

# The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 1:



Te Ope Whakāora

## The New Zealand Church

Dear John,

You ask how the New Zealand Church is doing - so here's a quick update.

### An Outsider's View

If you looked at the New Zealand Church as an outsider you'd be in for a few surprises.

Every weekend something amazing happens around New Zealand – 400,000 Kiwis stop what they're doing and head off to church. And it ties up half a day a week for many of them.

These Kiwis are an interesting group of people. Some are younger and some are older, and they come from many different ethnic backgrounds. But all 400,000 of them make their way to church – and many of the 100,000 other Kiwis who are interested in church, would gladly join them. It largely goes unnoticed, but half a million Kiwis still think church is a great idea.

Indeed, if you weren't familiar with church you'd wonder why so many still bother with it. The papers feature depressing stories of dying churches – with pictures of aged people sparsely spread through even older buildings.

But if you asked these Kiwis why they still go to church you'd get many different answers. Some go because they see their friends there. Many, perhaps most, go because they feel they meet God there in a way they can't at home. And many go because they think church helps them become better people – and more able to cope with life's great challenges.

These church attending Kiwis are by and large very caring people and love to share the good things they enjoy at church. So like many others, they're involved in a great variety of activities helping people here and overseas.

It's a curious thing, really, that so many bother with something that takes so much time, effort and money. So if you're an outsider, perhaps the only way you'll sort it out is to look in sometime and try to figure out what the attraction of church really is. Many churches will give you a great welcome!

### The New Zealand Church – An Overview

If you take your investigations as an outsider further, you'll make the following discoveries.

Nearly 100,000 people are at Catholic churches each weekend – and that attendance is now firming, especially in Auckland. The Anglicans, our most traditional mainline Protestant Church, are seeing the same trend – with attendances creeping up towards 50,000. The Baptists, who decades ago had a small attendance, are pressing towards the 45,000 mark. The Presbyterians, who saw horrendous decline from the early 60s, have also seen a firming trend in their most recent stats. Nationally, Pentecostal attendance is steady, although many individual congregations in the well-known denominations are struggling and even in decline. And attendance in the other denominations, which we can call "The Rest", is also steady.

So if you put all the attenders of all the churches together you find that, contrary to what we're led to believe, the New Zealand Church is holding up very well and doesn't show any sign of folding soon. In fact, the more traditional parts of the Church, which are meant to be in crisis, are making significant progress. Clearly, they find the present, apparently "postmodern" situation, a good environment for growing a church.

## **One Growing Church Profiled**

Having looked at the various families of churches, you could complete your research by looking at individual churches across the denominations – and here too you'd make some interesting discoveries.

You'd find many different types of growing churches, with different emphases – and a surprising number would be in the more traditional and mainline denominations. St Columba's Presbyterian, Botany Downs, where Andrew Norton is the minister, is one example.

I've preached a number of times over the years at St Columba's, and most recently just before I moved to my present work. Although it was the mid winter Sunday, when attendance would theoretically be at its lowest, I was greatly surprised.

Developments at the local shopping centre meant the congregation had had to move several kilometres down the road – to their splendid, new, purpose built, 500-seat facility. And this was my first visit to their new church.

They planned the church with great care, with a large foyer area, and an auditorium in which the worshippers would never be more than 14 rows from the front. But it was the services that impressed me most.

They get 150-200 at the first, traditional service – where only hymns are sung. But it's a traditional service with a contemporary feel about it – especially with the silent reflection time, as inspiring words and scenes move slowly across the screen (repeated without change in the second service). This was a very good service the day I was there.

But it was the second, contemporary, service attended by over 200 adults and 100 children that especially caught my attention. As I looked around, I saw people from a wide spread of ages and races. We sang carefully selected contemporary songs – which were all easy to sing and I noticed weren't particularly loud (Andrew later explained to me that he's convinced many Kiwis don't like very loud music - and I may get him to explain this some time).

But as I looked around at the people during the service, and later preached, I could see that they were having a profound experience of God and were passionate about worshipping. Indeed, one of the people who'd been involved in leading the first service told me that Andrew had said to her that it's all right to pass through seasons of doubt. So although she'd once drifted away from church, she was now back and moving forward on her faith journey. But as I later reflected on that second service, I felt it was the most outstanding service of any kind I'd seen anywhere in the previous year.

So as you did your research, John, you'd notice that there are many different kinds of churches that are growing significantly. But one of the surprises would be to find some of these in the more traditional part of the national Church.

## **Piecing it all together**

At the end of the day, the things that make churches grow have very little to do with whether they're Mainline, or Pentecostal, or Baptist, etc. Nor does it have much to do with whether they're congregationally or hierarchically governed. And it doesn't even have much to do with whether the service is more traditional or more contemporary. Both services are growing at St Columba's.

The overarching thing that makes churches grow is whether the people believe they're meeting God at church – meeting him so compellingly that it almost seems they could reach out and touch him. As they journey on in faith, “the pure, white glow of deep adoration” (as they said of the Scottish saint Samuel Rutherford's worship) becomes an increasing experience as they sing their songs of love and praise. And they crave the publicly read, explained and applied word of God; and treasure the relationships they develop with others attending the church.

Churches grow when the worshippers, at all stages of their faith journey, believe they're meeting God at church – and everything else, while important, is secondary. So over the years I've seen churches with almost hopelessly inadequate leadership grow significantly – or seriously deficient pastoral care, and lacking many other things we generally accept as essential (and they are important). But like some of the seriously deficient NT churches that grew so rapidly, they grow because the people are connecting with God at church and in other ways. And if we don't win here, we won't win anywhere. As a friend who's held prominent leadership positions, says, the average visitor decides in the first few minutes whether they're coming back. People crave to meet God; that's one of the reasons why many do bizarre things trying to connect with him. But he is known only in Jesus Christ.

Our number one challenge is to help people connect with God – and then follow him.

I hope this answers your question, John, and we'll be in touch.

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## **For discussion at Leaders' Meetings**

1. How well are we connecting people with God at church – and do we survey them from time to time to find out what they think of the services we put on for them?
2. What parts of our main church services do we need to work on - so that people from whatever background meet God at church and are changed by that encounter?
3. Does our church, like St Columba's, give people “permission” to live with doubt for a season – or do we feel threatened when they don't at first accept all our views?