**The search for spirituality**

In figures recently released by the Stats department from the 2023 NZ census, the proportion of people in NZ claiming to have “no religion” has increased to more than half the population (2,576,049 people). And that those people who identified as Christian dropped to 32% (down from 80% in the 1960s)

I am disturbed by that trend. We are no longer a Christian country (if we ever were). Godzone no longer?

Christianity has seen a significant amount of growth in recent years, particularly in Africa and Asia and some growth in Latin America. However, Christianity is also declining in the Western world.

These statistics should be disturbing to you as well as me. But there is another fact I want to layer on top of this:

In a different survey in 2018 almost half of Kiwis felt that spirituality was extremely or very important for their overall wellbeing (46%) and mental health (47%); and more than half of Kiwis (59%, often/occasionally) talked about spirituality or religion when they gathered with friends [[1]](#footnote-1)

How do we match up those 2 statistics – decline in Christianity and rise in spirituality. They seem to be in conflict with each other.

One writer suggests that there is a growing disaffection with runaway consumerism, disgust with the politics of power, fear of massive structural injustice, cosmic insecurity in a nuclear age, and a generalised rejection of the value system which has made the person an expendable commodity in a throw away economy. [And as a result, there is an increase in people] searching for personal meaning, a quest for the who and the why in a world of what and how.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Great news but how come there are only 32% professing faith in Christ and attendance in churches is in a steep decline.

In a different study in 2019 about 14.4% of New Zealanders attended church at least monthly (down from 20-25% in 2009)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Karlene and I went to Auckland a few years ago for my nephews wedding, and on Sunday we skipped church to go to the new in-laws brunch. On the way, we passed empty church car parks but cafes full of people and people cycling or walking their dogs.

Unfortunately, the great majority of spiritual explorers do not make any connection between their personal quest and the existence of the church.[[4]](#footnote-4)

They are looking outside the established church and religion to other options. According to the NZ writer, the late Mike Riddell, they see the expressions of spirituality described by the church as shallow and repressive.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rapidly increasing numbers are finding it possible to believe in reincarnation, spirit guides and extra-terrestrials and all sorts of other esoteric ideas, [which actually is good news because] it means that these people are spiritually open as no other generation within living memory has been.[[6]](#footnote-6)

But those facts and comments put the onus back on us. How can the church reach these people who seem to want to transcend themselves, to live in a larger horizon, to seek what is a real value,[[7]](#footnote-7) yet do not consider Christianity a viable option?

We need to recapture the churches’ role in spirituality and be attractive to those seeking more meaning to their lives.

Romans 10:14 asks the question:

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*

We cannot simply assert what we believe and compel the rest of the world to believe it too. We tried that with Constantine and Christendom in 300AD when religion became state business, and it did not work. It watered down faith and the church became a state agency and career path with a lack of personal relationship with God.

Do not despair about these figures. The community of God's people has survived in all cultures and civilisations but always as a minority, always marginal to the mainstream, never statistically significant.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Christian community can gently continue to live as the people of God and offer a viable alternative to the rat race, smash-you-neighbour, greedy, violent society that surrounds us. We can live out the gospel in peaceful, caring ways that exhibit the alternative way of life of those who follow Jesus Christ.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In Matthew 20:25ff Jesus said *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

But first, we must truly believe that the church has something to offer that the world cannot live without. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Do we believe that the church has something to offer?

We may say so but how good are we at getting the Good News out there?

We don’t seem to be doing too well in that regard.

The Faith and Belief survey in 2018 found that many Kiwis have little to no engagement with Christians or the Church in New Zealand. One in four (25%) know less than two Christians, and some of these don’t know any Christians at all (9% of all Kiwis). More than one in five Kiwis (22%) know nothing at all about the Church in New Zealand. Kiwis know even less when it comes to their local church, with more than one in two (56%) suggesting they don’t know their local church well at all. Therefore unsurprisingly, many Kiwis (51%) take a neutral stance regarding the impact of the church in their local area, suggesting it has neither a positive or negative influence in their community[[11]](#footnote-11)

And that is sad.

For me, the church is vital to the wellbeing of the community. It is vital for the lives of people who fail to recognise there is more to life than this life now. It is vital for meaning and wellbeing of individuals and society.

It is vital that we are a community reflecting God's passion for righteousness, Justice, and mercy. When we are that holy community, we make an impact on any unholy world, no matter how desperate circumstances.[[12]](#footnote-12)

But clearly, we can only make any impact if we have involvement in the world. Only 25% of Kiwis know more than 2 Christians, and over half not knowing anything about the local church!

The impact that we have will not be through programs or better worship teams or smoke and light shows, or classier preachers with amazing power points.

Spiritually disoriented God seekers and jaded Christians are not looking for the best stage presence or programs, BUT they will stay committed to real people and a mission that makes sense in the real world. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Real people and real mission. It used to be said that young people are looking for causes worth dying for. Is our faith a cause worth dying for?

