

REV JOHN BLACKET has been involved with Aborigines in five states of Australia as pastor, teacher, community worker, intercessor and friend for over 30 years. His mother was a missionary to Aborigines in New South Wales and many Aborigines stayed in their Sydney home during his childhood. He graduated from the University of Sydney in social work and divinity, and was ordained at the Galiwin'ku Aboriginal community, Northern Territory, as a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977. God then used him in helping bring renewal amongst Aborigines in Arnhemland, Central Australia and the Warburton area (Western Australia). From 1982-1988, John and his wife Jun pastored the Geraldton Uniting Church, before moving to Perth where John is associated with Churchlands Christian Fellowship as a minister. Their full-time work is with Khesed Ministries (www.khesed.org.au), encouraging cross-cultural bridge building and spiritual warfare with Aborigines and other Australians. John has a vision involving Aborigines as key people in revival and renewal in Australia.

Studies in Australian Christianity
Volume 3

Reviving Australia:

Essays on the History and Experience of Revival and Revivalism
in Australian Christianity

(Editors: Mark Hutchinson and Stuart Piggin
Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity 1994)

**Chapter 15: Rainbow or the Serpent?
Observing the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Revival, 1979 and Now.**
John Blacket

Aboriginal Christians today are struggling to come to terms with what it means to be both Christian and Aboriginal. It is the key current issue for them, and will have a major impact on the whole of the Christian church and the nation. It involves identifying and coming to terms with traditional spirits, issues of culture, and Aboriginal cosmology.

The title of this paper reflects this struggle through one of those spirits. The Rainbow Serpent is portrayed in the dreaming stories of most, if not all, Aboriginal tribes in Australia. Some Aborigines believe this serpent usurps the role of the Creator and masquerades as God. Discernment of the Truth of Jesus Christ allows Aborigines to enter into the Father's covenant promise symbolised in the Rainbow, as became very apparent in the 1979 Arnhem Land Revival. However, it must be the Truth which is not permeated with foreign cultural baggage. The Church's attitude has tended to take one of two extremes: to assure them that their culture is all good and must be retained, or to denounce it all as evil that must be rejected. Both are impossible roads for them, as they cannot live in their culture as Christians without discernment, nor replace it with some foreign culture such as western culture with all its evils.

This paper is an attempt to describe a little of God's solution as seen in a sovereign move of the Holy Spirit among some of them, and to explore some of the issues involved in it.

Arnhem Land

In 1979 a revival began among Aborigines at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land and spread across Australia bringing renewal of family relationships, release from alcohol, and leading to dramatically changed attitudes to life for thousands. This move of the Holy Spirit was particularly strong in tribal communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, but also affected many urban Aborigines and non-Aborigines. I had the personal privilege of being involved in various parts of this movement, and have spent much of the last five years interviewing others who were involved, and writing up the story.

The Galiwin'ku church officially celebrates the beginning of this revival on 14 March each year with a Thanksgiving Weekend. That was the day, in 1979, when the local Aboriginal minister, Rev Djiniyini Gondarra, and his family returned from two months' leave and found a revival breaking out in his parish.

While they were away he had prayed about things that should happen in the church that year, making a list of about fourteen items. The night they arrived home, as people gathered at their home to share what was happening, they discovered that God had already begun to act on all the things they had on their list.

Some people who had never been near the church were there, and there were lots of stories and questions. Djiniyini taught them about the Holy Spirit from the Bible, and together they asked for an Acts 2 type of pentecost. God answered their prayers immediately that night, and hundreds began to gather for hours every night to praise God. In a community with a total population around 1200 people, the number of active church attenders jumped from around 25 at the end of 1978 to 200 by the end of April 1979, then doubled again in the following month.

Attitudes to work and hygiene changed dramatically, and many miracles occurred. The rubbish around homes was removed and gardens planted with fruit, vegetables and flowers. The sister at the health clinic reported that the queues of people wanting attention, especially chronic attention seekers, almost completely disappeared.

One man told me he fell overboard from his outboard-powered dinghy at sea when no-one else was there. The boat continued on its way for quite some distance, then suddenly turned around and returned to him, stopping so he could climb aboard. Many people had visions and dreams in which they heard God speaking to them. People received miraculous healings and deliverance from demonic powers.

