

Interview with Glenda Ramsey by Tanya Riches

Darwin, NT ¹

Abstract

Glenda Ramsey is a Mamu woman from the Bagabara clan. Formerly a government worker, she is now a volunteer at Hillsong Church in Darwin, and the recently appointed leader of the Christian association Aglow in the Northern Territory. She is the daughter of Pastor Lawrence and Mary Ramsey who planted churches in Mt. Garnet, QLD, Kununurra in WA and Batchelor, Northern Territory. Here she reflects upon her own journey into leadership, and the value of being bicultural in assisting reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Interview

Tanya: What's your name for the transcript?

Glenda: Glenda Ramsey.

Tanya: And where is your country?

Glenda: My country is in Innisfail, North Queensland. I am Mamu and our clan group is Bagabara.

Tanya: Is it your daughter Frances Ramsey who is over in Western Australia?

Glenda: She's my daughter-in-law.

Tanya: And she did the first Welcome to Country at Hillsong in Perth?

Glenda: Yeah! I believe she spoke in the local language. I didn't even know that she speaks language ... but yeah ... Frances shone that night.

Tanya: Yes! Everyone said it was really beautiful.

¹ This interview took place on 26th August 2018 and the transcript was edited by the interviewee on 22nd January 2019.

Glenda: Frances is now inspired since the Welcome to Country Hillsong experience to go to the next level, of facilitating her language. I think that she has already started.

Tanya: So you've been coming to Hillsong church for a while?

Glenda: I've been attending this church since 2016, after I moved back to Darwin, from Katherine.

Tanya: Before it was Hillsong church, you were at this congregation, is that right?

Glenda: Yes that's right. The church was then known as Hope City. I was still fairly new to the Hope City fellowship, when the news came through that Hillsong was taking over Hope City.

Tanya: And where did you get saved, can you tell me a little bit about your testimony?

Glenda: I was saved in the mid-1990s at the church where Hillsong Malak campus stands today. I was brought up in a Christian family, but I didn't really commit myself to the Lord, and deliberately walked away from him for many years. I found it difficult to come to terms with a whole generation of Australia's Indigenous people's lives being disrupted under the assimilation policy and I blamed God for generational losses of identity. I now thank the Lord for praying parents and because of their prayers I eventually gave my heart to the Lord. My Dad and Mum never failed to invite me to church. I always made the excuse that I was studying for my course and couldn't go with them. One night, I decided to take a break from studying and I turned the television on, as I wanted to watch 60 minutes. The first story was about the war in Bosnia but I didn't feel [like] watch[ing] it. So, I laid on the couch and I closed my eyes and started to doze off to sleep. From a distance it seem[ed] [that] I heard Jana Wendt introduce the Bosnian Minister of Foreign Affairs, with words like... "*so, you're prepared to lay your life down for your people.*" I jumped up as it reminded me of Jesus willingly laying down his life for us... for the Bosnian Minister, the question I pondered on was, 'where will he spend eternity?'

I looked at the Bosnian Minister on television, and he was sobbing, and he responded to Jana with "yes, I am prepared to lay my life down for my people." His words gripped hold of me and for the first time I understood how much Jesus loves me. Before you knew it, I began to pray for the Bosnian Foreign Affairs Minister and for the war to end. Several nights after that I felt a peace. Shortly after, the war had ended between Serbia and Bosnia, [and] about a week later I gave my heart to Jesus. Today, I am still serving him.

Tanya: Were your parents pastoring at Malak?

Glenda: No, [at that time] dad was pastoring a small church at Batchelor, which is located only 100 kilometres from Darwin. My parents pastored that church for over 10 years. Most of the people attending the Batchelor church were Indigenous students, transients and some locals. The population [at Batchelor] at that time was 500 people. We had a lot of good things happening in the Batchelor community, which included Royal Rangers, all night prayer meetings, fund raising, catering for the Parachute club for international events, and so on.

Tanya: In this project we're really interested in the role of the Holy Spirit in your life, and how as a Christian [you] interact with the Holy Spirit?

Glenda: More so than ever before, it has to be a lifestyle with me. It is necessary for me to rely on the Holy Spirit. I am now in a position of leadership, and I don't do anything in my own strength. The reason is that the Holy Spirit is my helper, my guide and my mentor. Things begin to happen when I put my trust in the things of God. God is the spirit and they [who] worship him shall worship him in Spirit and in truth. The Holy Spirit is another level, whereby, things begin to break over our lives as we begin to put trust and have the faith in him. I am all for change - wherever there is oppression there is always the need for the Holy Spirit to come in his strength and his power and to change the atmosphere and uproot those things that [try] to obstruct us from achieving change.

