

# **Against the Tide: Spreydon Baptist Church 1960 to 2000**

## **ABSTRACT**

Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch New Zealand has shown a remarkable pattern of growth over four decades. This article outlines the story of the church and seeks to identify key reasons for its growth and development. Links are made to historical and sociological trends as well as to the leadership and style of the church. Conclusions are drawn as to what the Spreydon experience might suggest for the rest of the church in New Zealand and the West.

## **Context and Method**

This congregational study is one of four as part of a doctoral research project<sup>1</sup> which looked at how social and cultural changes in New Zealand from 1960 onwards have impacted on Protestant churches and how they have responded to these. Establishing a pattern of overall decline, the thesis demonstrates that within this decline there have also been cases of churches experiencing significant growth. It examines the secularisation thesis, which argues that few people are now interested in religion, and finds it an inadequate explanation of decline. While church going, or religious belonging, has de-

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Ward, 'Losing My Religion: Church decline, growth and change in New Zealand 1960 to 1999, with particular reference to Christchurch,' unpublished PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2003.

clined significantly, religious believing has in fact shown considerable persistence. By examining research in societies similar to New Zealand (Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia) and applying the findings to New Zealand, it finds that the most significant cause of decline has been the impact of the rapid social and cultural changes that have occurred since the 1960s. The wider research identified an ability to adapt to these changes along with a commitment to a strongly orthodox theological position as being critical to its success. Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch was identified as a congregation which had thrived by combining a strong commitment to orthodox beliefs while changing to adapt to social and cultural changes.

### **Introduction**

On December 12 1866 the Lincoln Road Baptist church was formed by a group of farm labourers meeting in a small sod house in Lincoln Road, on the southern fringe of Christchurch. The church grew steadily over the next 30 years, and in 1881 a church building was constructed on the corner of Lyttelton Street and Lincoln Road. In 1895 John (J.J.) North arrived to be the minister, and under his leadership growth was rapid so that by 1900 there were over 300 worshipping. In addition during North's time new churches were commenced by the church in neighbouring suburbs Hornby and Riccarton. After his ministry ended in 1903 the church experienced a slow and steady decline, with one exception. From 1932 to 1938 a returned missionary Ernest Goring was the minister, and the church membership grew from 57 to 91, with 35 new members coming in through baptism.

By the early 1930s the area of Spreydon, through which Lyttelton Street passed, was being planned as a large new housing area. J.K. Archer, a retired Baptist minister and President of the Canterbury Baptist Association who had served as Mayor of Christchurch from 1925 to 1931, approached the Spreydon church about starting a children's ministry in Lyttelton Street. It was commenced in 1933 in West Spreydon School, and in 1936 a church building was opened on land purchased opposite the school. The Lyttelton Street Baptist Church was officially formed in 1938. Despite the rapid growth of the suburb the church never really became strongly established with membership never getting above the mid thirties. By 1946 the Sunday School, which numbered 60 in 1941, had dropped down to about 30.<sup>2</sup>

In 1947 with both churches struggling it was decided by the Canterbury Baptist Association to recommend that a union be formed and in 1948 they combined to create what is now the Spreydon Baptist Church on a new site on Lyttelton Street, about halfway between the existing churches. Buildings were moved from both sites to the new land. The next twenty years were not really marked by great vitality and growth, and the membership stayed at around 60. Divisions from the previous congregations continued and a sense of 'them and us' existed. This period through the 1950s and early 1960s was a time of growth and great optimism for the church in New Zealand, but not for Spreydon.

The Billy Graham crusade in 1959, the high point of this period of church vitality, appeared to have some impact, with eleven people being baptised in that year, the only time the

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics for this early period come from *The Journey: 125 Years of Spreydon Baptist Church* (Christchurch: Outreach Press, 1991).

number reached double figures since World War II. This did not come through into increased church membership. The 1960s was a time of organised evangelistic missions for Baptist churches in New Zealand, and Spreydon was regularly involved in these. In 1963 an Irish evangelist, Michael Perrot, ran a mission over a week. In 1964 it was the turn of the Baptist Dominion Evangelist, Roland Hart. Then in 1965, the church was involved with many other Baptist churches in the 'Trans Pacific' Crusade,<sup>3</sup> holding a mission with Gene Hawkins from Texas. In each case there are reports of people being 'brought to the Lord,' but they did not seem to translate into new members or increased numbers at worship.

