

APPENDIX SIX

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Christendom, clericalism, church and context: finding categories of connexion in a culture without a Christian memory

In New Zealand and Australia, like all western countries, involvement in institutional religion, measured by such figures as church attendance, has been showing a steady and fairly relentless decline since the beginning of the 1960s. In Australia, 40% of the population in 1961 claimed to attend church at least monthly, a figure which had declined to 24% by 1980 and 20% by 1999ⁱ. Weekly church attendance was calculated at 10%. New Zealand figures would appear to be very similar, although data is more difficult to find. 40% of the primary school roll were enrolled in Protestant Sunday Schools in 1960ⁱⁱ and with the addition of those involved in Roman Catholic churches a figure of 40% for attendance once a month would seem reasonably accurate. Certainly by 1998 it was identical to the Australian figure of 20%.ⁱⁱⁱ I have estimated weekly attendance to be about 20% in 1960. Again by 1998 it was identical to the Australian figure of 10%.^{iv} These figures are similar to patterns of decline in Britain from 18% to 7.5%^v and Canada from 55% to 22%.^{vi} Even in the USA, often seen as immune from these trends, it has fallen from 49% in 1958 to 40% 2000.^{vii}

It is not my purpose in this paper to endeavour to explain this decline. I did this in a paper published last year.^{viii} To summarise my position briefly. For a considerable period of time this decline was explained by the secularisation thesis which, under the influence of leading sociologists, declared that as society became increasingly modernised religion would eventually disappear. However the thesis has had a hard time of it over the past 20 years, and Peter Berger, one of the leading proponents, said in 1998 that this was the “one big mistake” that he made in his career,^{ix} and his latest book is called *The Desecularisation of the World*.^x Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in their recent book, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*^{xi} title one of their chapters, “Secularisation, R.I.P.” and it is now hard to find sociologists who still hold to the secularisation thesis in the sense of the ultimate demise of religion.

What has emerged in more recent research done in western countries is that despite the fact that the church has been experiencing serious decline, people have continued to remain overwhelmingly religious. An article in *American Demographics* on religion concludes that “Amid the crumbling foundations of organized religion, the spiritual supermarket is on the rise... Numerous surveys show that Americans are as religious as ever – perhaps even more than ever.”^{xii} Similarly in Canada, where church attendance is at levels much closer to that in New Zealand than is the US, the leading researcher of religious trends declares that “Belief in a supernatural dimension of reality is widespread... and shows no sign of abating.”^{xiii} In Britain, research by David Hay through Cambridge University on the spirituality of non-church goers found in 1987 that 48% admitted to a form of religious spiritual experience. In 2000 his *Soul of Britain Survey* found 76%. Australian researchers state that “the myth of Australia the secular society needs to be put aside” when 85% believe in God and two thirds say they pray, half that number once a week or more.^{xiv} It is more difficult to make the same kind of absolute statements

about New Zealand because the research data available is much less. The most helpful, the Massey ISSP Survey^{xv} carried out in 1991 and 1998, indicates if anything a slight increase in religious believing. For instance certain belief in God was indicated by 31% of people, up from 29%; belief in life after death was up from 57% to 60%; and 30% of people indicated they prayed several times a week, up from 22%.

What all this means then is that in New Zealand, as in all western countries, despite declining levels of church involvement, we have not seen the gradual extinction of religious believing as the twentieth century ran to its conclusion. This has created the paradox of a highly spiritual culture yet declining involvement in organised religion. In other words it appears that people who are seeking spiritual experience and meaning in their lives are not finding it presented in a form that meets their values and aspirations in what the church has continued to offer. The thesis I have been developing is that this has occurred because while the values, attitudes and styles of the surrounding culture underwent a profound change beginning with the counter culture of the 60s and coming home to roost with a vengeance in the 90s,^{xvi} in what is now known as postmodernity, the church has continued to be shaped by a set of values, attitudes and styles that belonged to a previous era. As a consequence, whenever it has knocked on the door of the vast majority of the under 50s they have responded, no thanks I'm shopping elsewhere.

