced that person, and saying, look, your culture's bad, your language bad. We've had two hundred and thirty fricking years of that, you know.

Tanya: Yeah.

Ray: And, we've never heard the other side of it, in saying, look at all these Christian rituals and things here, why do we have to participate in that?! ... Easter is a pagan ritual.

Tanya: Yeah.

Ray: So too is Christmas!

Tanya: Easter bunnies, and Santa Claus.

Ray: Yeah, and that to me is a real desecration ... of the death and resurrection of Jesus. You know, we worship bunnies, eat chocolates. And I find that just absolutely, you know, totally irresponsible of the church, to actually make these pagan rituals a part of the Christian ceremonies.

Tanya: Sure.

Ray: So there's lots of stuff in that one little question there that needs to be re-examined in the light of whose asking the question? And what are the reasons behind that question? That's why I'm saying it's a little arrogant to ask an Aboriginal Christian, you know, what, there... when we have to be, we're forced to do, these other kinds of rituals and ceremonies that the white fellas have, without allowing us the opportunity to even question whether we should participate or not.

Tanya: For sure. And you're definitely able to ask that here. So, I guess the ... reason we did the journal is to ... actually listen to Aboriginal Christians on this issue, as to how *you* think about the

relationship between your culture and your Christianity, as opposed to the external voices that try to weigh into that?

Ray: Yeah once again... we've already done our... analysis of what gospel is, and what culture is, and we'll continue that journey. We're pretty content with the ways in which we have done that analysis over a short period of time really, we've done that without theological training, and we've done that mainly because, we've been forced to, by the church ... which is arrogant, again, and totally criminal, as far as I'm concerned. Because when you consider, like again, the Aboriginal Protection Act and all those others acts, they didn't end until 1967.

We've only had this short period of time - my generation - to be asked this incredibly deep question without the tools or the equipment to actually examine what the question is, nor [the right] to question the examiner or the questioner ... who's asking, that particular question, and the reasons why.

Most of the time I find with Western Christianity, they ask questions so they can know you're on the cross again, and slaughter you.... But, once we've done our own examination ... we're now realising that we've come to the conclusion that the Bible, for us, is tribal. It doesn't belong to the church, it doesn't belong to these white fellas. It's not their story, it's not their history.

We know who we are, we know where we come from, we're in our country, and we've got all our traditions, and that's what we're looking at in terms of this book. We know that Jesus was a tribal man, he came from the tribe of Judah. We know that the greatest theologian on the planet, Paul the apostle, was a tribal man, he came from the tribe of Benjamin. And so all of these elements of the Book become real when you look through, through a tribal origin.

Tanya: Yes.

Ray: It's *all about* land, and land rights. And also about individualism; as well as corporatism; as well as nationalism. I don't think that God wanted them to become a nation, if I'm reading the book correctly. I think where Samuel said, if you go down this track of wanting a King and to become a nation and all of this kind of stuff ... then these are things that will happen. You'll lose your crops, you'll lose your children, you'll lose all your things, and you'll be paying taxes for the rest of your life. And, but, God said if that's what they want... the grace of God.

If you look at that particular era, and that particular period, and that particular story in Samuel, how they were judged, you'll also understand how Aboriginal people operated. We call them judges, but there were a council of elders ... it's very similar, the ways in which those twelve different tribal groups came together and formed themselves into a society that looked after each other and respected each other.

God gave them the laws - to look after the land, to look after each other, to look after their animals, to look after their crops, to look after the environment, to look after everything. We had those, we've had those for the last sixty thousand years. My question is, how does the church fit into the gospel? How does Western culture fit into the gospel? Because it doesn't. It's pagan to the gospel.

And it needs to be examining its own culture in its relationship to the gospel. Not as individualists but as a collective. And once you start to unravel your own culture in relationship to the gospel, then perhaps you might get to a point where you'll understand what repentance is. Fast. You're trying to take us all down that same stupid path. And perhaps there could be repentance there in a turning away from all that, but, I, I have my...

Tanya: Does that mean that Aboriginal culture can provide another reference point, another example, of how the biblical text puts these things into practice? In order to critique Western culture?

Ray: Critique Western culture? Yeah. We had to interrogate the message...we had to interrogate the messenger...and we had to interrogate his methodologies, in order to understand what and why this message came to us, and whether we would then be able to accept its tenants and believe...this is the way in which our Creator has chosen - one tribal group, to reveal himself to the whole planet.

And if that's the case, then, you know, praise the Lord, we're there! We've got no problems with that. But when the white fellas come here, they thought they were the ones called by God, that they're the ones who should be doing all this stuff... and they're not.