Word spread to other communities, and people began to visit and experience the revival in their own lives, sharing the message and Holy Spirit life with others when they returned home. These churches then invited teams from the Galiwin'ku church to come and share this new life through missions all over the Northern Territory and beyond.

Central-Western Australia

In August 1981 we flew a team of Elcho Islanders to the Warburton Ranges, in the Central Desert region of Western Australia. The community had been in a very dysfunctional state for some years. The day the team arrived, a large ceremonial group arrived in town, intending to pick up all the men and travel on to Laverton. One of the truck drivers of the group decided he wanted to stay to hear what these strangers from the north had to say, and so the whole group stayed to hear the Gospel.

An intense spiritual battle ensued, through which we saw an amazing victory in which the whole community was transformed in one weekend. Hundreds committed their lives to Jesus Christ and relationships were healed, reducing the violence in the community dramatically.

They, in turn, went to other communities in their area to share what they had received. In December that year they asked for a return visit of the Elcho Islanders, and a smaller team arrived before Christmas for a teaching and commissioning mission. Hundreds were touched by the power of the Holy Spirit at one meeting, where each one fell under the power of the Holy Spirit after the team prayed for them individually. It was a new encounter with God in a meaningful way for them, which even those who had been through Bible College had not experienced. And God seemed to commission them to take the Gospel to others both near and far.

Following this, teams went around the state sharing the new life they had received. Almost everywhere they went there were dramatic results, and one team was on the road for around six months, starting with around twenty people, and growing to over seventy.

At Mt Margaret Mission, there had been a lot of work done by a few government agents to change the official power-base from ex-resident Aboriginal Christians to local, traditional elders. The 'Crusade Team' arrived the day before all the dignitaries who came for the official hand-over. But a dramatic change had occurred overnight, and the officials were puzzled and embarrassed when they were told it was to remain a Christian community, and the hand-over would not proceed.

Wiluna is notorious for the drinking of its Aborigines. The team stayed there for a week, the police asking them after the first night to move their meetings to the lawn outside the lock-up, as prisoners had heard the music and wanted to go to the meetings. When the appeal was made, people on both sides of the wire fence knelt with tears pouring down their faces, and some of the team went inside to pray with the prisoners. The last meeting was held at the school swimming pool, and over 250 were baptised – from a community of around 400. Court appearances dropped by 90 percent, with police, hospital, TAB and hotel staff having little to do, with money and attention now being given to children and families.

The team saw supernatural signs in the sky, guiding them to where they were to go, and received amazing provision for their sustenance and travels. Even non-Aboriginal churches were changed by the movement.

National and regional media sent reporters to cover the events, with 'Four Corners' and others doing a segment on these 'Crusades'. On one occasion, the

camera crew, packing up their equipment after a meeting at Warburton Ranges were in tears over what was happening.

The Lead-up to Revival

In this short paper it is impossible to deal with all the significant things that contributed to the revival, but one thing is very clear to me: *it was a sovereign work of God*. In this section I will concentrate on Elcho Island, after giving a brief comparison of attitudes and general situation there and at Warburton Ranges.

Policies and Attitudes

Elcho Island Mission was established in 1942 by the Methodist Church under the leadership of Harold Shepperdson ('Sheppie'), Wili Wallalipa and Batangga (two key tribal leaders). Sheppie was a sawmiller/engineer who had worked with the people at nearby Milingimbi for fifteen years until a Second World War Air Force base at Milingimbi forced a move to Elcho.

He had an extremely positive attitude to the people, to their language and to most of their culture, learning well from pioneer minister-anthropologist, Rev T T Webb, and living and working with the people for a total of fifty years. This was one of the key preparatory influences for the revival.

In contrast, Warburton Ranges, the other major place involved in the revival, was a much harsher environment among a fiercer tribe where competition for food and water was very intense. The United Aborigines Mission pioneered the work there in 1933 by travelling over five hundred kilometres on camels, under bitter opposition from the few 'whitefellas' already in the area and also from the government representatives. They brought a more fundamentalist approach to their work and taught the Bible and the Gospel thoroughly. However, in all the tribes the effectiveness of the Gospel was somewhat frustrated by the medium of western thought forms and language limitations.