The Holy Spirit is powerful, and he is Jesus. He teaches us how to pray, he reveals things, he breaks chains of oppression and gives us understanding, which unfolds revelation.

In the role I'm in at Darwin Aglow, I really have to stand on the Word and take the step of faith and to trust the Holy Spirit to help and guide me in everything. I do have a Vision and that is to see the Aglow movement established in every major city, town and community throughout the Northern Territory. I understand that I am the first Australian Indigenous woman to become the President of Aglow in Darwin. What an honour to be chosen for such a time as this.

I'm wanting to get to the next level in the Lord where I continue to be hungry and thirsty for him, and to be able to develop competently in my gifting. I don't want to miss out on anything to do with my relationship with God. Aglow's focus is on *Crossing Over*, and it so important that I need to become strong in the ways of the Lord, and disciplined in the things of God, if I am to lead the way in *Crossing Over*.

Tanya: So, you're a volunteer at Aglow?

Glenda: Yes, I am a volunteer at Aglow and I am enjoying it so much. I also think that there is a difference between being a volunteer and being chosen by God, and yet it goes hand in hand. God has chosen me to take up this leadership position for such a time as this. I would never

volunteer for such a role, because I would not be confident to do it. But what an honour and humbling [it is] to actually be chosen by God for such a time as this. My passion is to reflect *his Kingdom Come*, by outreaching the “who-so-evers”, such as those in prison, the long grassers, the sick, the aged, lonely and broken-hearted, and with the mindset of setting the captives free.

Tanya: So you volunteer here as well?

Glenda: Yes, I am a volunteer at the Next Step stand on Sunday morning. I am also on the doors at Sisterhood every Thursday morning, and maintain the updates on the screens of connect leaders located in the Palmerston area.

Tanya: That’s great! OK... what does culture mean to you and also what does the Dreaming mean to you? Is it the same?

Glenda: From an Indigenous perspective it seems that Dreaming is as one with culture. I was brought up in a Christian home and not the traditional ways. Yet to an extent I do [share] experiences with policies for Indigenous people. Yet, there are pockets of cultural ways [we have] that are similar to [people who live more traditionally] such as community gatherings, and some hunting/gathering activities, and our behaviour to each other in family.

Culture is very important to me, particularly if one comes from the position of the loss of identity. For many years, I grieved over the culture I didn’t have. The loss of identity really got to me, but now I am accepting the Indigenous contemporary culture I have today.

Overall, I believe that there is good and bad in every culture. Dreaming is associated with what is spiritual, however, if it does not align with the Word of God, then for myself, I walk away from it. Besides, I was not brought up with the concept of Dreaming. Like other cultures, if one thinks that what is good for one’s well-being - keep it, and if not good - simply leave it out! I think that in contemporary Indigenous culture, we have the capacity to do just that.

Overall, I am comfortable with contemporary Indigenous culture. It allows me to be who I am, what I believe in, and at the same time I respect and learn from other Australian Indigenous cultures, whether from those that live in the desert or those that live by the sea. It allows for diversity ... yet we are still connected on issues that impact us in the wider society.

Tanya: And how does your culture fit with your Christianity?

Glenda: I think here in the Territory, Indigenous women tend to be the ones that attend church more than the men. I know in the Batchelor church where my father pastored he relied on my mum and

his daughters to help with church activities - such as playing in the praise and worship band, cleaning, co-ordinating activities and so on. Several of my sisters were given the opportunity to preach, and with one of them actually running the church for two years.

It seems within Batchelor, Indigenous women were given the opportunity to use their giftings. I think ... we felt empowered to have this opportunity to experience different roles in a much more meaningful way, than ever before.

Indigenous people love gatherings and are very strong on Christian rallies, conventions and retreats. The diverse groups all love to come together for these special times. They will travel long distances to join as one for several days' events. Additionally, Country and Western, and Gospel tend to be the music preferred in the Northern parts of Australia. All look forward to fellowshiping one with another. Such fond memories.

We do have a sense of humour and events are the best time for us to act ourselves and add humour to stories around cups of tea. I've noticed that where there is an Indigenous congregation [or] Indigenous preachers and praise and worship leaders, they tend to speak Aboriginal English or Kriol when they are ... at the front. They tend to also talk within the congregation's experience as well. I often [do] this in conversations or when I used to facilitate workshops with Indigenous people in attendance.

Tanya: Do you think you draw some of those things into your roles at Hillsong?

Glenda: Most definitely the opportunity is certainly there to do so. It amazes me though when you see the local "Territorians" integrating some Indigenous culture into their lifestyle; it is so good. To me they're already there with their relationship with [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] people. This certainly makes [them] people feel at ease. I'm always interested in who they are, what group they come from, who are their families, as to seek some connection with them. At the end of the day we want to reflect "Welcome Home" but do it in a way that finds common ground.

