

The Church— Heading for Extinction?

By Rex Morgan

Fewer and fewer people are going to church these days. For thousands of years the church was at the centre of society. In the middle ages it had immense influence, and was able to sway kingdoms. Christian missionaries played an integral part in the colonising of NZ, and the church held an important place in the first half of the last century. NZ's rural landscapes are still dotted with picturesque churches, which once used to be at the heart of community life.

But recent census figures have shown a continual decline in church attendance. A 2011 study using census data from NZ and eight other developed nations (Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) indicates religion is 'set for extinction' in all these nations, according to an article in *The NZ Herald*.¹ The BBC put it this way: 'The result, reported at the American Physical Society meeting in Dallas, indicates that religion will all but die out altogether in those countries'.

Figures from the last three censuses show the number of people identifying as Christian in NZ declined from 64.2 per cent in 1996 to 54.4 per cent in 2006. It is widely expected that the 2013 census figures when released will show for the first time that less than 50 per cent of the population of 'God's Own Country' identify as Christian!



Is the earthquake-ravaged shell of Christchurch's Knox Presbyterian prophetic of the church's demise?

There are a number of reasons for this trend. Rapid advances in scientific and technological knowledge have caused many, particularly of the younger generation, to consign the idea of a God to the dustbin of outdated myths and legends. Media reports of church scandals and abuse by clergy have given rise to doubt and dismay. Religious wars, money-grabbing preachers, judgmental attitudes, and intolerance shown by religious adherents—all of these have negatively influenced people's perceptions. Some people have visited a church and found it to be a bad experience. Others feel that all Christians are self-righteous hypocrites, and that religious services are dull, boring, and meaningless. Many are so busy with the necessities of modern life that they don't have time for God.

Is the Church outdated, heading for extinction? Or does it still have a worthwhile place in our world? Have you been disappointed by Christianity? Can Christianity be 'redeemed'?

God Is Disappointed, Too

If you look at the Bible, it is fascinating to note that God himself says that he has often been disappointed by religion! Addressing the religious leaders of the period as he walked the roads of Palestine, Jesus remonstrated: 'You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You burnish the surface of your cups and bowls so they sparkle in the sun, while the insides are maggoty with your greed and gluttony'.²

Through his ancient prophets, God vigorously railed against the

Returns of the Jedi

A humorous but interesting insight into the decline of traditional religion in the western world was highlighted by the movement initiated in 2001 urging residents of a number of countries to record their religion as 'Jedi' or 'Jedi Knight' (after the quasi-religious order of Jedi Knights in the fictional Star Wars universe) on national censuses.

Over 53,000 people listed themselves as Jedi in New Zealand's 2001 census. New Zealand had the highest per capita population of reported Jedi in the world that year, with 1.5% marking 'Jedi' as their religion. Statistics New Zealand treated Jedi responses as 'Answer understood, but will not be counted'. If Jedi were counted it would have been the second largest religion in New Zealand. The percentages of religious affiliations were: Christian: 58.9%; No religion: 29.6%; Object to answering: 6.9%; Jedi: 1.5%; Buddhism: 1.2%; Hindu: 1.2%.

There was a fall in the number of New Zealand Jedi five years later, with some 20,000 people giving this as their religion in the 2006 census.



Jedi Anakin Skywalker

If we want to be fair about it, Christianity shouldn't be judged by what its frail human followers do, but on the basis of how Jesus taught and lived. It is a fact of life that churches are made up of human beings, and all humans are imperfect. All clubs, organisations, and groups have a mixture of 'good, bad, and ugly' people, and churches are no different. There is no perfect church, and if there were, once you or I joined it, it would no longer be perfect!

Full of Hypocrites

In a survey of unchurched Americans, 72% said they think the church is 'full of hypocrites'.⁵ It is easy to spot hypocrisy in the church, but that is because church is the very place sinners go in order to find forgiveness and answers to the problem of sin. It's like saying a rugby club is full of people who need to get better at playing rugby, or Alcoholics Anonymous is full of alcoholics. That is why they go there!