By 1968 there were only 67 members, many elderly. However, the youth group, which barely had double figures in 1965 had grown to over 30 under a new youth leader and there were 55 children involved in Sunday School. These two areas were to provide the basis on which Murray Robertson was able to commence to turn the fortunes of the church around.

### **1968 to 1973**

The church, realising it needed to change, called a young man, Murray Robertson, as pastor, although a number, particularly of the older women were quite opposed, feeling he was 'too young, too inexperienced and too academic'.<sup>4</sup> However a group of men in their thirties felt that if they didn't do some-

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<sup>3</sup> This involved simultaneous missions in New Zealand Baptist Churches by a team of pastors from Southern Baptist Churches in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Interview 27/04/00. The case studies in the thesis included a number of interviews of either existing or former members of the congregations. In order to preserve anonymity, interviews are identified by the date on which they occurred.

thing different the church would just die, and managed to sway the meeting that they needed to do more to meet the needs of the young people. Robertson had gone to Edinburgh to train for the Presbyterian ministry, because of the liberal stance of Knox College in New Zealand. A change in his view on baptism led him to seek ministry in a Baptist church on his return. He had been given recognition by the Baptist Union of New Zealand, after spending some time as an interim pastor at Spreydon. In calling him the membership had declared that it was 'aware of the need for unity and is prepared to work and seek God's guidance to that end.'<sup>5</sup> There was no great sense of optimism in the wider Baptist movement about the prospects and some felt it might be a good place for Robertson to find his way in the New Zealand Baptist church scene and prove his credentials before moving off to something worthwhile.<sup>6</sup> There was a general feeling that perhaps it was time for the church to be closed down. Robertson, though, had different ideas. Asked by one of the church leaders 'Young man what makes you think you can do any more here than anyone else has done?' He replied 'I'm going to preach the word.'<sup>7</sup> This was more than youthful idealism, but expressed a deeply held conviction that has been central to his ministry at Spreydon.

For his first few years the services, and indeed church life, were fairly traditional in the typical Baptist sense. The services were of the 'hymn sandwich' type<sup>8</sup> with a choir and

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<sup>5</sup> Church Minutes, 14/11/68.

<sup>6</sup> A comment to this effect was made to me in personal conversation a number of years later by Hugh Nees, who at the time was the General Secretary of Baptist Union of New Zealand.

<sup>7</sup> I have heard this story repeatedly from many sources since first arriving at the church myself in 1970.

<sup>8</sup> The traditional Baptist service of this period consisted of 4 hymns spaced throughout the service, with the various other elements (such as

pedal organ. In these early years a great deal of the initial growth could be attributed to the excellence of Robertson's expositional preaching which was delivered in a refreshingly conversational style which connected well with the baby boom generation entering their twenties and beginning to search for something different in an approach to church life. On the boat trip back from Edinburgh Robertson had read a book by the great German post war preacher Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble With the Church*. Thielicke's conviction was that the trouble was the quality of the preaching and so he committed to following Thielicke's advice and preach to the people he hoped would come. In the evening there was an evangelistic focus and some more contemporary and innovative music began to be used as well as use of 'testimonies.' One further innovation, typical of many churches of this time, was the beginning of a coffee bar after church, called 'Probe Inn,' where talking together over coffee and food, testimonies and youth oriented music provided a place for the 'new generation' to meet. Gradually an increasing number of young adults in their late teens and early twenties, including a growing number of students and nurses, from nearby Princess Margaret Hospital, began to arrive as well as some young families. What appears to have been very significant in this early growth of the church was the wide contacts that both Robertson, and his wife Marjorie had, through their previous involvement in the student Christian scene as well as in the incipient charismatic renewal movement. Repeatedly in interviews, stories were told of people coming to Spreydon at this time because they were recommended by someone who had known the new minister or his wife and they would 'get good teaching there'. This was

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prayers, offering, bible reading, children's talk and sermon) 'sandwiched' in between. In a communion Sunday there would be 5 hymns.

particularly so for young people coming to Christchurch for study or training.