All this means that an increasing gap has grown between religious believing and belonging. While people are apparently increasingly concerned to nurture the spiritual dimension of life, find answers to questions of meaning in life, prepare for whatever happens at the end of physical life, they see organised religion in the form of the institutional church as being increasingly irrelevant to those issues. Increasing numbers are "believing without belonging".^{xvii} Sociologist Wade Clark Roof, in his most recent book, writes that "A decade ago these questions were raised by Boomers who felt at odds with the religious culture of the churches; today these same concerns are most likely raised by those younger, the Generation Xers. In either instance, it is less a protest of religion in the deepest sense than a response to institutional styles that are unfamiliar or seemingly at odds with life experiences as these people know them."^{xviii}

It is not hard to find theologians and sociologists who warn that the crisis confronting institutional religion in western countries like New Zealand is massive, if not terminal. However many Christians within the evangelical tradition argue that their experience does not match these kind of gloomy predictions and immediately point to all kinds of evidence to contradict them. It may be the case that the mainline church is facing crisis, but an evangelicalism enlivened by the fires of charismatic and Pentecostal renewal can point to plenty of evidence that contradicts this generally negative assessment. The success of the Alpha course; the surge of new ethnic churches; the growth of some large Pentecostal and charismatic churches; the rise in "born again" religion and growth of megachurches in the United States are all indications that a robust evangelicalism seems immune from the trend toward decline and secularisation afflicting more traditional forms of institutional Christianity.^{xix} I remain rather sceptical about such claims. Klaas Blockmuhl, an evangelical, said that Christians in general had given very little thought to the challenges posed by secularisation and that evangelicals were "often content if they add to their numbers even when the overall state of Christianity deteriorates."^{xx}

A significant factor in the rather unrealistic perspective of many evangelical leaders has been the focus on church growth. This movement operates by basically looking at churches that are growing, tries to draw out reasons for the growth of those particular churches, and then claim that if all churches would only apply these principles they could all grow. The problem is they have never really looked hard enough at either how the growth of those particular institutions fits in to the broader patterns of religious and cultural change in society, or at where the people coming into these churches have come from.

When we talk of the decline of the church it is of course somewhat problematical, as the rates of decline have been somewhat uneven. Steve Bruce, one of the few sociologists still committed to the secularisation thesis, summarises the general pattern when he states that when we talk of the decline of British churches we should more properly talk of the decline of liberal and mainstream Christianity, as we find a general pattern of resilience as we move from "left" to "right" across the Protestant spectrum. Conservative elements have generally survived the best and a number of groups have shown marked growth.^{xxi} When I began my research for my PhD I believed that by researching these kinds of churches, and finding what it was that made them

effective, it would help provide material that would be helpful for the church in New Zealand in understanding how to go about its mission. In large part that was my motivation. However as I gathered data, interviewed people and observed how the patterns in these particular churches fitted into the wider patterns of religious and cultural change I became less sure. While these churches have played a very important role in helping to maintain and conserve a vital and living Christian faith within an increasingly post-Christian New Zealand, I have become increasingly less certain that they will provide the models for effective mission to the growing percentage of New Zealanders who are genuinely nonchurched.

I was first put on to this line of thought by North American research, particularly in Canada, which indicated that the vast majority of those who were in growing evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches actually came from other conservative churches or were the children of church members. These made up around 90% of the total, 70% and 20% respectively. Only 10% came from outside of this churched community. The reason for the growth of conservative churches the authors claimed was because conservative churches had higher than average birth rates, did a better job of retaining children and attracted more people ready to switch churches. It was not because they were more effective in mission, as many conservative church leaders believed.^{xxii} Two further factors prompted me in this direction. One was reflection on my own experience as pastor of a Baptist church which grew rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s and saw a significant number of baptisms. On reflection I realised that the vast majority of those either came from other churches, or were young adults who had been brought up in church and were now returning after sowing their wild oats. The other was doing research on the church I am currently involved with, which is one of four case studies I am doing. This is a church which has grown from an attendance of under 100 in the 1960s to over 1500 by the 1990s. It has maintained a strong focus on evangelism. As I read through multitudes of church reports I found a repeated concern expressed during its time of most rapid growth in the mid 1970s through to mid 1980s: a concern that so many new people were coming from other churches, and a desire to see more “unsaved people” coming along and coming to faith. When descriptions were given of the kind of people being baptised it was obvious the majority of those came from churched backgrounds, as at the church I had led during the same period.

As a result of this I decided to research the backgrounds of those now attending the church. The results were even more marked than I had imagined. What it showed was that over 80% of those attending the church had been attending another church as adults before they came to this church. Of the remainder the majority had attended either Sunday School or youth group at this church or elsewhere, and only 3.9% came from a genuinely nonchurched background. Interestingly the largest group of attendees at this church, 33%, came to it from mainline Protestant churches. I then wanted to find out if this pattern was true of other churches that had experienced growth over this period. I researched 3 other churches that had grown significantly. A charismatic Anglican church, evangelical Presbyterian church, and Pentecostal church. The results were similar, with in all cases at least 75% having come from other churches and only between 2.7% and 4.0% having a nonchurched background. Interestingly with the Pentecostal church the pattern was similar to the Baptist church in that the largest single group were those from mainline Protestant churches, in this case 38%.

