



## Mitchelton Presbyterian Church

### Growing Followers of Jesus ... beyond Christendom

Phil Campbell

Maybe you've had a vague sense of unease for some time but you don't want to admit it. But stop a minute and look around. Australia is no longer a "Christian" country. While past generations of church-goers could comfortably assume they represented mainstream Australia, these days fewer than 1 in 10 Australians regularly attend church. And the numbers are shrinking fast.

The most recent National Church Life Survey shows an overall decline in church attendance of 7%. The Catholic Church has hemorrhaged most dramatically, with a drop of 13%, and the regular attenders are almost all over 50 years old. The Uniting Church has dropped 8% in the last five years, and the Presbyterian Church, 3%.

Christian "values" are disappearing too. While most people once turned to the church to celebrate rites of passage, like births, deaths and marriages, that's no longer assumed. Marriage itself is out of vogue, with a 10% rise in the number of children born outside wedlock in the past decade. According to Morgan Research, there was a 2% decline in marriage rates over the five year period from 1998. According to the Courier Mail, "When Queenslanders do get hitched (about 20,000 a year), the majority opt for a civil wedding rather than a church service. Civil ceremonies make up 57.3 per cent of the big day."

The notion of a shared base of agreed "Christian values" and shared public traditions in other areas is also in decline – despite a rear-guard action from some politicians, "Christmas" is under attack from multiculturalism, and "Easter" holidays face extinction. Charity organizations are struggling. According to Dr Stephen Judd, Chief Executive of The Hammond Care Group, "The loss of a sense of community has left us with two key entities: the State and the Economy. Increasingly in this post-Christian world, it has become difficult to argue, within the 'language' available in our culture, why anyone should sacrifice one's interests for the sake of others."

In all of this, we're following the decline of Christendom in Europe and even the USA. The shared heritage of public Christendom is all but over. The first draft of the new European Union Constitution made no mention of God. Church attendance in most European countries is less than five percent. Less than half of the British public can name any of the four New Testament Gospels. Almost a third of all Dutch no longer know why Christmas day is celebrated. Only three percent of the British public regularly attend church, and of these, half are black—black Britons—who only make up about five percent of the population. When asked in a recent poll to nominate an *inspirational figure*, 65 percent of Britons named Nelson Mandela, 14 percent picked Prime Minister Tony Blair, 10 percent said 'none of the above', and six percent said Britney Spears. Only one percent named Jesus Christ as an inspirational figure.

That's no accident. Robert Manne, professor of politics at Melbourne's La Trobe University, sums it up this way. "During the period we call the '60s one of the deepest movements in the West was the war that was waged against old authority, on almost every front. In this war, one of the most important sources of authority which was questioned and, to a large extent, undermined, was that of the church."

Deconstruction of old notions of authority, and of *the sacred*, has been relentless and systematic. Sadly, the "establishment church" has responded with a public display of disunity, moral ambiguity, corruption and decline. Any casual observer of current affairs would surely typecast "the church" as a declining group of social conservatives, unwilling to grant equal employment rights to homosexuals, but desperate to cover up decades of child sexual abuse.

In the Melbourne Catholic archdiocese, which since 1996 has used an independent

**Overall church attendance in Australia is down 7%... And Christian values are disappearing**

commissioner to investigate sexual abuse complaints, about 200 victims have been dealt with, involving 25 offending priests. The Anglican diocese of Brisbane has received 157 complaints since February 2002, of which 119 involved allegations of child sexual abuse. Meanwhile, in the USA, a recent report revealed that 10,667 children were allegedly victimized by 4,392 priests from 1950 to 2002. Apart from the sheer magnitude of suffering these figures represent, the impact on public perception is immense. In the space of one week (March 1-March 8, 2004) the Google Internet News Service carried 729 individual news items containing both the keywords “priest” and “abuse.”

In short, respect for the “traditional church” has hit an all-time low. The church is seen as an archaic “authority” structure, pushing an outdated morality on the community while failing to observe even more fundamental standards itself. Our message is unclear, and our methods are outdated. We need to take stock.

### **The Missional Church**

Identifying similar trends in the United States, Tim Keller, Senior Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, says that the church must switch into “missional mode.” While traditionally we have seen the mission field as “over there” – distant gospel efforts in non-Christian cultures – we need to realise that the non-Christian culture is now all around us. The mission field is right outside our front door. We need to regain a foothold in our own communities, with a message that is both clearly explained, and clearly demonstrated. We need to both proclaim “Christ crucified,” and visibly demonstrate sacrificial love to a fractured community. We need to realise that our message has not been understood – and stop assuming that our community has any “residual knowledge” of Christian doctrine. We need to demonstrate the beauty of sacrificial service modeled on Christ. We need to be warmly welcoming. We need to be different.

