

Connecting Our Cultures

Interview with Pastor Rob Borgas

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Jo: Hi, this is Messages of hope and I'm Jo Chamberlain. Today we'll be reflecting on how Indigenous and other cultures connect through love of language, family dynamics, and a shared faith.

Pastor Rob Borgas has been involved with Indigenous communities for over 35 years and we'd like to hear a bit about his story and what he's learned from living in remote communities in Australia. So, Pastor Rob, how have you been involved in Indigenous communities?

Rob: Well, Jo, I've been working with indigenous people for about 35 years, while being a Lutheran pastor and a seminary student. I lived in Central Australia for twenty years and on the far West Coast for ten years. I was doing Aboriginal ministry in Adelaide for about seven years.

Jo: Was there something that particularly inspired you to get involved?

Rob: Well, when I was at secondary school there was a few Indigenous guys there who were boarding, and I got to meet them when I was at school and I guess I was a little bit disappointed how they were treated at school by other students. I befriended one of them in particular; we got to be good friends. And, yeah, I got to understand a little bit about Indigenous people, Indigenous life, through him.

Jo: So Pastor Rob, what was it like when you became a pastor and started living in these communities?

Rob: Look, wherever we went, particularly when we were living at one community, Yalata on the Far West Coast, we were really welcomed, there and made to feel part of the family. People would look after our young children. We had really young kids and they would just look after them, take them away and babysit them for us and they were very good to us.

Even though there was a lot of social problems at Yalata at the time, a lot of drinking and stuff like that, but people were really good and really looked after us and cared for us and stood up for us. And, yeah, we were really appreciative of them; the way that they took us in and taught us about the culture and helped us with many other things. It was a great experience.

I remember though, one guy criticizing me because I was spending so much time on my garden outside of the manse where we lived, because Aboriginal people didn't have gardens. Some do now, but the people where I lived, they didn't have much of that. And I was looking at this garden for years and years. And he kept saying to me, "pastor, why are you wasting your time on that garden?" He said, "you know, you should be out mixing with

the people, going out hunting with them, and you shouldn't be spending time on your garden." He said, "when you leave, that garden is going to die. And it's all gonna be finished." And he was right. When we left it was finished.

I guess, we do things when we're in communities, probably even more extreme than what we would do normally, because we do them to remind ourselves of our own culture and where we come from and stuff like that.

Jo: Rob, you have a strong connection to some of the first German migrants in Australia who ventured into central Australia and lived among the Indigenous communities. Can you tell us a bit more about their experience?

Rob: Their reason for being there was to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ as they saw it. And they wanted to share that with Indigenous people. But being educated the way they were in Germany at that time, there was a lot of value placed on language and language was the thing in German philosophy in particular that defined who you were as a person. Whereas in a lot of the British philosophies, it was more about logic and reason, a your appearance and stuff like that, which often, I guess, dictated the way that Aboriginal people were thought about in British colonialism. Germans, they were interested in language and they knew that if they learned the language of the Aboriginal people, that that would give them a glimpse into who these people really were.

And you'll see the first missionaries that came to Adelaide, they learned the language very well, and that led to them being able to understand and appreciate the Kurna people in Adelaide and what they were going through. And it's interesting to note that a lot of the early protest movements that were started by Aboriginal people were made up of people who were in churches and other organisations like that. So, a lot of churches have been very active and helpful and instrumental in supporting indigenous people in that whole process for many years.

Jo: how can we be better equipped at supporting or hearing the voice of the Indigenous communities?

Rob: Yeah, that's a good question, Jo. I guess by getting to meet Aboriginal people yourselves is probably the best way we can do something about it. And just getting to understand and know and appreciate where they're coming from and be aware that, you know, there are many different kinds of Aboriginal people, they're not all the same.

Most Aboriginal people, if not all Aboriginal people, have suffered some sort of racism in their life, some more than others. They've often lived in difficult conditions in outback places. I know a lot of Aboriginal people who were only 18 when they first came into white society and Western society. And, they'd been living off bush tucker all that time. And they tell me about the old days, they said that this land was like a garden of Eden before white people came, they said, because there used to be all these different animals and plants and now it's all gone.