Since doing this research I have found the pattern is very similar in other western countries. Sally Morgenthaler in the US asks “How do we explain the growth of the megachurch? Simple: musical chairs – church hopping growth. And it represents more than 80% of the people who have come in our doors in the past decade.... The megachurch’s feeder system is the smaller church, and disgruntled believers who have quit their churches.”^{xxiii} In Canada additional research by Don Posterski and Irwin Baker has found that 5.5% of church attendees come from an unchurched background, and that there is no difference between mainline and conservative churches.^{xxiv} Finally in Australia the NCLS research has found that 7% of church attendees are newcomers, of which 4% are returnees to church life after a period of time away, and only 3% are actually involved in attending church for the first time. Again they find no significant difference between Pentecostal and Anglican churches.^{xxv}

These rather disturbing figures indicate a basic flaw in the logic of church growth thinking. This claims that the way to have effective churches is to look at those churches that are being successful (in terms of numerical growth) and then seek to copy what they do. It stands to reason

though that if most of the growth in growing churches comes from other churches then it is impossible that if all churches applied the same principles all churches would grow. The problem is that we have confused the growth of some churches with growth of “*the*” church. We have confused growing churches with being effective in mission. What has happened is merely a reconfiguration of existing church goers. Where people go to church has changed, and some churches have grown at the expense of others. In New Zealand in the 1950s the vast majority of the 20% or so in a church on Sunday went to either mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic churches. By 1999 the percentage in church had halved to about 10% and over half had moved to evangelical, charismatic or Pentecostal churches. True, some of these people had stopped going to church for a time, but it is a mistake to confuse the awakening of their faith for the first time as an adult, or the renewal of a lapsed faith (though both of these are to be celebrated) as effective mission to that large and ever growing percentage of New Zealanders who have never had Christian faith as part of their story and are therefore the genuinely nonchurched. If most of the growth of evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches in New Zealand over the past three decades has been from people out of mainline Protestant churches (as the research clearly indicates it has been), what will happen when that pool runs dry? Indications are that in New Zealand (as well as in Australia) the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches came to an end in the late 90s. Peter Brierley’s research indicates that in fact this has happened in Britain also and indeed world wide.^{xxvi} In the US. George Barna’s research indicates also that numbers of the boomers who moved across into megachurches in the 80s and early 90s are now drifting off disillusioned.^{xxvii}

It appears then that how we do church, and consequently how we communicate the gospel, only makes sense to those who have “church” somewhere in their history. The problem is this is a diminishing percentage of the population, so in the retail terms, increasingly applied to the church in a culture where everything is commodified, the market for church is shrinking rather than increasing. In 1960 as we have seen 40% of New Zealand children were enrolled in Protestant Sunday Schools, but by 1985 it was down to 11%. In Britain research indicates that only 14% of children have contact with a church during their childhood.^{xxviii} It would be surprising if the figures for New Zealand or Australia was much higher. The consequence of these changing patterns is that as one goes down the generations there is an increasingly diminishing percentage of each succeeding cohort attending. In the US the generation known as builders make up 10% of the population and 60% are affiliated with church. Boomers are 29% of the population and around 40% are affiliated with church. Gen X make up 28% and only 18% are affiliated with church. The generation behind them, sometimes known as millennials, make up 21% of the population and only 12% are affiliated with church^{xxix}, a figure very similar to the 14% figure for British children. In New Zealand, those aged over 50 make up 32% of the general population and 58% of those in churches. Those 40 to 49 are 18% of the population and 16% of the church attendees. Those aged 20 to 39 are 42% of the population but only 21% of church attendees.^{xxx} One of the most significant pieces of research I have seen recently was done this year among students in Dunedin by a person employed by the Presbyterian church to work in this area. What he found, with information obtained from all of the Christian groups and churches in Dunedin, was that out of the 23,000 students only 700 were involved in any way with them. That equates to 3.2% of the total. If this represents the future of the church in New Zealand it looks grim indeed.

I believe these rather sobering facts present many significant challenges for the church and I want to focus on two of these for the remainder of this paper: our understanding of conversion, and our understanding of the forms church life takes.