Moreover, it is also a way of searching for family we do not know exist. I often think that features are important as it gives me the sense of what region that person comes from. The Hillsong foyer is an excellent place to be, as it allows for time to spend with people that can only be gold, should we find that we are family.

Tanya: Being bicultural you can do great things.

Glenda: Definitely, for sure. It's amazing to see, though, an Indigenous young woman from a remote community, on the journey to achieving bicultural ways. At first, she was shy, and her

conversation was very limited. As she knew our family from Kununurra, she hung out with myself and my sister...until she got to know other people. Little by little she began to grow in confidence, and one day she was asked to volunteer for the kitchen. She kept on saying, "they really want me, and only me to volunteer for the kitchen?! Why didn't they ask anybody else?"

Tanya: She was amazed that she was being invited to participate?

Glenda: Yes, for sure she was amazed, and I guess overwhelmed as well. I can only imagine that she must've felt very valued. It made me realise that what I may take for granted ... others may view as ground breaking stuff for them.

I was so happy for the young woman to be able to work alongside [church people] from another culture and to enjoy what she was asked to do. I noted that in a short space of time she became more relaxed around non-Indigenous people! Overall, it seems to make life easier for those...from remote areas - when they are able to adapt to another culture or environment that is different from [their home]. It's people like this young woman...you get the feeling may succeed in what seems alien to them, and I think they will with the right support behind them.

Tanya: I don't know whether there's a lot of cultural ceremonies in the Darwin area [but] some of the really big ones in Sydney are Welcome or Acknowledgment to Country and other ceremonies people put on. How do you decide on what you participate in and what you don't as a Christian? ... Do you find that you can participate in everything? Or not so much?

Glenda: You mean outside of church?

Tanya: Yeah, outside of church.

Glenda: As I said before, if such ceremonies are beneficial to one's well-being then keep it. However, if one is filled with the Holy Spirit then it is going to be through discernment that one can pick up [the spirituality of] ceremonies and [ask myself] in particular, "will [this] line up with the Word of God?" In a government [area] I once worked, they had a smoking ceremony for the opening of its new building. However, this ceremony did not sit right with me. Besides, some people suffer health problems, and any smoking can trigger off an asthma attack.

Tanya: So you'd feel okay participating in a government ceremonial moment like Welcome to Country but not so much in a smoking ceremony - or does it depend?

Glenda: I am totally in favour for the Welcome to Country and the Acknowledgement to Country. I use to do the Acknowledgement to Country in Canberra, when I co-facilitated the Cultural Appreciation Program for my former workplace. I guess if one is in a workplace where it is

mandatory that one attends Smoking ceremonies, then I have no choice but to attend. It seems that there is a spiritual aspect added to the smoking ceremony. For the Christian, this maybe of a concern, and may possibly cause disharmony due to the different values between the diverse groups.

It seems to me that Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement to Country is more common in the other states than here in the Territory. I've seen very little of these ceremonies here. I understand that the speaker for Welcome to Country is not qualified to speak on behalf of other sub groups [within] their overall group, and it seems that this causes conflict among them. For this reason, I think that it is [kept] low key.

Tanya: It's a bit different up here for sure! ... So you talked about being an Aboriginal Christian before you got a bit lost and had to come through a journey. What do you think is important for young Aboriginal Christians to know or that you could pass on, I guess, to people who might be reading this?

Glenda: I think for young Aboriginal Christians I believe that it is important for them to be grounded in the Word of God. Pursue a strong foundation in him, our Lord and Saviour. Surround oneself with people that are going to speak life into you. Position yourself where you are going to be influenced, so as to influence others. Be a role model for others, in the ways of the Lord. Live the Christian culture which embraces the fruits of the Spirit, and above all love others as Christ loves us.... don't walk away from your culture but give up on those things that are bad and are not good for your walk with the Lord, as you are a new creation; a brand new person! Old things are passed away [and] you are born again.

Tanya: Final question...so you've taken on this role of women's Aglow, you're an Aboriginal leader in Darwin - what's your hope for the church in Australia?

Glenda: I should've mentioned before that Aglow is not just for women anymore. It has a new title which is Aglow International-Australia, and we just added Darwin Aglow to it. God is coming back for a pure bride, and I believe that in order for the church to get ready and to become that pure bride, wrongs are needed to be put right.

I believe that God is giving the church the opportunity to do this so that breakthroughs can come, and revival breaks out before the coming of the Lord. I see churches in Australia in unity and getting behind each other to reap the harvest.

Most churches are multicultural, and we can learn from one [another] and share our culture(s) in praise and worship, food, or in cultural workshops that are going to impact the future for us as individuals, and as diverse groups and leaders.

Tanya: Thank you