So, yeah, it's not easy for many Indigenous people and I think the best thing we can do is to get know them and understand them. So, if you know an Aboriginal person in your street or in your church, say hello and try and understand and appreciate them; invite them around for dinner.

Jo: That sounds really good. I think that's a really good message to offer to people just to be able to get to know them more because we can also put in our own assumptions in things and get it completely wrong.

Rob: Yeah, just try to make friends with people, who are Indigenous, I think that's the best way of doing things.

Our modern Western cultures are fairly capitalistic and we don't really share stuff all that well. And they really think that our culture is quite mean and stingy. And, admittedly, Aboriginal people don't share with everyone, but they've got specific relationships or specific people that they have to share with according to their law. And then, they believe that if they share that people will share back with them. So, it becomes this great cycle that happens of you share things with people and they share them back.

And it's got an actual term in Pitjantjatjara culture and it's called *Ngapartji Ngapartji* and it means that you do one thing and that is returned to you. It's where they see that things don't belong to them but they just have more of a collective ownership of things with certain people under their law, not with everyone, but with certain people who they have to look after and care for in certain ways. And same goes with the country. They have to care for and look after certain places.

The connection to people through sharing is quite significant. Family is everything to them. But it's sort of the opposite with us where we're much more individual and less family orientated, or extended family orientated than they are. We have a concern about mathematics and science and stuff like that, they have their own sort of complex mathematics, but it's a mathematics of family relationships and who belongs where, and it's quite complicated.

And, if we buy a house, we buy it just for ourselves or for our partner. We don't buy that house for our whole extended family. Whereas in Southern European countries, they still have that care for the extended family. Well, in aboriginal culture, it's much greater and there's a lot of care for the extended family.

Jo: So Rob, I have heard of a lot of Christian indigenous leaders in the cultural community. How have you been helped by some of these indigenous leaders?

Rob: Yeah, well, they've really taught me about the culture and the language and really led me to show me the way that I should be behaving and what I should be doing. They've been great. They've been really understanding and appreciative. And also many of them have a really good sense of humour as well. And they've been through a lot of tough times in their lives. But you know, they really have a strong faith and that faith is really ground in hope for the future and the belief that God is with them in their culture and in their land and in their lives and that God will be with them, even when they die. I know they've got a marvellous way of living though, and a wonderful way of showing their care for their country and for their fellow human beings, and for their fellow Christians.

Jo: what sort of messaging can we offer to the new generation then?

Rob: What I'd like to say is don't forget your faith because your Christian faith was something that was given to you by your family, by your descendants. And they really appreciated and valued it, even though lots of bad things were happening in the colonial enterprise, there was some good that came out of it, and one of the good things was that your descendants got to know about Jesus Christ.

And, they really appreciated and gave them a lot of hope and a lot of help for their lives while they were enduring all of these terrible experiences, for many of them throughout that time. And it gave a lot of them the strength to endure through it all.

So don't forget your faith. It's served your descendants well, your ancestors well, and it will serve your descendants well in the future too.

Jo: Is there any hope for the future of reconciliation that we can lean into?

Rob: We need some sort of treaty, and we need some sort of truth telling. We need to really honestly have a good look at our history and what really happened. And there's all sorts of stories. It's not simple as they did this or they did that. You know, it's, it's complicated and it's not. Just because one thing happened in one place didn't mean that it happened everywhere. But there were general trends and tendencies and I think we need to be aware of them and be honest and open about them. So those two things, the truth telling and the treaty are really important. And just getting to know Aboriginal people, that's probably the third thing.

Jo: And I guess from my own reflections with working alongside people from Indigenous representations, one thing I've noticed is that there are a number of leaders in Indigenous society that actually strive for a future hope together, that it's not so much about a separateness at all, but it's more about how we do get along well together.

Rob: We've all got different backgrounds and we've got to respect that and appreciate that. But at the same time, we've got to get on and we've got to work together as human beings.

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