

Interview with Robyn Ober by Tanya Riches

Darwin, Northern Territory

Abstract

Robyn Ober is a Mamu woman and an Indigenous educator and Research Fellow at the Batchelor Institute, Darwin. She is also a service pastor at the Hillsong Darwin (Palmerston) campus. Here she discusses the way she navigates cultural protocols when in community, in order to be respectful in her work. From her extensive knowledge of the Top End she outlines some of the significant Christian ministries in the Darwin region, and speaks about her own leadership from a uniquely Pentecostal perspective.

Interview

Tanya: Can you tell us your name for the transcript?

Robyn: My name is Robyn Ober.

Tanya: Thank you! And where is your country?

Robyn: My people are from North Queensland. My mother's people are from a little town called Innisfail just south of Cairns and we're the Mamu Bagirgabara people. But we also have connections to the Tableland Djirrabul people through my mother's father and my father's people are up near Hope Vale so Guugu Yimithirr people.

Tanya: You're very much a Murri!

Robyn: Yeah, I'm a Murri or Barma people, those two words are used, yeah. I guess we don't have as strong a link with the Hope Vale families or the King River Station (I think it's called), as we do with the Innisfail families, because they were taken, when I think grandmother was quite young.

Tanya: So can you tell us a little bit about how you became a Christian, a little of your testimony?

Robyn: Yes! Well I actually grew up in a Christian home. My parents were ministers, they still are. My dad is an Assemblies of God pastor. So a very strong Pentecostal home and I was born into that.

I just stayed with the Lord through those years growing up. I was really in that church family ... that environment ... so it was just a natural course for me.

I think when I made my own commitment to Jesus was probably in my teenage years when I was at that age of understanding. I remember there was an evangelist who came through our town and it was like a mini revival amongst young kids, amongst the youth and ... there was a whole group of us that made our commitment to the Lord and never looked back.

Tanya: What was the evangelist's name do you remember?

Robyn: I think it was Pastor Andrew Watters yeah ... and Merle was his wife.

Tanya: And your parents are pastoring in Innisfail?

Robyn: My mum has passed away now, but my dad Pastor Lawrence Ramsey and his wife June they're in Cardwell, North Queensland and he's semi-retired. He's 84 but he oversees the church... just until they can get a pastor. I think that's how it is, I'm not quite sure. He's still in ministry at his age which is good.

Tanya: And you're now attending Hillsong Darwin. What's your role here?

Robyn: I'm service pastor for the morning service... yeah that's my main role here... looking after everything for our AM service and overseeing everything that comes out of it for the new people's network. I look after our Connect groups, the midweek follow ups, and roster people on the front doors and in the foyer... So just making sure everything is running smoothly which is a big job. I'm still learning!

Tanya: It would be one of the bigger churches in Darwin wouldn't it?

Robyn: It is yeah, absolutely, and that's my role. Tonight Ilija Jacobs is on. Quite a few people come out in the evening services too.

Tanya: How long have you been service pastor for?

Robyn: About two years. So, Hillsong's being going for about two and a half years here I think. I'm just learning all the time. Always looking at how I can improve and do things better with the team of course. We're all together.

Tanya: And you also work at Batchelor Institute?

Robyn: I do.

Tanya: What is your role there?

Robyn: I'm an Indigenous research fellow. So I'm finishing off my PhD which is about Aboriginal English as a social cultural and identity marker in Indigenous tertiary education. So it's a big, big area and I'm just finalising my thesis now.

But I also teach. I've got an education background, I'm a primary school teacher trained through Batchelor Institute. At the moment I'm teaching our Indigenous knowledge unit. Also, I'm co-teaching with another lecturer [on] Indigenous ethics and protocols within the Indigenous context. Challenging Paradigms of Education is another unit I teach.

I'll do two units [each semester] plus I'm involved in research projects, probably three at the moment that I'm either co-researcher or on the research team in an advisory committee, so there's a lot going on in my life! But it's all good.

Tanya: I guess one of the things I'd love to hear a little bit about [is] how Aboriginal people engage with Hillsong Darwin - maybe you can speak from your role as service pastor? How do you see that happening?

Robyn: I was really interested in your statistics there - about 73% of Aboriginal people identify with Christianity - we find that true. Most of the people who come here, our Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander people they've grown up in a Christian home or have a Christian background from their community. So they know the Lord and they've been... invited by family or friends.

We still have a long way to go! But ...yeah, I would say the people I've spoken to just keep coming back and that's, I think, a part of the Hillsong culture...making it welcoming for whosoever, it doesn't matter. Darwin (and Palmerston) is such a multi-cultural city, just like Sydney ... it's very multi-cultural but the difference up here is the high population of Indigenous Australians. Not only locally - they come from everywhere.