A significant area of research in sociology of religion since the 1960s has been trying to understand conversion. Johann Lofland and Rodney Stark^{xxxi} were the first to actually go and watch people convert to a new religious movement. Up until that point most scientific explanations saw conversions as an attempt by individuals to address the deprivations they felt. What Lofland and Stark found was that attachments lie at the heart of conversions and that conversion therefore tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments, and is a process rather than a sudden event. Since then many studies have found the same to be true in an immense variety of religious groups around the world. Thus in looking at how people make religious choices, Stark and Finke, propose that in making those choices “people will attempt to conserve their social capital [interpersonal attachments] and so under

normal circumstances most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate.^{xxxii} This then explains why children usually adhere to the faith they were brought up in. By doing so they protect their relational and kinship ties. Research shows that most people who are in religious organisations have stayed within those in which they were raised. Darren Sherkat has studied religious orientation and participation among baby boomers and finds that “traditional socialisation factors have a dominant influence on future religious beliefs and participation... that radical changes in religious orientations or behaviours will be uncommon, and that individuals will follow the beliefs and patterns of participation established by their parents and religious groups... Stated in terms of theories of religious commitment, religious desires and understandings are learned through social ties.”^{xxxiii} On the basis of these patterns some have applied social learning theory, widely used in psychology, as an explanation of how religious commitments are made. This emphasises the role of observational learning and the modelling of behaviour, suggesting that socialisation occurs when important cultural agents model and reinforce certain attitudes and behaviours.^{xxxiv} It seems clear then that basically people in western countries are socialised into the faith, and that very few are to be found in churches who have not received a basic understanding of Christian beliefs and behaviour during their upbringing as children or adolescents, or both.

In the light of this, how are we to understand the process of conversion, something that has traditionally been so central to conservative, evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. Again I think that sociology provides some helpful insights. A number of researchers on conversion prefer to use the term “alternation” rather than “conversion” when discussing some kinds of religious transformations.^{xxxv} In most cases the use of the term “alternation” recognises that some religious changes in people’s lives are significant, but they are not full blown conversions. Rather, they involve the integration of a series of elements that result in less disruptive life changes than defined by conversion. In fact a general conclusion from the social psychological literature is that the nature of personal transformation is rarely radical enough to qualify as a conversion.

The term “alternation” was originally suggested by Peter Berger to refer to the possibility that “an individual may alternate back and forth between logically contradictory meaning systems.”^{xxxvi} Berger preferred the term “alternation” to the more religiously charged term “conversion.” Richard Triviasano, however, has suggested that conversion and alternation be used to refer to two quite different types of transformation.^{xxxvii} He defines conversion as the negation of a former identity. Conversion is a radical and fundamental shift in identity that results in clear changes in values, ethics, morals and lifestyle behaviours. Alternation, on the other hand, implies some linkage and continuity between the past and the present. The ensuing identity and lifestyle grows naturally out of its predecessor.

This distinction is I believe helpful in understanding the kinds of transformations or changes that people undergo. In alternation a supportive network and an ideological framework is already present. In conversion, a whole new world is entered; the past no longer has a direct bearing on the present. Conversion is non-cumulative. Alternation is cumulative. Our analysis suggests clearly that most of what is reported in church growth stories and counted in “conversion” statistics is alternations rather than conversions. An additional difficulty is that in much church growth literature conversion and recruitment are confused in the focus on gaining new members. Since most come from within “the tradition,” rather than outside the church, very few have actually been converted. As a consequence, particularly within the evangelical tradition, we need to rethink the metaphors and symbols we use to describe the kind of changes we are calling people to do and the kinds of commitments we are asking them to make. We have used the language of dramatic conversion to describe what is in reality either a consolidation of some existing identity a person has, or a reaffirmation of their previous identity,^{xxxviii} maybe after a period of experimenting with some alternative identities. This has deluded many church leaders into believing they have been seeing a constant stream of “new converts to Christianity” coming into their churches, when in reality they have been witnessing some significant milestones in the ongoing journey of those who were already in the fold of faith. It has made us feel comfortably successful and hidden from us just how difficult the real challenge of seeking to convert people to the faith who have never been a part of it.

At the beginning of this paper we suggested that in western culture religious believing increasingly had become separated from religious belonging. Historically orthodox faith has seen Christianity as having both dimensions. Faith needs to be communally expressed, it has both

social and cognitive dimensions. In our examination of religious commitment and conversion we have suggested that it can be explained largely in terms of socialisation. Sociologists claim that faith is both socially transmitted and socially maintained. If this is so then it is clear that the critical challenge that we face is, not how to find better explanations of the faith, a sharper apologetic and more polished presentation, so that people through understanding might come to believe. Nor do we need to radically change the nature of what we believe in order to make it more palatable to people, as liberalism attempted to. The rapid decline of most liberal churches clearly indicates that is not the critical issue.