Two other important developments in these early years helped to establish a platform for the future shape of the church. In 1969 Bruce Stewart, the director of Evangelism for the Baptist Union, visited and evangelism was set as a priority for the church. Then in 1971 after a further visit by Stewart and the introduction of 'Evangelism Explosion'<sup>9</sup> by the local Anglican vicar, Rev. Dick Tripp, a programme of evangelistic home visitation was begun. This came to involve many people. As one of those who was involved put it 'Murray had a way of making you feel you didn't have much choice.'<sup>10</sup> This helped to set in place the intentional evangelism that has always been a high priority of the church in the following thirty years. It also resulted in a number of conversions and in 1971 baptisms again exceeded double figures, a figure that has been maintained every year since. In the same year a visit by Gordon Coombs (pastor of the largest Baptist church in Christchurch, Opawa) to speak at a deacons' retreat led the following year to the first missionary convention with Norman MacIntosh<sup>11</sup> as the speaker. This was the beginning of the focus on world mission that has also remained central in the life of the church.

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<sup>9</sup> This was a method of home visitation to enquire of people their spiritual condition and by a series of questions to present the gospel to them. It was based on a programme developed by a Presbyterian minister in Florida, James Kennedy, and became widely used when it was published in book form by that name. Tripp had visited Kennedy's church and had first hand experience of the programme.

<sup>10</sup> Interview 11/04/00.

<sup>11</sup> The New Zealand Director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship, and one of the most highly respected mission leaders in New Zealand in the post war period.

In the next two years a visit by well known English Anglican speaker and author David Watson and involvement with Christian Advance Ministries<sup>12</sup> laid the foundation for a move into charismatic renewal. Robertson himself had been involved in the charismatic movement in Wellington during his student days there and he continued to be involved in a personal way with some people in the wider Christchurch renewal scene.<sup>13</sup> He had, however, seen too many 'churches blown apart'<sup>14</sup> by division over the 'gifts of the spirit', above all prophecy and speaking in tongues, to feel confident about introducing it into the local church. He felt that Watson's visit in particular and Christian Advance Ministries demonstrated how it could be done without dividing the church. By the end of Robertson's first five year period of ministry in 1973, atten-

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<sup>12</sup> Christian Advance ministries was an interdenominational organisation set up to promote charismatic renewal in the historic denominations: it included Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist representatives. Each of these denominations also had their own organisations to promote this.

<sup>13</sup> Wellington was quite a centre of early charismatic growth in New Zealand, with the Lower Hutt Assembly of God, under Frank Houston, being a place visited often by many young Christians in the area. Houston was later to move to Australia and found the Hills Christian Centre in Sydney, which by 1990 was the largest church in Australia and centre of the Hillsong music industry. Christchurch by the late 1960s was another important centre of charismatic renewal particularly with the growth and influence of the Christchurch New Life Centre under Peter Morrow. The history of the latter is outlined in B. Knowles, *New Life Churches of New Zealand 1960-1990*, a PhD thesis for the University of Otago, 1994. Much of this is contained in B. Knowles, *New Life: A History of the New Life Churches of New Zealand 1942-1979* (Dunedin: Millennial Publishing, 1999), esp. 95-100. The more general context is examined in a forthcoming University of Canterbury PhD thesis on charismatic renewal in Christchurch, by Michael Reid, parts of which I have been able to read.

<sup>14</sup> A phrase frequently used by Robertson to describe the often divisive effects of the movement.



dances at worship services had more than doubled and church membership increased 60% to be over 100.<sup>15</sup> One consequence of this growth was that with so many new people coming, increasingly the divisions of the past became irrelevant. No one cared whether you came from Lincoln Road or Lyttelton Street, or indeed had any idea there were originally two separate churches.

It was not all smooth sailing however and a number of the older established people found some of the changes being introduced rather difficult to take. As one of them expressed it at the time: 'It's good to see all these people coming along but I just can't cope with a lot of what goes on in the services.'<sup>16</sup> In particular for older evangelical Christians a sense of stillness, quietness and reverence in church had disappeared. This was perhaps epitomised in one of the dramas done in a church service which used the word 'bugger'. A loss of quietness was bad enough but when reverence seemed to be disappearing it was too much for some and a few people left and went elsewhere. For some, also, the focus on mission and reaching new people was they felt at a cost to their own personal and pastoral needs being neglected, adding to their discomfort.