### **Some Elements of a Missional Church**

#### **1. Use Plain talk**

Tim Keller points out that, although there was a time when biblical technical terms were well-known both inside and outside the church, those days are over. “In a missional church, terms must be explained.” Here are some ground-rules from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York which have instant application to our Australian context.

##### **a) Avoid “Tribal Language”**

The missional church avoids 'tribal' language, stylized prayer language, unnecessary evangelical pious 'jargon', and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.'

##### **b) Avoid We-Them Language**

The missional church avoids 'we-them' language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs, and dismissive, disrespectful comments about those who differ with us

##### **c) Avoid Unrealistic Sentimentalism**

The missional church avoids sentimental, pompous, 'inspirational' talk. Instead we engage the culture with gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates. Humility, irony and realism are appreciated by our culture. The gospel adds joy to the mix.

##### **d) Always Talk as if Non-Christians are Present**

The missional church avoids ever talking as if non-believing people are not present. Keller says, “If you speak *as if* your whole neighborhood is present (not just scattered Christians), eventually more and more of your neighborhood will find their way in or be invited.”

Importantly, Tim Keller notes that “Unless all of the above is the outflow of a truly humble-bold gospel-changed heart, it is all just 'marketing' and 'spin.'”

#### **2. Enter and re-tell the culture's stories with the gospel**

In the context of changing social values, it's easy to withdraw, or simply criticize. However, Tim Keller argues that in a missional church preaching and communication should always assume the presence of skeptical people, and should engage *their* stories, rather than simply talking about our "old times." That means entering our culture, and showing sympathy toward, and deep acquaintance with the literature, music, theater, and movies of the existing culture's hopes, dreams, 'heroic'

**Our missionfield is not “overseas” - it's here! The church must switch to missional mode.**

narratives, and fears. We need to work hard at understanding what makes people tick, and showing how the gospel interacts with contemporary issues and needs. The content of our public preaching, and our overall “discourse” and language, must connect with real, everyday people. We need to be both sensitive and well informed.

### **3. Create Christian community which is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.**

In a missional church, Christian community must go beyond self-sustaining, nurturing relationships to create and embody a 'counter-culture,' showing the world how radically different a Christian society can be. Keller argues that we must demonstrate key differences in the culture-dominating areas of sex (avoiding both contemporary idolization or traditional fear), money (promoting radical generosity) and power (modeling servant leadership both within the church and towards the world).

“In general,” says Keller, “a church must be more deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice than traditional liberal churches and more deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion than traditional fundamentalist churches. This kind of church is profoundly 'counter-intuitive' to observers. It breaks their ability to categorize (and dismiss) it as liberal or conservative. Only this kind of church has any chance in the non-Christian west.”

### **MPC as a Missional Church**

Mitchelton Presbyterian Church is uniquely positioned as a “missional church” in 21<sup>st</sup> century Brisbane. If our world is “post-Christian,” it’s certainly “post-denominational” as well. We can’t simply expect a steady stream of “Presbyterians” to keep turning up at church. We need to work hard at engaging our community with the gospel. We need to be well focused and clear; we need to be friendly, and welcoming. We need to be an open community, always ready to encompass all kinds of people.

While we hold to the doctrinal statements of the Westminster Confession of Faith, our “face to the world” must be more engaging and direct. Like Paul, who could say he knew nothing while he was with the Corinthians other than “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” we need to be clear that we are presenting *Christ* rather than an outdated system of authority structures. Our meetings must be welcoming and understanding to the outsider, avoiding jargon, flowery language and “in-group” references. Our engagement with one another must be authentic, and characterized by a love that is active and practical rather than simply “sentimental.” In summary, our motto states both what we are, and what we’re doing... “Growing Followers of Jesus.” Our desire is to grow *as* followers of Jesus, and to grow *new* followers of Jesus.

Further, MPC is uniquely positioned on Brisbane’s North-side to nurture a network of like-minded churches and train future “missional leaders.” While we are by no means a perfect church, and face the same challenges as every other church, we have had some experience of working in “missional mode,” and have seen the benefits. Newcomers without any church background are being incorporated into our church family, finding a ready welcome, and a clear pathway to understanding the basics of the gospel. Because of our experience, we can offer help, encouragement, and some resources, to other churches in our area who are willing to join us in the goal of “growing followers of Jesus” within the same parameters. Our vision is to nurture a network of clear, Christ centred churches. It’s spelt out in detail in our formal “mission statement,” while our key characteristics and distinctives as a missional church are included in our “Core Commitment” statements.