So [we have a lot] of Northern Queensland people; a lot of Western Australian and Kimberley people; we have a growing population of Torres Strait Islanders who kind of congregate here. Darwin is appealing, it's quite laid back and casual and I find people are more accepting of other cultures. It's the gateway to South-East Asia and that's reflected in our church attendance and our population.

You look around and you see the different nations and cultures and things. That's a good thing! I think the ones who do come feel that they are accepted and belong and they do feel welcome. We really, really try hard.

As service pastor or as a leader here, I try to make those connections with everybody but we've just got that bit of an "Indigenous advantage" because like the lady you met downstairs. I know her, I know her family and as you know, with Indigenous Australians we just have to say a family name, and we connect.

So with our mob there's that element of trust and security. "Okay, Aunty Robyn knows my family" and so there's that little bit of, "I feel okay, I feel safe" so there's that side of it too. I think that's got to be more appealing, if you like. Because we have such a high population we kind of don't think so much in black and white - it's so multicultural. Even downstairs I had to look around and think. Half the time it's there, but we don't think about it too much.

Tanya: Are all churches in Darwin welcoming to Aboriginal people?

Robyn: St Martin's Catholic Church have their own Aboriginal service - so they have Aboriginal leaders in their church. I kind of know that you know, because again, we know people...so I think they specifically reach out to their community (as in, Catholic people) and they have people who come to Darwin from Port Keats, from the Wadeye Catholic Mission and also Daly River...so they seem to congregate all together there.

We have other little churches such as the AIM (Aboriginal Inland Mission) on Sabine Road, that's mainly all Aboriginal folk - again, because of the missions. Yeah and the Anglican, Uniting Church with Nungalingya College.

But there are also little spots like in the Bagot community they actually have a little fellowship, a church. I think that's under the ACC. We've been there a couple of times when we were in Batchelor, when my dad was a pastor there. They'd often invite him up to speak - that was all local people from the Bagot community and I think people from the Minmirama town community would come across. Yeah that was flourishing quite well.

And there's a lady named Annette Sharman... She started a little work out here at the Indigenous village. We call it "Eleven Mile" - if you were to drive out to Batchelor you would have seen a little community on the left, if you went out on the highway, so that's the "Indigenous village" they call it. We call it Eleven Mile so there's little kind of churches and little ministries around.

And there's one down here at Gray, you know there's little fellowships that open up like outreaches to the community and things like that.

Tanya: It's good to know that they're around. A bit of a different tack - what is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life as a Christian?

Robyn: As a Christian...yeah well, I've been in the Pentecostal church for all my life - and so we've seen a lot of things as kids. We hear the speaking in tongues and the prophetic words and the words of knowledge. I've been around all of that all my life, so it's something I'm comfortable with.

Through church and in my studies I've learnt that the Holy Spirit is my friend and he's my helper. I love how Pastor Emma Cooke says he's my "unfair advantage," I love that! Just learning that I'm not alone and that I have a comforter and I have a helper.

I've learnt now to rely upon the Holy Spirit in times when I maybe have to do something - especially in a service - if I've got to get ready to speak or get ready for a prayer meeting or something, I say "Oh, Holy Spirit just help me, I can't do this in my own strength, I really need you" - and then he always comes through, you know. So it's like my helper, my friend and you know...over time I've been able to do things and people say to me "that was different. What website did you go to?" I say "No, I asked the Lord... because, truly, I can't do it in my own strength, I need God." You know, the Father has left [us] the comforter - the Holy Spirit.

So that's become really real to me. Also the anointing! We need the anointing in everything we do. I wouldn't [be] able to do it. It would really be in my own strength which wouldn't be nice, it would be so plastic you know... I know who to go to when it's like "oh gee this is a bit hard!"... So I've got to go down South and I've been praying, "Lord just give me an opening; just soften the peoples' hearts." It is that unfair advantage, it's like "God go before me, I don't want to offend people, but we need to get this project off the ground!" He's interested in all aspects of their life so that's how I...that's my relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Tanya: One thing I find really interesting...you're involved in much research about language and culture. So, what does "culture" mean to you?

Robyn: That's a good question. We all have a culture. We all have a lifestyle, we all have a way of being. Even when I'm talking to my students, I try to break it down like that. Culture doesn't mean exotic people who act differently. We often have this romanticised view of cultural people. [But] we all have a culture. It's part of our identity.

Right up front, I don't speak my own language. I don't have traditional culture or traditions that I know of. It's probably there but I have limited knowledge in that area. So culture for me, is

that I identify as a strong Aboriginal woman, I'm proud of my identity. I tell people who my people are.