### **1974 to 1983**

The period from the middle of the 1970s to the mid 1980s was marked in church life in New Zealand perhaps more than anything else by the charismatic renewal which swept through

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<sup>15</sup> Figures for the rest of this essay come from either the church's own records, or from the Baptist Union of New Zealand *Year Books*, which contain an annual statistical data listing a variety of data about individual churches.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 12/12/98.

many churches,<sup>17</sup> and seemed to be particularly appealing to baby boomers. The Baptist Churches of New Zealand were affected by this in a greater way than any other existing denomination and Spreydon, while a somewhat late starter, was soon to be at the leading edge of this movement. Further impetus was given to it by the visit in 1974 of an English Baptist leader of charismatic renewal, David Pawson, who helped provide clear biblical teaching on the dimensions of the spirit that fitted more readily into an evangelical theology. The influence of English charismatic leaders like Watson and Pawson was very significant in Baptist churches in New Zealand, as their evangelical biblical understanding and teaching, and more reserved and controlled manner, helped shape a form of renewal that was more acceptable to the somewhat reserved, conservative evangelicals who made up the major constituency of those churches, than the more experiential and emotive forms that emanated out of North American Pentecostalism. Also significant were the Christian Advance Ministries Summer Schools, especially the 1975 school held at Lincoln, which pushed Robertson forward as a leader of charismatic renewal in New Zealand.

The first consequence of this, and a direct by-product of the 1975 Summer School, was a change in the nature of the church services with the development of charismatic praise and worship. This was led by a musical group and singers instead of an organist, and used contemporary songs, a growing number written by members of the church, instead of traditional hymns. Spiritual gifts, including tongues and prophecy began to take their place in worship services and elsewhere in church life, and a focus on personal healing through prayer

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<sup>17</sup> Most denominations in this period had reports commissioned and tabled investigating it.

developed. These developments increased the dissatisfaction of those who were struggling with the increasing number of changes, especially for those who felt uncomfortable with 'Pentecostalism', and again a few moved off elsewhere. One of these leavers explained: 'We had difficulty with the worship. People with arms in the air, eyes closed, highly emotional. Then when tongues and prophecy began to emerge it was too much. Also we held that Pentecostalism was basically evil.'<sup>18</sup> The few losses though, as in the early period, were much more than compensated for by the increasing numbers of new people coming into the church.

The other significant development was the decision taken in 1976 to close down many of the church's week day meetings and ministries and to reform the church around small groups, meeting in people's homes for bible study, praise and prayer. This was not initially a program instituted by the church, but rather something that had developed informally in the previous year. When it was obviously being effective Robertson decided it would be a good model for the church to follow. They were called house churches and their leaders were referred to as house church pastors. Initially there were six of these and this group of pastors along with Robertson became the effective leadership of the church with the deacons, the traditional decision making group in Baptist churches, being relegated to a secondary role. Eventually, as the number of house churches grew, a smaller group was selected out to form the church eldership, and this has remained the major decision making group since.

The house churches, which initially averaged about fifteen in each, often grew to be quite large with more than forty

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 12/12/98.

meeting in the one house, dividing up into smaller cells for prayer and discussion. Many people still look back on this era of house churches as a time of support, sharing, community and relationships that have never been rediscovered. 'They had a very highly developed sense of acceptance and belonging and a great deal of material sharing of goods went on.'<sup>19</sup> Many people also saw their involvement in these as being very significant in their personal growth in faith. Eventually in 1981 these were changed into home groups with an upper limit of about fifteen, and in addition ministry groups for evangelism, music and drama were begun to run alongside them. These two changes in the style of worship and development of small groups made it possible for many more people to participate in the ministry of the church and to exercise their gifts in its life, either in the Sunday worship or in the small groups. 'You discovered gifts, abilities and passions you never thought you had.'<sup>20</sup> These were important changes to connect with a generation of young adults wanting more participatory, less controlled, and more informal and expressive forms of church life as well as music that connected with their own culture. It was part of the process of contextualisation that was to make Spreydon such an effective church from the mid 1970s through to the mid 1980s

As the church grew, other people were added to the pastoral staff. The first was Bill Gray, taken on part time in 1974 with particular responsibility for the evangelistic visitation still being carried out with a team of thirty involved. When he went to pastor the Oxford Baptist Church in 1976, Paul Askin was taken on, part time at first, then full time in 1977, with particular responsibility for the house churches. The visitation pro-

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<sup>19</sup> Interview 26/04/00.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 26/04/00.

gramme, which was proving less effective, was brought to an end. After Askin came Gerald Tisch and Adrienne Calvert, the latter beginning a craft group, the first foray into community ministry. In 1980 Lionel Stewart and Brian Andrew joined the pastoral team.