Efforts of pioneer linguist-missionary, Wilf Douglas, were blocked for some years by the Mission's Board, by some of the missionaries and even by the government. Despite this, they were still many years ahead of Elcho in translation of the Bible into the local language, their biggest hurdle being the negative attitude to their own language which the people themselves had absorbed.

By the time of the revival at Elcho and Warburton, there were drug problems, violence and family breakdown and tension in both centres, although it was worse at Warburton. The situations were totally different in many ways, but in both cases God surprised everyone in the way He worked.

Commitment in the Fire at Elcho Island

During the 1940s several of the key tribal elders made commitments to Jesus Christ. In 1957 Batangga and Wili led the whole community in an act of commitment to God in a ceremony where secret and sacred tribal totems were brought out into the open before the women and children and concreted into a monument alongside the

church, with a sign declaring their allegiance to the 'true God in heaven'. Very few people understood what was happening.

In 1976 an Aboriginal committee banned the use of the name of one of the prince-spirits of the area as a translation of the name of God, as they came to realise they were clearly not the same nature or being. Years later one tribal elder told me that spirit was 'the same serpent as the one in the Garden, but don't tell the young fellas.'

Then, in 1977-8 two of the key leaders in the church went through the Refiner's fire. It was a time of deepening their commitment to God. Rrurrumbu and Nyiwula lost two of their young children through illness. Rrurrumbu was a son of Batangga, deputy school-principal, and an evangelist. During the funeral of the second child they made a strong stand for Christ, despite traditional family pressures. From this time their ministry began to develop rapidly in its effectiveness.

Djiniyini and Gelung went through a very difficult time in the birth of one of their children in 1978, when Gelung had to spend months in Darwin hospital. He was the son of Wili and the local parish minister, and also was a gifted Christian teacher through the revival. After the birth of their child they were released into new experiences of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in a hostel in Darwin – the first time for any of the people.

Back at Elcho, a lot of growth occurred in 1977-8 in the area of acceptance of other groups in the community: Christians and non-Christians, Aborigines and non-Aborigines. There was also an escalation of expectant prayer – a sense that God really *was* going to do something *big* at Elcho, and we had to pray for it to happen.

Warfare during 1978

At the end of 1978 a group of about fifteen non-Aboriginal Christians at Galiwin'ku happened to be in one house at the same time and had an unplanned and totally informal time of fellowship and prayer. There was a sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit, with many baptised in the Holy Spirit for the first time. The meeting went on until around 3 am, and involved a time of taking authority over the same spirit that was involved in the 1976 ban, with a strong feeling that a significant victory had been achieved in a heavenly battle.

Only a few weeks later the first release of the Holy Spirit was experienced among the Aboriginal Christians at Galiwin'ku, at an informal meeting on the beach, leading to the revival already described.

The Levelling Out afterwards

During the revival period of 1979-1984 there were a lot of 'froth and bubble' experiences that eventually began to quieten down. Today, both communities (and many of the other places touched by the revival) are still noticeably different to pre-revival times. There are many who have drifted or fallen away from the church or even from following God at all, but most of them still believe in God and long for an even deeper experience of His presence than before. In many places the formal

church is dying fast, but the informal church, particularly in the 'homeland' centres away from the pressures of town and community life, there is a vitality of spiritual life that is really exciting, especially among the young people and children. I now want to touch on some of the issues and struggles that have followed the revival.

Evangelistic Cords

The Rev Ron Williams, Aboriginal evangelist based in Kalgoorlie, claims that the Aborigines are the most evangelised people in the world, with the least results. There has been a lot of effort put into taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Aborigines, particularly during this century, and the Spirit of God has certainly touched a cord in the spirits of Aboriginal people. Because they are people who are very sensitive to spiritual issues, thousands of them have responded to calls to commitment, many of them responding repeatedly as they feel the Spirit touching them. Sometimes this is a commitment to a deeper walk with God, and often it is a result of falling out of relationship with Him and seeking restoration. Frequently these 'recommitments' have been treated by travelling evangelists as initial commitments or interpreted totally in western evangelistic concepts.

