

Interview with Adam Gowen by Tanya Riches

Ulladulla, NSW

Abstract

Adam Gowen is a Wiradjuri man currently living in Ulladulla on the New South Wales south coast. He has completed his Bachelor of Arts Honours degree at Wollongong University. He is a pastor with ACTS global churches and currently attends Highway Christian Church, which is a part of ACTS Global Churches (formally the Apostolic Church of Australia).

Interview

Tanya: Would you like to introduce yourself for the transcript?

Adam: My name is Adam Gowen.

Tanya: What nation do you identify as?

Adam: I'm Wirradjuri. So my ancestral connection to country is out Wagga way on Wirradjuri country.

Tanya: And where are you living at the moment?

Adam: I live in Ulladulla on the Country of the Murramarang people of the Yuin Nation, on the south coast New South Wales.

Tanya: When did you become a Christian? ...And could you tell us a little bit about your testimony?

Adam: I became a Christian probably at about the age of seven or eight ... so my family...took a year where we travelled around Australia in a caravan [with] a Toyota Landcruiser and...God made himself known to me particularly – but also my family through that experience...coming back to Canberra we had many encounters and experiences with God's Spirit, in terms of provision, but also miraculous things happening. They were too often and too crazy to be normal so we concluded that they must have been God.

... So... I was friends in primary school with someone really involved in [a Canberra] church and he invited me around to come to Sunday school (and youth group eventually). So I went along with him and then my family started getting involved in church and became part of the community. Then when at Sunday school the opportunity was given for anyone to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, I just thought it was something that everyone did. I didn't think it was a big deal and I thought "yeah! I haven't done that yet, I'd better to do that" and so I put my hand up. That was really the start of my journey of discovering faith and what it means to live the Christian life.

Tanya: Were your family travelling for fun? ...I'm just curious.

Adam: My mum and dad's marriage was a bit rocky. So they took a year out to kind of try and resolve [it]... some of the things resolved but their marriage ended up breaking up a little while after that. In a lot of ways that actually solidified and really grounded my faith - when I had the world falling apart around me [it] was something that I could hold on to. I might have been a Christian before but my faith really became real in that testing time.

Tanya: How would you describe the role of the Holy Spirit in your Christian life?

Adam: I think the Holy Spirit is a part of everyday life for me and is someone who helps me, someone who guides me, someone who reveals things to me, someone who also is the Creator and who is evidenced in all creation, who is all around. Someone who I feel a connection to in myself, in my Spirit, but also through creation.

Tanya: In your presentation at Grasstree you talked about the insights that you'd gained from the bower bird... I wondered if maybe you could [share] a bit about that?

Adam: I actually used that analogy in my thesis as well. The bower bird is "Nguram-bula" in Wiradjuri language and "Nguram-bula" literally means "homes, two" or "two-homes" - so having a home [in] the bower where courtships displays are presented [and] also having a nest where eggs are laid and chicks are reared. So that symbolism to me is really pertinent because I feel at home in the "mainstream" Australian world, but I also feel at home in the Aboriginal Australian world. It's actually [about] bringing those two things together for me. They're indivisible, part of one whole. It's not separate but it's actually two parts of the same - which informs my life world and who I am and where I live, in that sense.

Tanya: Do you think that the Spirit helps you to get insights from creation like that help you to navigate in life?

Adam: Definitely! I think one of the big roles of the Holy Spirit for me is that of someone who reveals, that giver of revelation... I think those revelations can come in different forms and through different means. With that whole image of the bower bird ... it is actually a revelation from the Aboriginal world but it's also something directly relevant to other parts of my life.

Tanya: What does the term "The Dreaming" mean to you and do you feel comfortable using it?

Adam: Sure. The Dreaming to me is something that I'm still exploring. So I didn't really grow up knowing or being in touch with my Aboriginal identity. I kind of grew up as a white fella - and so I'm kind of coming late to the party, I guess, in terms of understanding what The Dreaming is and what [it] means to me personally. But I think The Dreaming is something that is so precious and so sacred. It has so many facets to it.