This was the period of most rapid growth in the life of the church. In the five years from 1975 to 1980 membership trebled to reach 486. Some of this growth came from conversions of people from outside of the wider church community. Robertson noted in a letter to church missionaries in 1976 that they had had a number of adult conversions. 'Most of the adults who accept Christ here would be in their twenties. A number have had no church background whatever although we have had quite a number of Catholics and ex-Catholics being converted.'<sup>21</sup> However a constant concern expressed in these letters over this period of time was the fact that most of the new people coming into the church were from other churches. 'We do have a real concern that far-and-away the majority of the people coming are still those coming from other churches and we have a real need to see more growth through people coming to the Lord.'<sup>22</sup>

Most of the people coming into the church were from one of two sources. Many were from mainline Protestant or Catholic churches, who had had an experience of 'new life' in the Spirit, perhaps for the first time in their lives, and could no longer find the life they wanted to share in their old church. These people, and their children, helped to swell the numbers being baptised, which reached above seventy a year in 1981, 1982 and 1983. Because all adults being baptised tend to be

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<sup>21</sup> Murray Robertson, 'Pastoral Newsletter,' September 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter', April 1985.

regarded as conversion growth in Baptist churches, it is difficult to assess how many of these were actually genuine conversions from a non-churched background. The other large group of people were from other conservative evangelical churches, usually either other Baptist churches or Brethren Assemblies, who were closed off to the charismatic dimension. Often, after attempting to introduce this emphasis in their own churches, people left and moved to churches that were 'moving in the Spirit'<sup>23</sup> – usually either Baptist churches or some of the new independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches such as the New Life movement or Christian Fellowships. The most significant example of this came in 1977, when the largest Baptist Church in Christchurch, Opawa (with a membership of 425, still significantly larger than Spreydon) closed itself off to the renewal.

One of the reasons we have gained quite a lot of new folk over the holiday period is that unfortunately another Baptist Church in Christchurch has adopted a very intransigent attitude towards the charismatic renewal and this has polarised people within the church to such an extent that over the last few months quite large numbers of the charismatic folk have left. We have had over 40 come here who have put their roots down and a large number of others who are left floating around at the moment...<sup>24</sup>

In addition there was over this period growth by conversions.

Along with this big influx we are continuing to see some genuine growth through people finding the Lord. I think in New Zealand there are three kinds that we have found.

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<sup>23</sup> This phrase became part of the in house language of those involved in the renewal movement, as a way of describing churches where renewal was happening without using the word charismatic.

<sup>24</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter', February 1977.

The first are English immigrants who have come out to New Zealand looking for a better life only to find New Zealanders are not much different from those back home so they seem to be open to new ideas, and there are young couples who have been setting up house and just having a family and starting to wonder what life is all about and the third group would be young single adults, some who have had a nominally Christian background and felt there must be much more to it, and others are coming out of the drug and Eastern religion scene. At least these are the responsive groups that we are finding.<sup>25</sup>

It is probably worth thinking more closely about the background of these people. The likelihood is that in all three groups a good proportion of those who came to faith had a church background in the past. The Kiwi young adults in all likelihood were largely part of that half of New Zealand children in Sunday School in the early 1960s and English immigrants would be coming out of an even more church culture, even if largely nominal. While there is no historical data kept to indicate this, my own research among 567 current attenders indicated only 3.9% had no previous church involvement prior to their involvement as an adult at Spreydon.<sup>26</sup> By reflecting on the kinds of people coming into Spreydon during this period it helps us see that a lot of the growth in charismatic and Pentecostal churches during the heyday of the renewal, was a consequence of people leaving other churches to come to those churches where they felt 'spiritual life' could be experienced.