All humans are hypocrites to some extent—we all say one thing and do another at times! But Christians can more easily be identified as hypocrites because they make no secret of the standards they hold, which are laid out in the Bible for all to see. Because churches espouse these lofty standards of morality and ethics, they are judged severely, and so they should be. But in the end they are composed of human beings, so they are bound to make mistakes.

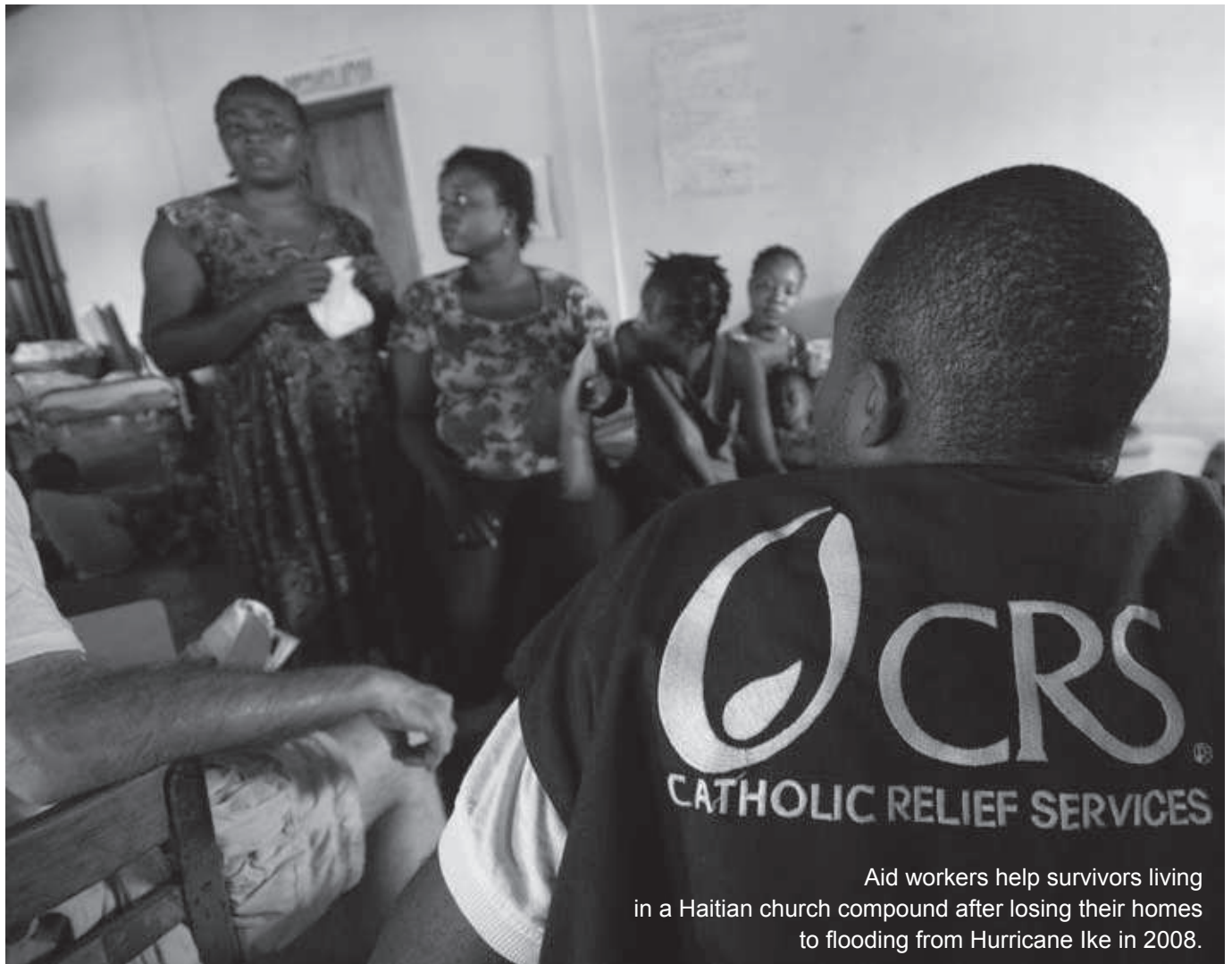
Indeed, it is people who have had tough lives and perhaps don't possess so much in the way of money or intellect that are most likely to feel a need for God. So it isn't surprising that Christians exhibit various weaknesses. One of the earliest church leaders, the apostle Paul, recognised this, pointing out: 'Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that

churches of their time. For example, on one occasion he protested: 'Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more! I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning'.³