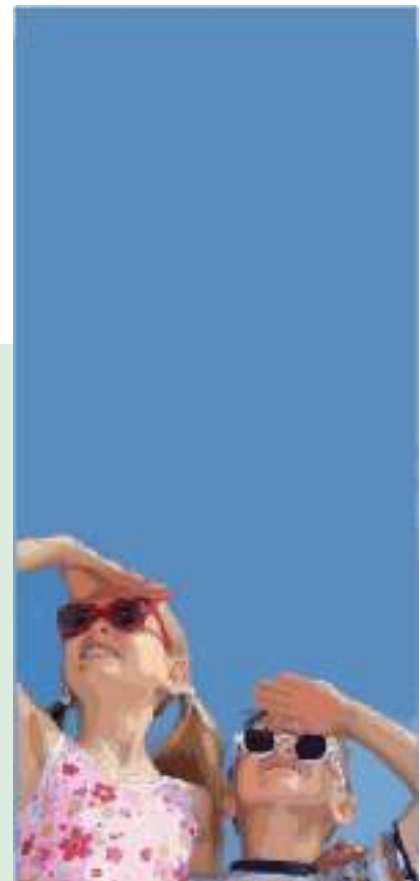
### **Our Vision**

In prayerful dependence on God, our vision is to impact Brisbane’s northside by creating a network of radiant churches, where people hear the message of Christ clearly explained, are regularly exposed to clear, Christ-centred Bible teaching, and see the transforming impact of God’s Spirit demonstrated in lives of love. We will enthusiastically nurture the growth of this network with whatever resources, means and opportunities God provides.

As we nurture this network, our goal is to be a radiant church ourselves. We are committed to growing together as a loving, Bible-centred community. We aim to effectively call people to be reconciled to God through his Son Jesus Christ, and so be transformed by his Spirit.

We will always be welcoming, open and flexible, so the good news of Jesus will be made clear through us. We will love our neighbours, work constructively in the wider church, and contribute strategically to the growth of God’s Kingdom around the world. We will seek to play a vital role in raising up, training and supporting Christian leaders who will model and reproduce our vision and core commitments elsewhere, for God’s glory.

**The message of Christ must be clearly heard, and the love of Christ must be clearly seen in us.**



## **Our Core Commitments**

We are committed to sharing the good news that God's Son, Jesus Christ, gave up his life for the sins of the world, and rose from death to rule the world. (1 Peter 2:24, John 3:16,36, Philippians 2:9-11. )We are committed to praying to God our Father, in dependence on his rule over all things, and we seek to pray according to His will. (Rom 8:15-16, Matt 6:10, 1 John 5:14-15)

We are committed to developing the fruits of God's Spirit, setting our minds on what his Spirit desires, and seeking the gifts of the Spirit that are good for building up the church. (Gal 5:22-26, Romans 8:5, 1 Cor 14:12)

We are committed to clear, Christ-centred Bible teaching that leads to trusting in Jesus as Saviour and obeying Him as Lord (2 Tim 3:14-17, Col 4:4)

We are committed to regularly meeting together to encourage one another to worship God in lives of loving, sacrificial service. (Rom 12:1-2, Heb 10:24-25)

We are committed to caring well for all age groups within our church family. (1 Tim 5:1-4)

We are committed to engaging ordinary people outside the church with the person and claims of Jesus (1 Peter 2:11-12, 3:13-17; Col 4:5-6)

We are committed to church activity which is welcoming and understandable to newcomers (1 Cor 14:23)

We are committed to serving together, generously using the gifts, abilities and resources God has given, for His glory. (Eph 4:11-13, Rom 12:6-8)

We are committed to actively encouraging those who give themselves to full-time gospel ministry, and supporting those in training for future ministry. (2 Tim 2:2, Heb 13:17)

## **Some distinctive passions of mpc ...**

Some distinctive passions of our church that we hope will be clearly evident are -

- the way we strive for clarity and quality in Christ centred bible teaching
- the way we seek to provide wise, loving and practical pastoral care in the context of a loving and supportive church family
- the way we work at welcoming, loving and integrating newcomers, whether churched or unchurched
- the creative and enthusiastic way we work towards providing exceptional youth and children's programs
- the way we prioritise the training of others for effective, full-time gospel ministry and share in the cost and sacrifice of ministry training.