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<sup>25</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter,' February 1977.

<sup>26</sup> This figure of 4% was also true for those who were baptised at Spreydon. Only 6 out of 134 had no previous church background. This figure came from a survey carried out during a morning service at Spreydon in 2000. Similar figures were found in 3 other charismatic/Pentecostal churches which had grown over this period in Christchurch.

It also seems that a considerable amount of the conversion growth was also in effect reconversion or the 'coming home of prodigals' who had left the church during their later teenage and young adult years. Unfortunately at Spreydon, as with most Baptist churches during this period of time, the background of those being baptised was not recorded, meaning much invaluable data has been lost. The only way to recover any perspective is through oral history and the kind of survey mentioned above.

Wherever they came from, the growing size of the church created accommodation problems and, by 1973, over 200 people were cramming into a church designed for 120. In 1977 a new church building was completed and opened debt free. Seating about 400 it was comfortably full within two years so as a consequence the first move toward planting a daughter congregation was made. In 1980 the two house churches in Halswell began meeting together for worship on Sunday mornings. In 1983 they began worshipping on Sunday night as well and became an independent church. The church began to have an impact beyond its own life in a number of ways. Leadership conferences were held and the church began sending ministry teams off to other churches in New Zealand and eventually Australia. It also began supporting churches in Roxburgh and Alexandra, which were pastored by Paul Askin and Tom Martin from Spreydon. By 1983, the membership of Spreydon, even with those leaving to form the Halswell Church, had reached nearly 600 and the total number of people worshipping on Sunday was over 1000. It was a very dynamic time in the church life. 'At that time everyone in church had a consciousness of God doing something in their lives.' 'Every-



one seemed to have a story. Healing of memories, a marriage put together or whatever.<sup>27</sup>

As so often in the story of Spreydon there also developed some tensions underneath. This time it was over a change in the direction of the house churches. These had been fairly loose and highly relational under Paul Askin's leadership. When Lionel Stewart took over they were seen to move in a more controlled and study oriented direction. He 'produced common studies which all had to do. A kind of doctrinal orthodoxy imposed itself over the effervescent and diverse spirituality.'<sup>28</sup> A consequence of this was the departure of some key leaders in charismatic renewal in the church. This is a pattern that has happened every few years where, with a change of direction, a group become dissatisfied with the changes, feel they are not being heard, and some leave, either noisily as in this case, or just drift off quietly. In some cases the leavers end up being involved in other churches, but in a number of cases end up pursuing their life and spiritual journey outside of institutional Christianity.

Even with the planting of Halswell the church building was obviously too small to accommodate all of the congregation in one service so a number of home groups from different areas of the city began to meet together for worship on a cyclical basis in 1982. These were in the neighbouring suburbs of Addington, Somerfield, North Spreydon, South Spreydon, Hoon Hay and Rowley, as well as the more distant university suburb of Ilam. This was the beginning of the move towards the area congregation model of church life. Another pragmatic factor in pushing in this direction was the arrival of 'carless'

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<sup>27</sup> Interviews 11/04/00.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 26/04/00.

days in 1982 and the felt need to have church accessible within walking distance.<sup>29</sup> Further impetus for this move came from David Pawson's second visit in the same year where, basing his message on Israel's occupation of the land, he urged New Zealand churches to 'move out and occupy the land' by a similar strategy of dividing into many smaller groups. His model for this came from the rapid growth of the house church movement in Britain. Additional impetus came from the church planting movement which was developing strength in this period, based on Peter Wagner's dictum that 'church planting is the most effective evangelistic method under heaven.'<sup>30</sup> A number of prophecies in the life of the Spreydon church itself also encouraged a move in this direction.

One other significant long term development began in this period. The church had increasingly become involved in overseas mission in the ten years since the first missions convention in 1972. In 1982 the guest speaker was Viv Grigg, who had been living among the urban poor in Manila for the previous seven years. He spoke of 'God's deep heart concern for the poor and needy of his world', and that God wanted his people to be involved not just in their own communities but to be his hands and feet to 'preach good news to the poor, to pro-

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<sup>29</sup> This was a result of the increased cost of fuel and anticipated shortages because of the low overseas exchange rate of the New Zealand dollar. It was a way of limiting fuel consumption, by people nominating one day a week in which their car would not be used. With most New Zealanders using a car for work, Sunday became the most convenient for many.