This focus on belief is part of the legacy of the enlightenment with which we are still shackled. A number of thinkers have argued that the church in the west, in both its evangelical and liberal forms, tied its coat tails to, and was basically shaped by, the values of the enlightenment. As the church generally resists change, rather than engaging positively with it, it has continued to hang on to this paradigm much longer than the rest of the society in which it exists. Scottish theologian John Drane suggests that churches are “the last modernist, Victorian bureaucracies that are left.”^{xxxix} One of the strongest illustrations is the whole evangelistic crusade movement that reached its peak in Billy Graham. For Graham the gospel was reduced to a matter of individual belief and conversion a matter of a rational choice. It was buying into the beliefs of Christianity, clearly and logically presented. So it became “Steps to peace with God” or “The Four Spiritual Laws”. People were asked to “only believe.” In a culture where people still belonged within a basically Christian community, and had social networks that reinforced those beliefs, then making a commitment to affirm or consolidate those beliefs which were already a part of their “ideological framework” was relatively easy. Many responded, as was demonstrated in the large crowds and high number of responses during his 1959 Crusade in New Zealand. However as the culture changed from the beginning of the 1960s, as baby boomers moved out of church in increasing numbers, the social networks that maintained a sense of belonging were fractured. Thus when Graham returned to New Zealand in 1969 the social connections to church, the sense of belonging was much weaker, and so crowds were considerably smaller and responses dramatically less.

Research by sociologists amongst baby boomers and their religious journeys^{xl} indicates quite clearly that the reason the majority left church was not to do with disagreement over belief, but rather a disengagement from the way they were being asked to belong. In other words, the forms in which belonging was expressed and the behaviours they were asked to engage in, became increasingly disconnected to the style and forms in which they expressed their belonging and behaviour in other areas of their life. It became irrelevant. For all the talk about church change and renewal, for all the energy expended, the ways in which we belong have remained fundamentally unchanged over 40 years of the most rapid change in human history. Eddie Gibbs, Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, suggests that the “popular models of church today, such as the “megachurch” concept, the “seeker church” and the new “cell” church model are only tactical attempts to breathe new life into old structures.”^{xli} They may make church more appealing and attractive to those who already belong or have recently departed. They still though have a form of life that is increasingly distant from, and irrelevant to, those who are one, two, three or even more generations removed from the church, as the majority of those in countries like New Zealand, Australia and Britain now are.

If conversion comes about primarily through socialisation, as we have suggested, it indicates that belonging needs to happen before believing can occur. Without a social connection it is unlikely to happen. Hence the critical challenge we face. How do our churches become the kinds of community to which those outside may make come kind of connection, and therefore might possibly someday end up belonging, and so eventually come to believe? I think there are three key areas of challenge with which the church in countries like New Zealand and Australia, need to grapple: the shadow of Christendom; the stranglehold of clericalism; and the idolatry of church. Let's look at each of these in turn.

The Shadow of Christendom

The forms of church life that exist today have been shaped and formed by existing for eighteen hundred years in what has been known as Christendom, a period where western culture and

society was shaped by a Christian understanding, with the church a significant player in determining the values and culture of that society. While that state began to break down in the nineteenth century, it still continued to at least be given lip service until the second half of this century. What has emerged in the west since the end of the second world war, and particularly since the “cultural revolution” of the sixties,^{xliii} is a society whose values and culture are no longer shaped by a Christian understanding. The church meanwhile has continued to maintain forms, values, language and rituals that come out of that framework. These are intensely meaningful and helpful to those brought up within that church (or Christendom) culture, and it is their concerns that largely shape what churches do. However they are meaningless (when they can actually be understood) and irrelevant to the vast majority of those brought up in post sixties western culture. Hence the diminishing involvement in churches, as we have seen, amongst Baby Boomers and even more so among Gen Xers. Most of the attempts to renew, or build new kinds of churches, are still largely determined by the inherited forms and patterns of the past. A case in point that illustrates this is the huge emphasis still placed on coming to worship on Sunday as the primary point of commitment for Christians. Sunday as a special day for worship was a product of Christendom. In the post Christendom culture in which we live it is just another day of the week for increasing numbers of, particularly young, New Zealanders, and for many attending a church service is not possible with work, family or sporting commitments. Yet for so many churches it is still the only real option offered. Or take what happens in services. Shaped by our Christendom heritage the main fare is worship in the form of corporate singing and listening to a 30 or 40 minute monologue, with no opportunity to interact. Where else in our society do we attempt to create a sense of belonging and community in this way?