At another time he warned: 'Don't listen to the sermons of the prophets. It's all hot air. Lies, lies, and more lies. They make it all up. Not a word they speak comes from me. They preach their "Everything Will Turn

Out Fine" sermon to congregations with no taste for God, their "Nothing Bad Will Ever Happen to You" sermon to people who are set in their own ways'.⁴

God doesn't mince words! If you've been disappointed by Christianity, you're in the best of company! God is disappointed, too. He definitely doesn't approve of religious wars, abuse, and hypocrisy. Where these things are found in 'Christianity', it is not God's type of Christianity. But that doesn't mean all Christianity is ungodly!



Aid workers help survivors living in a Haitian church compound after losing their homes to flooding from Hurricane Ike in 2008.

are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him'.⁶

However, church people should be transformed for the better by their relationship with God, and thankfully the majority are. So a lot of good is done by churches—the good far outweighing the bad. Thousands and thousands of Christians are found in the most impoverished of places, their kind hands tending to the sick, comforting the traumatised, feeding the hungry, giving hope to those who have lost everything, and putting a smile on the faces of the lonely.

When disaster strikes, churches are often in the forefront of the relief effort, offering facilities to homeless people, collecting clothing and food for the stranded. Humanitarian aid organisations such as World Vision and Tear Fund are underpinned by strong Christian values.

After the recent devastating storms in Oklahoma, a local news reporter saw church volunteers move onto the scene after the tornadoes left. He told his listeners: 'Wait for government aid and you'll be here forever. The Baptist men will get it done tomorrow'.⁷

The fact that Christians follow a man who died for his enemies, praying for them to be forgiven, and that they are taught week by week to practice sacrificial service, generosity, and peace-making means society is greatly benefitted by their compassion and good works. A US study found significant differences in charitable giving between secular and religious people. Those with religious commitment were 25 percentage points more likely than secularists to donate money (91 percent to 66 percent) and 23 points more likely to volunteer time (67 percent to 44 percent).⁸

Bad things have been done by accountants and investment advisers, people like the infamous Bernie Madoff, but that doesn't mean we should steer clear of all accountants. Numerous tragic 'medical misadventures' have been recorded, but that doesn't put us off going to the doctor. We need to choose our professional advisers carefully, with our eyes wide open, and so it is with selecting a church.

What about the arrogance of Christians? There is a perception the 'God-botherers' are arrogant because they claim to know the truth. But surely the claim that Christians are misguided 'God-botherers' is arrogant in a similar way?

Simply claiming to know truth isn't necessarily arrogant. The manner in which that is claimed can be a problem, though. If Christians smugly boast that they know more than

Feedback Requested

Have you been disappointed by Christianity? Have you had a bad experience at church—or a particularly good one? We would appreciate readers' comments on this article, for possible use in a further piece on this subject.

Please send any thoughts to : *Inside Life*, PO Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland 0750

others, and certainly there are some who do, then they are indeed arrogant. But most Christians realise they are not to behave in that way. They know God wants them to act with humility, the very opposite of arrogance. God makes it very plain that he hates conceit and arrogance.⁹

Christians who act as if they are better than everyone else are certainly not living by the creeds of Christianity. The Bible says very clearly that all people are sinners, and strongly condemns a 'holier than thou' attitude.¹⁰ Christians who are judgmental are going directly against the instructions of their founder, who cautioned: 'Judge not, that you are not judged'.¹¹

Some churches give the impression they are always out for money. Once again, such Christians are letting down the God they claim to serve. God's way actually emphasises giving, not getting.¹² There is no record of Jesus asking for money, although some funds were donated to his ministry.¹³ It is fair enough for churches, as do all clubs and societies, to seek adequate funds to do their work. And believers may wish to voluntarily make offerings as part of their worship of God. But no one should be forced to give, or made to feel guilty for not giving.