Mission Control

When it came to the responses to the revival, both the United Aborigines Mission (UAM) and the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA) welcomed the new life in the church, but both controlled the revival using totally different methods.

Aboriginal Christians from the Warburton area became very discouraged when some missionaries and even UAM Aborigines from the Goldfield started to tell them that some things they felt were important in the movement were wrong. This included the controversy over speaking in tongues, whether falling over under the Spirit was from God, and that Christians had to be married under Western law.

In 1981 the UAM was caught up in the strong opposition of the evangelical church to the Charismatic movement. The UAM Council responded to the revival by drawing up a supplementary doctrinal statement which all their missionaries were required to sign.

All but one of the missionaries in the Central Desert area resigned as a result, and continued to work with the people through an independent Bible Translation program. The remaining single, female missionary had to leave the area within a year for health reasons, and the Mission has not been able to replace any of them effectively since, leaving the new Aboriginal Christians very confused and hurt.

By contrast, the UCA in the Northern Territory tried to encourage the movement without overt control. However, it tried to do so by involving the leaders in a large number of outside activities related to church structure. Many were sent to Darwin for training for ministry.

Djiniyini, the Elcho minister, was appointed to Darwin to teach in their theological college, appointed Moderator of the Synod, appointed to many national and even international committees, some of which were trying to Aboriginalise the

management and ministry of the Aboriginal church. Rurrumbu was given similar responsibilities, including the administration of a dying arm of the Church's Aboriginal work, which eventually killed him through a heart attack.

There has also been intense pressure for Aboriginal Christians to attend conferences and all sorts of other meetings to share their new life with the wider church or to equip them better for ministry. Elcho Christians have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. While this has helped them and the wider church, it has also been an incredible drain on the one-to-two hundred Aborigines in the local church.

Money, Sex, and Grog

The things of this world have taken their toll of Aboriginal Christians, possibly even more than the rest of the church. One of the real strengths they have to contribute to the rest of the church is their very strong emphasis on relationships. Satan has used this strength against them by pressuring Christian relatives into drinking, gambling or other activities which drag them away from God, based on the lie that they are breaking their relationship with their family if they don't join in.

Some have been diverted by offers of well paid jobs – particularly as the Christians are often the most reliable and honest people. Others have given in to political pressures for them to take an additional wife, and have felt ostracised from the church or their spiritual life has been sapped from them in the process.

Gospel and Culture

Probably the most intense struggle of all has involved the relationship between Aboriginal culture and the Gospel. Following the revival, a number of the elders were saying that God gave them their 'law' (meaning their dreaming, ceremonies, traditions and all their culture). I believe that God created a culture for each language He gave at the Tower of Babel, but mankind has constantly added baggage and garbage to it, so that it is difficult to see *what* God gave.

Aborigines say that the law is unchanging, but it has been overlaid with a lot of ceremonies and practices from various sources. One of these is Muslim folk religion from the Macassans in Indonesia. Aboriginal Christians are gradually sorting through some of this. One significant Christian elder said to me that all the secret ceremonies must go, but they must hang onto all the open ones where the women and children are able to participate. Not everyone agrees with him, and in at least one church building, opposing Christians have fought with their fists as well as their tongues over these issues.

Some of the Warburton men found that they lost their desire for God when they attended some ceremonies, but then had to ask how they could exercise any discipline over their young people without the law and the ceremonies, since their authority and whole world-view is based on them.

Recently, as a result of a vision, the Elcho Church dedicated a didgeridoo and rhythm-sticks to God. They have no traditional markings on them, and are never to

be used for any other purpose than to worship God. However, when they took them to a gathering in New Zealand and heard other indigenous groups from the Pacific doing traditional warfare songs turned into warfare for God, they stated that they can't do that because they still have a memory of the ancestors in their hearts when they try to use traditional styles of song for God. They have tried a number of times, but mostly they write new songs and translate others, using their traditional instruments with guitars.

Demons and Free Will

One of the personal struggles I had to work through, coming from a fundamentalist, evangelical background that was then moulded by seven years in Sydney University and Leigh College/ Uniting Theological College, Sydney, was to accept that Satan and his demons do have an influence on western, rational people, including Christians.