We need to see new forms of church developed that are not shaped by the values and forms of Christendom but by a genuinely mission encounter between the gospel and culture of 21st century New Zealand. My belief is that these cannot be developed by those of us who have lived in the church for thirty or twenty or maybe even ten years (and so are already shaped by the inherited culture) but must be developed by those who have been brought up in the context of that culture and who have come to faith out of it. In other words we need to change from a patronising “come” mentality – this is what we have developed to meet your needs – to a “go” mentality, where we seek to sow the seed of the gospel in the lives of communities of people outside of established churches and see what new forms and shapes that new life creates. This of course raises all kinds of issues of authority and control and so brings us to the second point.

The stranglehold of clericalism.

Fundamental to Christendom is the distinction between clergy and the laity. “A professionalized cast of Christians, with its own hierarchical gradations, is separated from other Christians by various forms of ordination and induction.”^{xliii} While the markers of this separation may have changed, from “priest” to “senior pastor,” from “Roman tunic” to “blue suit and white shoes” and from “confessional” to “corner office,” it is still kept firmly in place. Everyone knows who calls the shots and who gets the money. As we have seen one of the core value changes of the sixties, was a deep seated anti-institutionalism. Roof, writing about this in a religious context, notes in his long term research that “Boomers in great numbers questioned religious authority when they were growing up and have remained somewhat distrustful of institutions even as they had aged.”^{xliii} While many contemporary churches endeavour to disguise any signs of hierarchy and talk a language of tolerance and “permission giving,” to outsiders they appear dominated by hierarchies and deeply concerned over issues of control. In most churches whether something is allowed to happen or not, whether it is some new venture by young people, or a new ministry that someone wants to begin, permission has to be sought from the appropriate authority before it can begin – usually in the end the “man” at the top. In a culture which encourages you to do your own thing and follow your own dream people bristle at this kind of control over what often seem to be fairly minor things. Often people suspect the real issue is that the leaders are afraid of losing control of what people think or do. One of the values that has become central in our culture is that people resent being told what to do by others and want to have a say in decision making. Most innovative and growing companies achieve this by devolving much decision making down to small groups and teams. In most churches, however, there is still a small and central decision

making body dominated by the minister, staff, vestry or elders. Feeling they have no say in what is happening, increasing numbers of thinking church goers are drifting off, while, given the postmodern suspicion of control, few are attracted into an organisation that smacks of this kind of culture of control.

As we look for new forms of church life, so we need to look for new forms of ministry that are non hierarchical, inclusive and open, forms which will loosen controls in church life and free up resources to be used in helping people rather than supporting and meeting the needs of the institution.

The idolatry of church.

I recently talked with someone who had just begun as the pastor of a church. He had spent his first period of time meeting with people in the church and asking them how they viewed the church at the moment. What he heard repeatedly went something like this: "I am just absolutely flat out and stressed out at the moment. My job is taking about 50 hours a week, my wife is working a fairly pressured job and the demands of the children both in their education and leisure activities just seems to increase all the time. And all I ever hear from the church is they want more. We should be supporting their programmes more. We need to be giving more." That perspective is not unique to that church. It is a refrain I hear repeatedly from people who are married with significant work and family commitments. I believe that one of the problems we face today is that the local church has become an idol. This is a consequence of the church growth and church management approaches which have interpreted the gospel in terms of what happens to the church. It becomes the focus and centre of attention. A church leader in Canada^{xiv} told me "We keep asking the wrong question. We keep asking what is the right form for the church. We should be asking what does it mean to be an authentic follower of Jesus today – and the church should take its form out of that." It seems that so often today our preoccupation is with the church as an institution instead of living out the gospel. We become focused on keeping the institution going, on making it bigger and better, on what is happening at church, inside the institution. It becomes idolatrous, and in the end any idol takes from life rather than gives life. Research on church leavers indicates that has been the experience of many,^{xvi} and those looking on from the outside say I don't want to have any part of that.

The gospel is not primarily about building churches, it is about living in the world with a spirituality shaped by gospel values. The local church exists in two modes: gathered and scattered. It is gathered when we meet together to worship corporately, to encourage and disciple each other so that when we are scattered in the world we can authentically live as Christians and so bear witness to the gospel. Jesus is primary, the church is secondary. The problem is we have made the church in its gathered form all pervasive and forgotten that it loses its rationale if it is not primarily resourcing its members for their life when it is scattered. When this happens people say, as they are in increasing numbers, it is simply irrelevant to my life. What is desperately needed is a whole change of perspective about "church" as an institution (in other words when it is gathered) that actually puts it in its right perspective. Rather than the church in this sense demanding that people serve it, it should be seeking to serve people by resourcing them so that they can live as authentic followers of Jesus in the world, at work, at home, in education or in leisure and so point others to him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described Jesus as "the man for others," the one who was willing to give away his own life that others may live. The church that goes by his name is called to follow his pattern and give away its own life that others may live.