Culture for me is how that Aboriginality is expressed in the different aspects of my life. I think the main thing is our way of being and our way of making meaning. All that epistemology stuff - our morals and our values and all of that. A lot of it comes from my Christian upbringing, but then a lot of it comes from my Aboriginal cultural identity, my Aboriginality, who I am.

When you stop and talk about it, it doesn't kind of make sense - until you're with people who you connect to, or who are like you - you know, when black fellas get together ... we're on the same page. Like I know their family, I know their background and we joke and laugh and we tease and all of that, but we've got this common understanding. We've got a shared understanding, a shared cultural base that we come back to.

I will always talk about the diversity, multi-diverse nationality of Aboriginal Australia. We're all from different places and even tonight you'll see that we have Nyoongars we have Murris, and Koories. We have people from Broken Hill and we've got Torres Strait Islander people. So we have a whole group - but we have that commonality.

So I guess for culture ... yeah it's ... who we are, our ways of being, our ways of knowing, our ways of doing. I keep saying I can't pretend I'm somebody else. I can't pretend I'm a person who can speak my language and do ceremonies and things like that - because I'm not! And if I try to be that we say "gammin" - you're not real, it's pretending, you're just trying to be somebody you're not and that's not a good look.

Tanya: Is a lot of that the disconnection through the history of your area, and the way the government separated families?

Robyn: Absolutely! All of that! The historical policies, assimilation, Stolen Generation - all of that has great impact. There's even diversity within the stories, because it's not all cut and dried. It's so complex. People often think oh the missions were bad - or this or that was bad. For some yes, atrocities and abuses happened. But then for others they say if it wasn't for the missions, we wouldn't have survived... if we weren't taken to that mission - because it was so bad in those days.

So yeah. Sometimes ... our people can go silent on that because they're not saying what people want them to say. People want them to say [certain things]... but we've got a different story. Yes, there was racism. Yes, there was horrible stuff. Even throughout the church there was white privilege stuff - all of that. That happened. It still does in some cases.

But my thing is that there are *many* stories. So we have to listen to the many voices and stories - and sometimes these may be contested spaces. Sometimes there may be tensions and things like that - but that's what you've got to navigate through.

A lot of our people hate Christians and churches. I've just got to listen and I've just got to love them. I don't understand, I can't imagine what [they've] been through. You can't even say "God loves you," you've just got to love them; you've got to let them talk. I have many people who just come to my office and I just let them talk. "Oh Robyn come and have a cup of tea," ...and they say "you kind."

"But look, you know, I'm here just to be your friend and listen." So you see the Holy Spirit at work again [through] the fruits of the Spirit... I can't say I have a lot of understanding but I've got some ... because of my own family and what they've been through.

Tanya: So ...you've travelled a lot, you've been in different communities. So when you're out on Country, how do you negotiate your involvement in culture?

Robyn: It depends on the purpose of the visit. Yeah every context is different. Every community is different. Every situation is going to be always slightly different and I guess for me as an Aboriginal person a lot of times I've got my foot in the door and when I say foot in the door, I know people. I've got contact. I've already got relationships so straight away I'll go to my contacts and I talk about it.

Initially I might ring up and say, "Is there anything I should know? Me and a non- Aboriginal researcher, we're coming out for a visit. Anything happening on community? Death ceremonies? Anything?" ... and they'll tell me because I've got a relationship. They'll tell me. Even as an Aboriginal person I'm always going to be a visitor. I'm not from there. But we've got a connection.

I've just got to be respectful and a lot of times there's no issue, I just go in, do my job and come out, again touch base with the people I know. You've got that being respectful and considerate. Going around and talking to the TOs (Traditional Owners), telling them that we're here. Sometimes when there's deaths or ceremonies going on they'll tell us not to go down that end because they have the body there. They'll have ceremonies every night, we can hear them - but they'll let us know. They'll say you can go anywhere in the community but don't go there. And we usually don't participate because it's a closed ceremony and I don't really feel comfortable a lot of times.

Like spiritually too ... there's a lot of stuff going on spiritually that I don't feel comfortable participating in. I'll go if it's an open funeral and they've got a service and I know the person. But otherwise I don't think that's being respectful. Most of the time I haven't had an issue, and

I think there's this understanding where they know you're there to do your job and if you're just being upfront they're fine. We tell them "we're just here to do this at the school and that's all and then we'll go out."

Sometimes you're not allowed to say people's names if that person has died so they'll tell us that's "Kuminjay" or that's "Kunmanara" ... or we just use the person's initials.

The beauty of me being here so long is that I can talk to my contacts and my friends and they will just let me know... I'm very conscious of that especially in the Top End... I think I've just learnt how to navigate that space now and I've learnt when to move forward and when to come back.