<sup>30</sup> During this period of time Bruce Patrick was the director of Home Mission for the Baptist Union of New Zealand. He embraced church planting as the most effective way to see more New Zealanders become Christian, and often used this quote of Wagner's in promoting his strategy. See for example, 'Multiplication: The Key to Growth,' in B. Patrick ed., *New Vision New Zealand* (Auckland: Vision New Zealand, 1993), 247-273.

claim freedom for the prisoners and to bring recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed.'<sup>31</sup> Grigg had created a new mission organisation, 'Servants to Asia's Urban Poor' to carry out his vision of people living and working in the slums of large Asian cities. In 1983 Colin and Janet Harrington had gone to Manila to help develop a base there and by the following year another six had left from the church to join them.<sup>32</sup>

### 1984 to 1993

By 1984 Gerald Tisch, Brian Andrew and Lionel Stewart had all left Spreydon to work elsewhere. Change in how Spreydon was structured as a church was thus able to be done in conjunction with a new staff. The decision had been made in 1983 to focus intentionally on the development of area congregations. Four reasons were given for this: first was the pressure of numbers on the facilities of the church; second they were seen as a strategy for mission in the light of the growth by division principles so current at the time; third it was felt they would provide the opportunity for the more meaningful relationships that could be found in congregations with a maximum size of 150 to 200 people than in the larger setting of 500 to 600 people; and finally it would provide opportunity for people to use and develop their gifts in worship, leading and

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<sup>31</sup> Quoting the words of Jesus in Luke 4, at the commencement of his ministry in that Gospel.

<sup>32</sup> This organisation is still continuing with a strong involvement in many Asian countries. A history of the organisation was written by Jenni Craig, a Spreydon member at the time, who was one of those who went to Manila. J. M. Craig, *Servant's Among the Poor* (Wellington: OMF Servants, 1998).

teaching through the much greater opportunities for participation.<sup>33</sup>

During 1984 the first two area congregations meeting regularly for worship on Sunday were established. Somerfield met at the Somerfield Community Centre under the leadership of Murray Winn; Addington in the local primary school, led by John McGowan. In 1985 another two were established when the Ilam group split into two. The Ilam congregation under Brian Broom and Howard Taylor met in the Ilam Primary School, adjacent to the University of Canterbury. With a number of students beginning to come it soon developed a focus on ministry to university students. A congregation in the neighbouring suburb of Upper Riccarton began meeting under the leadership of Ted Wiggins. The other area groups stopped meeting and became fully involved at the main congregation at Spreydon, or 'mother', as it was to become known. Two slightly different congregations were later added. A Community Centre had been developed under Graeme Reid and a group had begun meeting to pray and worship together out of that. Consisting mainly of former patients from the nearby psychiatric hospital at Sunnyside, it was felt they didn't fit well into the style of services in the other congregations so they began meeting at the Spreydon Church on Tuesday evenings. With over 100 attending it became one of the church's congregations, known as the Community Christian Fellowship. Then in 1987 Bryndwr Baptist Church, whose membership had dropped to below 50, asked Spreydon to take oversight of it, and it also became an area congregation.

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<sup>33</sup> These are outlined in a paper 'Philosophy of Ministry – Area Congregations' written by the staff member responsible for area congregations, Murray Winn, and formalised in January 1984.

Despite the enthusiasm with which the move was greeted, within a couple of years questions were being asked, especially by Robertson. The move had not led to any great growth or inflow of new converts. The main congregation at Spreydon lost a lot of its energy and spark. By the end of 1986 he was wondering whether the move was 'imparting a vision of smallness to people.' He was concerned to 'hear people talking often about feeling 'comfortable' in small congregations' and wondered if they were helping people avoid 'the uncomfortable experience of growth.' He also felt that by requiring the energies of the staff to be put into the congregations it meant their primary focus was on pastoral care, rather than on the specialist ministries needed to develop mission at the growing edge of a large church. In particular, for the first time there was no one on the staff whose primary focus was 'equipping and calling out of people in evangelism.'<sup>34</sup> This tension between the demands of congregations and need for specialist ministries, particularly in relation to staff resources, was an issue that was to be raised many times over the next few years.