For the church to be the church in New Zealand and Australia in the twenty first century I believe these are three of the major issues with which we need to wrestle. What will the church be like when it manages to break free of the shadow it has inherited from its form in Christendom, is no longer dominated by the control of its leadership and rather than demanding its members serve it, in fact seeks to serve them so can live their lives in the world as Christ intended. Peter Brierley, the key researcher on the church in Britain, and a deeply committed church person, said to me in an interview that "I believe we are entering a time of churchless Christianity." What he meant was not that Christianity will no longer exist in communal forms, it inevitably must if it is to survive let alone thrive, but that the forms of Christian community that it will take, the way

belonging is expressed, will bear little resemblance to “church” as we have known it. I don’t know exactly what it will look like, but I do believe it will be vastly different from the form of even the most innovative of those churches regarded as contemporary. Roof who we saw earlier claims that the absence of Boomers and Gen Xers from churches is less a protest of religion in the deepest sense than a response to institutional styles that are unfamiliar or at odds with their life experience, suggests that three key parameters will be that it “privileges open discussion, shared experiences and attention to spiritual development.”^{xlvii} Those qualities seem a good place to begin.

One final helpful sociological insight comes from looking at the nature of “sets.” Sets refer to the way we group categories of people or things together. Mathematicians speak about a variety of different types of sets, and one helpful distinction is that between “bounded” or “closed” sets on the one hand and “fuzzy” or “open” sets on the other.^{xlviii} A closed set has a clear boundary, and things either belong inside the set or are outside it. Open sets on the other hand have no sharp boundary and categories flow into one another. In western society after the Reformation the church has often functioned as a closed set. It was clear who was in and who was out, there were a variety of boundary markers, and for someone to come into the set they had to come through these, often defined in terms of belief and the various rites associated with it. The usual institutional factors of hierarchy, control and sanction came into play. This model is most marked in the conservative, evangelical and Pentecostal stream. In an open set the focus is not on the boundary: who is inside and who is outside. Rather the nature of the set is determined by a focus on the centre, which holds the set together. In the case of the church this is obviously Jesus Christ. Thus the concern is not on who is in and who is out (institutional concerns), but rather whether people are moving toward the centre, Christ (gospel concerns). If conversion is regarded as a process, and belonging needs to be experienced before believing happens (and hopefully eventually behaving results), then it is obvious this model of church needs to be that which is embraced. The church is then an open community of people who are seeking to help each other in their life journey.

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ⁱ P. Kaldor, J. Bellamy, R. Powell, K. Castle, B. Hughes, *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1999), 22.

ⁱⁱ Figures Supplied by Children’s Bible Crusade, New Zealand.

ⁱⁱⁱ *International Social Survey Programme*, Department of Marketing, Massey University, 1998.

^{iv} This figure is supplied by both Alan Webster, Director of the New Zealand Values Study; “New Day Dawning: God’s Not Dead – Just changing gear” *Grace*, May 2000, 67 and Gordon Miller, World Vision church consultant, *Evening Post*, 5 June 2000, 5.

^v P. Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out: What The English Church Attendance Survey Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2000).

^{vi} R.W. Bibby, “Religion in the Canadian 1990s: The Paradox of Poverty and Potential” in *Church and Denominational Growth: What does (and does not) cause growth or decline*, D.A. Roozen and C.K. Hadaway eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 279.

^{vii} “Church Attendance”, *Barna Research Online* www.barna.org

^{viii} “Religion in a PostAquarian Age”, *Stimulus* Vol. 9 No. 1, Feb 2001, 12-21. The paper can be also be found at www.missionstudies.org/anzams. A summarised and more popular version of this can be found as “Believing without Belonging: church in the aftermath of the sixties” *Reality*, 43 Feb/Mar 2001, 19-24.

^{ix} P.L. Berger “Protestantism and the quest for certainty”, *The Christian Century* Aug 26-Sept 2, 1998, 782.

^x P. Berger, *The Desecularisation of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

^{xi} R. Stark & R. Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

^{xii} D. Climmo and D. Lattin, “Choosing My Religion”, *American Demographics*, April 1999.