It seemed that this opened the way for people to say too readily: 'The devil made me do it!' and totally opt out of their own responsibility for their decisions choices and actions. We came to accept both the influence of demons and our free-will in accepting the demons' influence. In the case of demon-possession, with which we have often had to deal since 1978, the person still has the free-will to seek help from God to be released.

Charismania

Many people have asked me, particularly in the early days of the movement, whether it wasn't a charismatic or pentecostal movement. If it helps people to label things in those sort of ways, I would accept that what happened to me in the movement could be described in those sort of terms. However, the use of these terms is inappropriate as it squeezes me into a box shaped by other people's assumptions that are often far from reality.

And I have always pleaded with people not to restrict God by labelling this movement in those ways, but to let God be God and do what He chooses to do. Aboriginal people were totally puzzled by all the fuss made over this issue, and I have already made reference to the damage it caused through attempts to control what God was allowed to do.

Repentance

Many times the question of whether there has been genuine repentance has been raised with me. This is raised because some 'conversions' in such a movement may be based on all sorts of political, economic and other factors, more than a desire to live a changed life in relation to God.

Rrurrumbu told Christian anthropologist, John Rudder, that at the very first release of the Holy Spirit they were all very deeply conscious of their sin and were simultaneously confessing their sin with tears and praising God. If our definition of repentance centres on changed lives and communities, then we have to agree that there was repentance, at least in many of the people. There are still many active

Christian Aborigines whose lives were radically changed ten or fifteen years ago through the revival.

However, the Aboriginal world view declares that there is no change – only transformation in the outer expression of the inner reality. This was explained to John Rudder as being like a butterfly that transforms from a crawling grub into a flying beauty but is always a butterfly in its identity. One can then say that the work of the Holy Spirit in repentance only brings about the outer transformation to expose the inner reality of a person's life in relationship with Jesus Christ. If there is no outer transformation, then the person cannot be held under condemnation, because they are already living out their inner reality. This brings us into all sorts of interesting issues of predestination that I do not propose to discuss here.

Conclusion – Revival, Renewal...?

I have personally tended to use the term 'renewal' for the movement, since that was the word used in the vision I had in January, 1979, where I felt the Lord say: 'I will renew the land.'

Some have said that it couldn't have been revival, because that would have needed the life of the Holy Spirit to be there in the first place for His life to be revived, so a more appropriate term would be 'awakening'. Others have said that revival would keep going and so it would not now be needing a further spark of the Holy Spirit. Some claim that 'renewal' is what God was doing to our denominations, and He has now moved to a much deeper work of revival in our society and world.

Of course that all depends on our definition of the terms. What God did during this move among Aborigines can be seen to be 'revival' under the generally accepted definitions of the term, and its influence still continues.

I believe that God's purposes are still to renew the land, which includes reviving all of life and society, bringing a commitment to God's covenant and Holy Spirit discernment of the Serpent's lies and distortions in all our cultures. That is just a part of God's mighty plan for Australia and the world today in which He has chosen the despised Australian Aborigines to have an important role that I have often described as being the 'feet' of the Body of Jesus Christ – to dance His praise and run with the Gospel to all humankind.

REV JOHN BLACKET has been involved with Aborigines in five states of Australia as pastor, teacher, community worker, intercessor and friend for over 30 years. His mother was a missionary to Aborigines in New South Wales and many Aborigines stayed in their Sydney home during his childhood. He graduated from the University of Sydney in social work and divinity, and was ordained at the Galiwin'ku Aboriginal community, Northern Territory, as a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977. God then used him in helping bring renewal amongst Aborigines in Arnhemland, Central Australia and the Warburton area (Western Australia). From 1982-1988, John and his wife June pastored the Geraldton Uniting Church, before moving to Perth where John is associated with Churchlands Christian Fellowship as a minister. Their full-time work is with Khesed Ministries (www.khesed.org.au), encouraging cross-cultural bridge building and spiritual warfare with

Aborigines and other Australians. John has a vision involving Aborigines as key people in revival and renewal in Australia.