We need to show we are real and that we offer a better alternative to the life they are leading or the spiritual practices they are pursuing.

We need to exhibit the truth that “for the Christian, the spiritual life is faith life, the relationship of the person with God in Christ through the power of the Spirit within the believing community.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

By our conformity to Christ, the church can manifest God’s rule and participate in God’s mission to flood the world with the divine presence. In its concrete communal life, the church as the body of Christ is called to witness to the promised future of a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13).[[15]](#footnote-15)

We need to highlight that the Christian religion is not a set of doctrines about Christ, nor is it a rule of life based upon the teachings and example of Christ. It is not even an earnest and sincere endeavour to live according to the mind and spirit of Christ. It is not a system, but a presence; the spirit of Christ indwelling the spirit of man. [[16]](#footnote-16)

Galatians 2:20 says *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*

We need to introduce people to the Jesus who came and loved us and left his Holy Spirit within us, in constant communion with God.

In a national Church Life Survey conducted last year in NZ, 75% of the people surveyed felt at ease talking about their faith, yet only 34% invited others to church in the past 12 months.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Dr Phil Halstead, a lecturer at Carey College related the story that whilst he was a university student, he got a job at an appliance store but in a month had made no sales. He knew all about the product he was selling and its worth and value but could not sell any of the items. Another colleague sold 17 items in the same period. The difference was that the other person would conclude his sale pitch with “What is stopping you buying this item today?”

Knowing the product is one thing but getting someone to commit closes the deal. 75% of people are happy talking about their faith but only 34% had invited someone to church in the previous year.

And that is not even asking them to surrender their lives to Jesus! Only 34% even ask people to come to church with them!

That is why Debbie Hay’s Wayfinder workshop in November here is so important. It helps people navigate their journey by passing on wisdom and experience from their own journey. It inspires and equips us to open a spiritual conversation, share our stories in 3 minutes, share stories about Jesus and run a group where people become disciples who make disciples.

We are not talking about brow beating people or bashing them over the head with the Bible.

If we simply focused on doing the most basic aspects of Christianity, like loving each other, it would say more to the watching world than all the systematic theology we could throw at them.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Love God and love your neighbour. In a world where people are unloved, loving them is an attractive alternative.

Non-Christians feel that Christians could better represent Jesus by letting their actions speak louder than words. Instead of Christians telling others how to live or what to believe, non-Christians would like to see Christians living out the values that Jesus proclaims in the Bible and continuing to do good work in the community.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The Church Life Survey found that only 53% of the people surveyed were involved in community service not connected to the church.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Where do we rub shoulders with the people who are not Christians? Not in here.

That is why the Serving the City initiative was a good idea.

That is why our Christmas event on 15 December is a good idea.

As a pastor, I spend more time with Christians than non-Christians. It is part of the role of being a shepherd, but Jesus, the great Shepherd, said he came to seek and save the lost. He left the 99 to go and seek the lost one.

The lost are not in here, but out there. There are 2.5 million lost people in NZ, they are not hard to find.

It can be scary, but Jesus in Luke 12:11-12 says *Don’t worry how you’ll respond, and don’t worry what you should say*. *The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the moment when you need them.*

We do not go alone. We do not step into the enemy’s territory unprotected. We go with the Lord. In fact, he is already there, waiting for us to catch up.

Deuteronomy 31:8 *The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”*

Isaiah 45:2 *“I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.*

Isaiah 52:12 *the Lord will go before you, And the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*

Remember Catherine Booth’s quote about church and its mission: A barracks is meant to be a place where real soldiers were to be fed and equipped for war, not a place to settle down in or as a comfortable snuggery in which to enjoy ourselves.

Let’s change the trends.

1. https://adra.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FaithBeliefNZ\_Report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sandra Schneiders *The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction* 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://nzchristiannetwork.org.nz/some-challenging-data-about-christianity-in-new-zealand/#:~:text=From%20the%20New%20Zealand%20Attitudes%20and%20Values%20Study,but%20the%20largest%20proportion%20of%20those%20attended%20weekly. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dave Tomlinson *The Post-Evangelical* 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mike Riddell *Threshold of the Future* 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Drane *What is the New Age saying to the Church?* 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carolyn Gratton *Guidelines for Spiritual Direction* 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eugene Petersen *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. 288 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Marva Dawn *Joy in our Weakness*: 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Paul Nixon *Fling Open the Doors* 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://adra.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FaithBeliefNZ\_Report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Colson *Against the night: living in the dark ages* 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hugh Halter & Matt Smay *The Tangible Kingdom: creating incarnational community* 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Schneiders 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Samuel Chadwick *The Way To Pentecost* 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. https://clsnz.cra.org.nz/ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Halter & Smay 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://adra.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FaithBeliefNZ\_Report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. https://clsnz.cra.org.nz/ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)