I think a lot of people don't understand how multi-faceted The Dreaming is - and how special it is. It's kind of seen as just Aboriginal religion but no, it's actually something more than that, [it] actually informs all of life for many Aboriginal people, and something that actually is constructed or created by Creator God. That's something that I think is often missed.

Tanya: Are there any significant traditions or cultural celebrations that you consider important from The Dreaming and want to participate in?

Adam: ...there's a lot from Aboriginal culture that I want to participate in. The Dreaming encompasses some of that. But there's actually, I think, a wider cultural reality. Yes, I do want to participate in Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal events, Aboriginal communities. That's not always encapsulated by just The Dreaming, I think it's probably wider than that. It's something I definitely want to participate in and I don't see that as antithetical to my faith, but actually a core part of it.

Tanya: Sure! I guess the reason I'm asking is because some Aboriginal Christians, but particularly Pentecostal Christians, distinguish between culture that they would comfortable participating in, and others that they feel they wouldn't participate in. Yeah I just wondered if you make that distinction?

Adam: I think the thing to be conscious of there is that *all* cultures have things that are inspired by kingdom culture. And all cultures have elements that are actually opposite to what Creator God has as his intention and heart for us. All cultures have things that are actually amoral so neither good nor bad. So I think that we're [often] actually applying a harsher scrutiny to Aboriginal culture than we do to the mainstream Western culture that the churches are generally positioned in.

So I think that Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal theology in particular has a really important role to not only say “here’s the good things about our culture” but hold up a mirror to Western culture and go “actually, there’s some stuff in Western culture that’s pretty wrong too and it’s actually just accepted as part of church culture when it probably shouldn’t be. We really need to look at that and address that.”

Tanya: How do you explain the relationship between your culture and Christianity? We’ve kind of covered it, but if you have anything to add?

Adam: I’ll just say that my culture is both Western and Aboriginal. So there are as many Aboriginal cultures as there are Aboriginal people... when thinking about Aboriginal culture, it’s not just one monolithic, huge, big, indistinguishable thing - but there are actually so many different Aboriginal cultures. That’s something that I think gets lost as well. What was the question again?

Tanya: How do you think about the relationship between your culture and Christianity?

Adam: I think we’ve covered that in what I said about how there’s good stuff and bad stuff in both Western and Indigenous cultures. We just really need discernment to see what we need to take away and emulate [so that we are] drawn further into the culture of the kingdom of God and less into the bad stuff.

Tanya: What churches or denominations have been significant in your journey as a Christian?

Adam: I’m a Pastor with the Apostolic Church Australia which has just actually changed its name to ACTS Global Churches. It’s actually the denomination that I was saved in so I’ve not gone anywhere else. I was saved in and I’ve been a part of the Apostolic Church Australia since my salvation. So that’s been the only church denomination really. I have had encounters with other churches but not really belonged to any other churches.

Tanya: What knowledges do you think are important for younger Aboriginal Christians?

Adam: I think it’s important that we understand culture generally... [meaning] what culture is, so that we can be informed [about] what we’re participating in. This includes how we form the cultures of local churches, the cultures of denominations but also the culture of our nation. As we actually understand what culture is and particularly the individual cultures that different individuals come from. I think it’s important to understand them so we can grab hold of the good stuff and run with it and also critique the stuff that is not so good or productive - in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

I think [it's] really important that we actually understand the whole dynamic... it's important to understand your own culture but I think it's maybe even more important to understand what culture is and how it works so that we can actually progress forward into something that's beautiful.

Tanya: Speaking about the future - what is your future hope for the church in Australia?

Adam: I hope that the church in Australia really values Indigenous perspectives of theology. So I hope it really values the stuff that Aboriginal cultures have to say about who God is and what he's doing. I think that as we start to accept those perspectives not as "other" or "demonic" but as really valuable and vital, the church in Australia [will be] well positioned to actually lead the way and show the world what's possible in terms of true reconciliation, meaning reconciliation in the Spirit, not just in practical or external stuff but reconciliation...that goes so much deeper than any of that exterior stuff.

Tanya: That's so great. Amen!