... In my spirit I might just feel 'don't go there, there's just something not right.' So there's that spiritual stuff too, the cultural stuff that our mob know about. We've seen things where people have been really broken or destroyed by the enemy in the name of culture. And we've seen things in the spiritual. My fathers had to do a lot of praying and deliverance over people who've been tormented by stuff. I'm aware of that. I'm not naïve to that, you know.

Tanya: You've touched on some of the darker sides. Is there a good kind of culture that intersects with your Christianity?

Robyn: Our Hillsong Pastors Emma and Jared just came back from Hall's Creek, have you been there?

Tanya: Not yet.

Robyn: You should go because you'd talk to a lot of the local people ...but one of the Aboriginal pastors there, I think it was Gerard Killer - he said that when you look at Aboriginal law, it's very similar to the Ten Commandments. There's right and wrong. So I believe that is inspired of God. Because ... in the beginning people knew right from wrong.

Traditional way - you take that girl, wrong skin for you, you get speared in the leg. There's no doubt about that. I guess the other side of that is that element of fear around that - and I think sometimes that's where the tension happens. Yeah.

We've seen people tormented by stuff that not only happens in Aboriginal cultures but in all societies. The enemy is alive and well and he uses things like Ouija boards and séances and things like that. If you open yourself to those things ... but I think with our mob, they know. When we were in Batchelor they would have a lot of seeing things in cabins or the accommodation, and they'd know who to come to. They'd come to my father, and ask him to

come and pray... “There’s something looking at us.” I mean they’ve got that Christian upbringing but they also know that other side too.

Tanya: There are a lot of people who I think would really appreciate hearing your view on what you think are the important knowledges to pass on to young Aboriginal Christians?

Robyn: For our young Indigenous Christians? ... For our mob... just be true to yourself. Just be who you are. Don’t try to pretend to be anybody else or don’t try to exaggerate your Aboriginality. You can go the other way too and just make it all, “look at me.”

But I think just be proud of who you are. Proud of your identity. Proud of your upbringing. Remember those things that were taught to you. You know right from wrong and your grandmothers and mothers taught those things to you. Family is so important for our people. We make those connections, we look after each other. We know those protocols and we know the values. We know those roles. A lot of that is getting fragmented now. But ... with our mob...we know the family connections and values, looking after each other. Yeah just remember your upbringing!

It’s so different everywhere. Like I said the diversity ... but there’s common threads right through all of us. Like when I was at the colour conference, I was missing my mum. All I could see was a sea of white faces. I didn’t think it would bother me but I was like, I’m really missing my mum. But then I see Auntie Gail Sellman and the mob there and I was like, hey it was so good! It does something to you. You don’t realise you miss your own mob until you’re away from your people for a while.

That’s part of who we are, our being, and you know our ways of doing and our ways of thinking, our ways of processing knowledge and information. For young people, just developing that and those Christian principles of treating others with respect. Treat others how you want to be treated like how the Gospel says. A lot of those things have been taught to us about the right way of doing things, so I guess that’s all I can say, just be the best person you can be.

Sometimes with our mob... we’re looking, because we forget we’re just all family. I say that at [the pre-service gathering] we’re all family. I don’t like cliques, you’re going to have move out of your cliques, out of your comfort zone. Go and approach people and befriend them because we can’t have “welcome home” as rhetoric. It has to be reality and so I talk to everybody in that way because I’m the service pastor and I want my service to be welcoming. I don’t want it to be cliquey.

Tanya: Just a final question. What is your hope for the church in Australia?

Robyn: It has to be that we move out of the four walls, move into community. Be the hands of Jesus, being real. Get out. We do a little with Aglow... just going to the old people's homes and singing to them and seeing their faces and the joy it brings. I think we can be too inward looking if we're in the church.

Of course - salvation, salvation, salvation! ... But we can't just say that unless we do something. So breaking out of these four walls and getting out there. It's going to get messy. It's going to get dirty... you will be offended. All of that will happen. Isn't that what Jesus did, isn't that what the Lord did?

He was always out with the lowly and the unlovable and most unlikely to succeed; our street people, our itinerants. Last Christmas we went, just my family. We do this little thing. I made a big stew and rice, and we took bottles of water. My daughter and my family went on the streets and said, "it's Christmas Day ... we just want to wish you a Merry Christmas and bless you with a lunch and a bottle," ... and then we talk. "Where are you from, brother? Oh Timber Creek! Oh you know my father Pastor Ramsey!" ... Yeah so connections.

It doesn't take us long. Once we know families and that we can connect. But there's a lot of work to be done. My heart is for the people out on the streets and I [hope] for all churches to break out of their four walls. There's a lot of people who will come ... but there's a lot of people who won't ... you're going to have to go to them. So that's my prayer for the church.

Tanya: I love it, that's so great. Thank you for the interview!