- ^{xiii} R. Bibby, "Religion in the Canadian 1990s" in *Church and Denominational Growth*, D. Roozen and C.K. Hadaway eds (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 288.
- ^{xiv} G. Bouma and B. Dixon, *The Religious Factor in Australian Life* (Melbourne: MARC Australia, 1986), 167.
- ^{xv} *International Social Science Survey Programme*, Department of Marketing, Massey University, 1991, 1998.
- ^{xvi} "At the centre was a rebellion by the young against the values, conventions and authorities of the older generation and the emergence of a new cultural style – the "expressive revolution" – based on individual self-exploration and self transformation, informality, spontaneity and immediate experience." D. Hilliard, "The Religious Crisis of the 1960s: The Experience of the Australian Churches", *Journal of Religious History*, 21, No. 2 (June 1997), 210.
- ^{xvii} This is the subtitle of Grace Davies' book *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994).
- ^{xviii} W.C. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 56.
- ^{xix} An example of this is a letter to the Christchurch Press on Jan 15 2000, as part of the debate in the national media following the honours given to Lloyd Geering. The correspondent claimed that "As fast as people are leaving traditional churches they are flocking to Christchurch's largest congregations where a variety of contemporary styles of worship can be found." Unfortunately the facts simply do not support the claim.
- ^{xx} Klaas Blockmuehl, "Secularization and Secularism – Some Christian Considerations", *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 10/1, 1985, 50.
- ^{xxi} S. Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.
- ^{xxii} R.W. Bibby & M.B. Brinkerhoff, "The Circulation of the Saints: A Study of People who join Conservative Churches", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 12, No 2, 1973, 273-282. This study was followed up by further studies which confirmed the same patterns. See *JSSR* 17.2, 1978, 129-137; 22.3, 1983, 253-262; 33.3, 273-280.
- ^{xxiii} S. Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 26
- ^{xxiv} D.C. Posterski & I. Baker, *Where's a Good Church* (Winfield: Wood Lake Books, 1993), 53-54.
- ^{xxv} Kaldor, *Build My Church*.
- ^{xxvi} See Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out*. Also *A Global Analysis of the Christian Community to the Year 2010* (London: Monarch Books, 1998).
- ^{xxvii} E. Gibbs & I. Coffey, *Church Next: quantum changes in Christian ministry* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 150, 173.
- ^{xxviii} J. Finney, *Finding Faith Today* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), 11.
- ^{xxix} "Generational Differences", *Barna Research Online* www.barna.org
- ^{xxx} P. Kaldor, J. Bellamy, R. Powell, *Shaping a Future* (Adelaide: Open Book, 1998), A1-A2.
- ^{xxxi} J. Lofland and R. Stark, "Becoming a World Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective", *American Sociological Review* 30, 1965, 862-875.
- ^{xxxii} Stark & Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.
- ^{xxxiii} Dean Sherkat, "Counterculture or Continuity? Competing Influences on Baby Boomer Religious Orientations and Participation", *Social Forces*, March 1998, 76 (3) 1087-1115.
- ^{xxxiv} See A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1977). This is examined in the context of religion by B. Hungsberger, "Apostasy: A Social Learning Perspective", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1983, 21-38. Also W.C. Roof and D.R. Hoge "Church Involvement in America: Social Factors Affecting Membership and Participation", *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1980, 405-426.
- ^{xxxv} See for example: T. Pilarzyk, "Conversion and Alternation Processes in the Youth Culture", *Pacific Sociological Review* 21, 1978, 379-405; J.T. Richardson "Conversion to New Religions: Secularisation or Re-enchantment", *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, P. Hammond, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 104-123.
- ^{xxxvi} P. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 65.
- ^{xxxvii} R. Triviasano "Alternation and Conversion as qualitatively different transformations" 237-248 in G.P. Stone and H. Faberman eds., *Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970).
- ^{xxxviii} The terms "consolidation" and "reaffirmation" are used by Meredith McGuire, as two of three categories of religious transformations. The third is "radical transformation" which she describes as relatively uncommon today. Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1981), 64.
- ^{xxxix} J. Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 54.
- ^{xl} See especially Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* and *A Generation of Seekers* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). Also R. Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *After Heaven* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).
- ^{xli} Gibbs, *Church Next*, 168-169
- ^{xlii} Historian Arthur Marwick examines the sixties in 4 different western countries, and puts forward 16 factors which indicate the changes that took place merit the description "cultural revolution." A. Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)
- ^{xliii} Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International 1999), 95.
- ^{xliv} Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- ^{xlv} His church largely made up of Gen Xers had grown from 120 to 2000 in the past 6 years.
- ^{xlvi} See A. Jamieson, *Churchless Faith* (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).
- ^{xlvii} Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* 189.
- ^{xlviii} Most of the material here is derived from P. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 107-136.