Boring, Boring, Boring

A survey of 8,500 people in Australia¹⁴ found the top reason

non-attenders don't go to church is that they find church services to be boring or unfulfilling.

It shouldn't be that way—and if it is, there is something wrong. True Christianity is far from boring. It is about living life to the full. Jesus said: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'.¹⁵ This is a reference to a whole new way of living, with a spiritual dimension that reveals exciting and satisfying new insights on the issues of life.

William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* comments: 'When we walk with Jesus, there comes a new vitality, a superabundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living and we



Thirty volunteers from the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Parish of Christ Church in Geelong, Australia, joined together in 2012 to put on a three-course Community Christmas Day dinner for more than 150 people in need.

begin to live in the real sense of the word'.

Writing in *The NZ Herald*, columnist John Roughan, although he says he is 'not consciously religious', expressed appreciation for Christianity in an article entitled, 'Celebrating a force for good'. He stated: 'Religion is a conviction that there are greater and better forces at work on the world than human reason. Christianity should be capable of moving rich and poor to moments of awe and excitement at life and its infinite possibilities'.¹⁶

The church has changed a lot over the years. The long and ponderous sermons of the past have given way in many places to modern services incorporating contemporary music (all genres are available), and shorter interactive sermons often utilise technology such as videos, vimeos, and Powerpoint presentations. Christianity is relevant in today's world because it has to do with living—the process of living our daily life to the full, with an understanding of who put us here and the meaning God intended for our lives. Christians learn about marriage and family relationships, love, forgiveness, honesty, and integrity. They are encouraged with principles of happy, healthy, and spiritually satisfying living, and the assurance of eternal life.

Among the benefits of attending church are friendship and a sense of belonging. Friendships made at church often become close and lifelong because they are based on deeply held mutual values and faith. Churches put on activities for all age groups, with events tailored for singles, for the elderly, and so on. Christian youth camps provide a wonderful opportunity for young people to spend time with their peers and learn a wide variety of indoor and outdoor activities in a safe yet challenging environment.

Participation in a positive endeavour greater than oneself is a great help in facing the challenges of life.

Ten Reasons for Not Washing

It is interesting to take the reasons people use for not going to church, and apply them to other areas of life, to see how inconsistent we can be in our logic. For example, if the commonly held reasons for not going to church are valid, they are good reasons for not washing either...

1. I was forced to wash as a child.
2. People who wash are hypocrites—they think they are cleaner than everybody else.
3. There are so many different kinds of soap, I can't decide which one is best.
4. I used to wash, but it got boring so I stopped.
5. I wash only on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter.
6. None of my friends wash.
7. I'll start washing when I get older and dirtier.
8. I can't spare the time.
9. The bathroom is never warm enough in winter or cool enough in summer.
10. People who make soap are only after your money.

There is a story about a pastor and the CEO of a soap manufacturing company who went for a walk together.

'What good is religion?' asked the CEO. 'Look at all the trouble and misery of the world! Still there, even after years, thousands of years, of teaching about goodness and truth and love and peace. Still there, after all the sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, why should this be?'

The pastor said nothing.

They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. Then the pastor said: 'Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. Of what good is soap? With all the soap in the world, over all these years, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is, after all!'

The CEO protested: 'But pastor, soap can't do any good unless it is used!'

'Exactly', replied the preacher. 'Exactly.'

Another benefit of the church is its care for, and support of, its members. Many churches have groups that join together to look after the sick, take meals to shut-ins, and distribute food to the needy, both in and outside the church.

Church also provides a much neglected luxury in the midst of today's hectic helter-skelter society: the chance to slow down, pause, and reflect—an opportunity for meditation: just being quiet and contemplating what is truly important in life.