Tanya: Yeah, thank you. Okay, so, we've talked a lot about denominations and churches in putting the Aboriginal history together ...particularly some of the stories that aren't told in the theological libraries...what churches or denominations have been significant in your journey as a Christian?

Ray: Yeah once again, it's the history of the *neglect* of the church, really. That is, that's the most significant part of this story.

Tanya: Sure.

Ray: Because here I am in Sydney, two hundred and thirty years on, and we're still asking "where's our Aboriginal pastors, where's our Aboriginal church, where's our Aboriginal bishops, where's our Aboriginal Archbishops, where is our Aboriginal land?"

Tanya: Yeah.

Ray: So, taking that into consideration ... which denomination has had a major influence on us? None of them. And, if it ever had an influence, it was always in a negative way.

The one who has made the most significant influence on Aboriginal spirituality and culture and people would be the Catholic Church... because they're more open to these kind of explorations and experiences. The Western tradition ... [as in] the evangelical churches, are still trying to battle amongst themselves as to who they are, let alone what they're doing on the planet.

You know, there's, just, to me, if there was something that I would be begging the church to do in this country, would be to destroy, to break open, the [denominationalism]... the Australian church is more tribal than we are.

They've got their own God and they call him Jesus - and *these* are the rules by which we will worship him. And if you don't like that, there's the door, see you later. So that's tribalism at its best... And how do you then break down that tribalism?

Because, you know, when this reconciliation business come amongst us... through political social developments... which is a good thing - but it's also challenging... when the churches came amongst us and said you know, we want to reconcile with you...well ...we never had a relationship in the first place, so reconciliation is the wrong word. And if we are going to go down that track, are we going to be reconciled to that history again? The White Australia policy... all that stuff?

But ... the other problem is, if we do go to any of these churches... work inside the structures and systems... do we have to also take upon ourselves the biases, the racisms, the culture, the persona of those particular systems? ...Because in our observation, you know, the Baptists don't get on with the Penties, don't get on with the Catholics, don't get on with the Anglicans.

So if I go inside that denomination...and I have to become a part of them, [but] my brothers and my sisters are in the Catholic Church over here - then I can't have a relationship with them. Because of this tribalism, these silos.

So the more serious thing for me, isn't our people. The more serious thing is to look at this church and say what the heck are you doing here?

Tanya: So then, maybe the opposite - which have Aboriginal people contributed to?

Ray: Well... what really is significant, you did mention the AEF.

Tanya: Yeah.

Ray: When you look at the relationship between Aboriginal people and the gospel and the church.... If you take that fifty years' experience ... fifty-two years really, since 1967... one of the first things that happened in terms of a Christian movement that was Aboriginal owned ... a movement of God, would have been the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship. It gathered together all the significant Aboriginal Christian leaders of that era, of that time... who gathered together to say "we're Aboriginal, we're Evangelical," and what we must do is create fellowship... we're not here to create church.

We're here to create *fellowship* for our people, where we can encourage them, bring them into a place where they can be encouraged in their faith, and then send them back into their systems and structures. We don't want to be taking them away from that, we're not sheep stealing ... all that kind of silly stuff.

So, ... I'm so thankful to the Lord that I'm a part of that, in terms of those old Elders of ours, those wise old Elders, who came up with this incredibly ingenious way of us enjoying our Christian experiences, is the fact that they emphasised the fellowship... it took us back, it took me back anyway, to Acts. Straight after the coming of the Holy Spirit they gathered together and they had fellowship with [one] another.

And that, really, was very significant. Once again, where was the church? Wasn't there, and that's okay. But the fellowship began. And it's still there, turns fifty this coming year.

Then, there was another movement that came through after that, the only denomination that actually took Aboriginal people seriously, was the Uniting Church. And what they did was, when they formed the Uniting Church of Australia, they said we can't miss [or] neglect, we can't exclude the Aboriginal people from our story. And so they have in their constitutional preamble, the recognition of Aboriginal people as First Peoples. They've also the notion of inclusiveness for congress - the Uniting Aboriginal Christian congress - as separate but a part of. And they've also come up with a covenanting process.

So this is the only structure, the only denomination that's actually done some serious work, and tried to be more inclusive. They've got a long way to go... they're far from where they should be, and they've only been thirty years in operation.

All denominations still look at Aboriginal people as a mission field...and we're sick and tired of being a mission field, an evangelistic training ground for...all the up and coming evangelists, or some other kind of training ground. We're just sick and tired of being a training ground. They come and get trained by us, but we get nothing out of it. All the other denominations have really... just been absent from dealing with the issues here.

I trained with the Assemblies of God, they had nothing for us... I would love to see some kind of significant change. But the moment you go into a charismatic or a Pentecostal church and start talking land rights, there's the door, see you later. Change the date, there's the door, see you later... Aboriginal culture, there's the door, see you later.