You are invited to come and meet the sponsors of *Inside Life!*

Worldwide Church of God services are held weekly in the following locations:

Auckland: The Mt. Eden Senior Citizens' Club Hall, Balmoral
(corner Dominion Rd and Brixton Rd)
Saturdays at 2.00 pm.
(contact: Rex Morgan, ph. 09 489 8910)

Rotorua: Contact Peter Lindop, ph. 07 349 2272

Wellington: Thumbs Up
5 Elizabeth Street, Petone
Saturdays at 2:30 pm.
(contact: Dennis Gordon, ph. 04 386 2094)

Invercargill: The Southern Light Community Centre
64 Conon Street
Saturdays at 1:00 pm.
(contact: Les Evans, ph. 03 216 3680)

Other NZ locations: Small groups meet regularly in other cities nationwide. For details, contact Dennis Richards, ph. 06 353 6224 or visit www.wcg.org.nz

The greatest benefit, however, is to tap into the power of a relationship with God, to learn about him, and his will and direction for your life. Church is all about an encounter with God and others that changes who we are and provides a new source of power for living.

You don't have time to go to church? It only takes two to three hours a week, about the same time as going to a movie, or a meal out. That's not really a lot of time to invest in an activity that can deliver so many benefits! Churches don't meet only on Sunday mornings; services are available on Saturdays or midweek. Isn't it time you thought about connecting with a church to experience the joy of worshiping God, making new friends, learning vital life principles, giving practical help to others, and discovering the joy of spiritual understanding leading to eternal life?

Some people prefer to seek God personally rather than via organised religion, noting that all organisations are man-made and fraught with difficulties. A survey showed a massive 86% of unchurched Americans believe they can have a good

relationship with God without being involved in church.¹⁷

It is true that God is everywhere and we can communicate with him in any place at any time. But Jesus does want his disciples to follow him as a community that can work together in proclaiming the gospel.¹⁸ After he returned to heaven he gave the Holy Spirit to his people in a group setting.¹⁹ Thereafter, the New Testament records him operating in the context of local church congregations, where members can grow together as a 'body', learning from one another, caring for one another, worshipping God, and spreading the gospel in a united effort.²⁰

Is the church heading for extinction? Is it fast becoming obsolete? Far from it! In fact, we can be assured this will never happen because it was founded by Jesus Christ, as his way of carrying out his work on earth. It has gone through many ups and downs over the centuries. Aggressive governments have persecuted it and tried to stamp it out. But Jesus promised it would never die out, giving the guarantee: 'I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'.²¹

Jesus also famously said 'I am the way, the truth and the life'.²² If this is correct, Christianity is extremely relevant and meaningful to each of us. Surely it is worth giving it a try to see if he was right?

Notes

- ¹ *The NZ Herald*, March 22, 2011, citing a study by academics from Northwestern University, Arizona University, and a research company in Tucson.
- ² Matthew 23:25-26, *The Message* version.
- ³ Isaiah 1:13-14, *The Message* version.
- ⁴ Jeremiah 23:16-17, *The Message* version.
- ⁵ Survey of 1402 adults conducted by LifeWay Research in 2008.
- ⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, New International Version.
- ⁷ <http://holysoup.com/2013/06/05/reaching-the-community-with-no-strings/>
- ⁸ 'Religious Faith and Charitable Giving', by Arthur C. Brooks, reporting on *The Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey* of 30,000 observations of 'civic behaviour' in 2000.
- ⁹ Proverbs 8:13
- ¹⁰ Matthew 6:1; Galatians 6:14
- ¹¹ Matthew 7:1
- ¹² Acts 20:35
- ¹³ John 12:6
- ¹⁴ *Why People Don't Go to Church*, 1998 Australian Community Survey, conducted by Perth's Edith Cowan University and National Church Life Survey Research.
- ¹⁵ John 10:10
- ¹⁶ 'Celebrating a force for good', *The NZ Herald*, 24 December 2011.
- ¹⁷ Survey of 1402 adults conducted by LifeWay Research in 2008.
- ¹⁸ Matthew 28:19
- ¹⁹ Acts 2:1-4
- ²⁰ Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Hebrews 10:24-25
- ²¹ Matthew 16:18
- ²² John 14:6



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