It's gonna' be a significant job to confront... the system. Because I do remember when I was in Bible College up there in Katoomba... I went to a church that was built by our people up there in Bowen, Aboriginal owned, Aboriginal governed, all that stuff... Aboriginal money built it, but the AOG would never put an Aboriginal pastor in charge. And I actually remember hearing from that pulpit there, this visiting white fella ... said very clearly to all of us black people, you know, he told us about the curse, oh yeah, the Hamite curse that was on us. And I looked at me missus and said "well that's the end of us, we're not going to get anything in this particular structure, if that's how they see us - as their servants and their slaves." South Africa was based upon that Hamite theory... and that came from the AOG minister. I thought well there you go... that's the end of me.

Tanya: So, if someone was in the theological library in Alphacrucis in twenty years' time, reading this, what would you want them to know? What knowledges do you think are important to pass onto younger Aboriginal Christians?

Ray: I would want them - any young person - to know who they are first and foremost, in terms of their own identity. That's not just... that's a biblical edict. Because every Jew knew [who] they were ...Even Jesus. He could trace his heritage back... fourteen generations. Now that's very indigenous. Because we want to know who we are, before we can know what we can do. So that history, that genealogy, knowing who you are, is one of the most important things to understand.

In spite of the fact we've been forcibly removed, we've had stolen generations, from the year dot onwards, there is always some skerrick of evidence you can connect to. You know, for me, myself, I know who I am, I know my heritage, I know exactly where I come from and I can go back to those places and know, I'm from here, this is me. And I can go to a little place in Queensland there, the mountain, and go "yeah, this is me."

It's not my mountain, but *this is me*, I'm part of this, this is where my ancestors came from, this particular part of the country - so that's who I am. Or up into Goreng country, I can go there, and I know exactly where my great-great grandfather was buried, he's buried there on my country. I have that history, I connect to him, and my grandmothers and all that stuff.

If you don't know who you are, then you're kind of lost... and for indigenous peoples, one of the facets of our culture is the fact that we like to walk backwards into the future. We need to know where we came from, more than where we're heading. The moment you turn your back on that story, then you've lost yourself, you've lost your way.

If we follow the Westerners, that's what they've done, they've turned their back on their history, and they don't know who they are. They're lost, poor fellas. They don't even know where their spirituality comes from. It doesn't come from the Scriptures, 'cause I know that. It comes from, well, a whole range of other sources... sadly, materialism and all those other kinds of things they brought into the country, things they worship.

Tanya: What is your future hope for the church in Australia?

Ray: Yeah... when you look at Jesus' life, one of his greatest challenges politically wasn't the local drunks, but the religious sector, and the political sector. He said ... some very, very powerful things to the religious sector - called them hypocrites, and vipers, all this kind of stuff. That's true even today, for the church. I can look around the churches here, and say they're all hypocrites, they're all vipers. It irks my spirit.

That's what Jesus faced in his time, with his own religious sector, his own people. And he actually said "I've gotta' destroy this, I've gotta' tear it down, in three days I'll tear it down, it's gotta' be destroyed."

But that's what we worship, we worship our systems and structures, we don't worship the God who IS over all, everything. That's, I think, the radicalness of Jesus. We don't know who we're preaching sometimes. He's too radical for us. We actually have to bring him into our own tribal religion... and make him into something that we can own and control.

Tanya: I know that I've heard you say before that your hope for the Australian church is that it is planted in Australian land... so is your hope in moving towards a spirituality of Christ?

Ray: Well, I don't know how it's gonna get there - particularly with this crop of leadership ... and the kind of structures we have. I don't think it's got the capacity or the desire to move away from what it's created for itself. So, it is only something an act of God could do, "...in three days I will raze this thing to the ground."

Tanya: Are there moments of hope that keep you going?

Ray: Aw yeah, there's always hope! You know, I wake up with a pulse every day! It would be nice to see more respect for our people and more respect for the challenges that we face, from the church. [But] I'm not going to expect that, I'm not even going to hope for that, because I doubt if that will ever take place, in this generation, in my generation. It might take place in about another three or four or five generations down the track, but we've lost so much territory and so much ground ... maybe that's when the Lord will bring it all to an end and say okay I'm gonna have a go now.

In my readings of things anyways, and my experiences, of seeing that the Lord has moved more outside of these structures... than he has moved inside the structures. I think he will continue to do that, try to shake the church up a bit, like he used to do with the people of Israel, "I'll make them jealous for me." And, that might come when they lose interest in their landholdings and their monies, and their investments, and their positions, and prestige, and privileges... all this silly stuff. Maybe, when all of that is gone, they might start to look to Jesus. That's my hope.

Tanya: Amen.