I would want to make one strong affirmation and that is I believe God has led us into both models of the church that we operate. That is the large church built on specialist ministries and the mother church/daughter congregation model. I don't think the answer is a wholesale abandoning of either of these. What we have to do is to get them both to work so that the kingdom is being extended.<sup>35</sup>

A new way of developing leaders was introduced, with the congregational leaders and other new staff members being taken on as interns, spending four days a week working for the

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<sup>34</sup> These issues were raised in a report by Murray Robertson to the elders in February 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Robertson, 'Whither Spreydon?' report of July 1987.

church and one day a week studying with the local branch of the Bible College of New Zealand.<sup>36</sup> It was an initiative that was to anticipate a major trend in the training of pastoral staff in the 1990s, with a move to local churches developing partnerships with theological colleges in programmes that combined academic study with practical ministry experience. So far over twenty five people have been involved in training in this with the church. Some of these have stayed on at Spreydon as staff members or become involved in ministry in other ways in the church, while others have moved to other parts of New Zealand or overseas in pastoral ministry or involved in mission.

In 1987 the restructuring of the church was completed with the formal decision to close down the home groups and focus on mission to the local community. Home group involvement was declining and new leaders were not emerging. It was felt that asking people to be involved in running area congregations, which had developed a very participatory form of worship, as well as small groups and some form of community mission was too much.

For some the home groups were not missed and they found that involvement in the congregations, where attendances averaged between about 70 and 130, met most of their relationship needs and sense of belonging could be met. For others though there was a great sense of loss. 'I thought it was awful. I felt we lost something very vital when that happened.' 'I think we threw the baby out with the bathwater. There was no group to meet your own needs. So people got a bit strung

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<sup>36</sup> Developing out of this was the Bible College of New Zealand's Ministry Internship Programme, now one of the major providers of Christian Training in New Zealand.

out and burnt out. I think we lost something really crucial and never really recovered.<sup>37</sup> As so often, though, the church had a life that existed outside of 'official' policy directions and a number of groups simply continued meeting.

The main church at Spreydon continued to be comfortably full in the mornings, although with a somewhat older and more staid congregation, many of the younger and more creative people having moved into the area congregations. At night all the congregations came together for a combined 'celebration.' With the obvious problem of numbers these were moved to a local high school hall. Over this period of time the charismatic movement in New Zealand was significantly influenced by John Wimber and his teaching on 'signs and wonders' and 'power evangelism,' an influence reinforced by a 1986 visit and on subsequent occasions. Robertson himself had a profound 'power encounter' at the 1986 conference,<sup>38</sup> and become a keen advocate of the movement. The consequences of these movements was a focus on the 'power dimension' at these evening celebrations, with healings, exuberant worship and the then current fad of people 'falling under the influence' or 'slain in the spirit' as it was called elsewhere. For many this was a very exciting time, remembered with considerable affection. Despite this sense of a renewed stirring of the Spirit numbers in attendance were down in both morning and evening services.

Robertson's pastoral letters again provide an interesting reflection which has proved to be true.

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews 11/04/00.

<sup>38</sup> See his account of this. 'A Power Encounter Worth Laughing About,' in J. Wimber and K. Springer (eds). *Riding the Third Wave: What Comes After Renewal* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1987) 188-197.

...the overall attendance decline is not something peculiar to ourselves and it seems that a number of the larger charismatic and Pentecostal churches in New Zealand are experiencing the same kind of thing. You can't help wondering if we are at the end of some kind of an era of the years of easy growth... the years of having large numbers of people transferring to us from other churches is really over. It seems to me that with the renewal emphasis those who wanted to change churches have done so and that, from here on, if the church is to grow, it will have to grow because we win people for Christ, not because people simply turn up from elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

This note is a further indication that much of the rapid growth that occurred in charismatic and Pentecostal churches from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s<sup>40</sup> was in fact transfer growth from other churches, rather than that of people from outside the church community coming to faith. The depletion of this large pool impacted in negative ways on the growth of these churches in the 1990s.

The other major development of this period was the growth of the community ministries. The visit of Viv Grigg to speak at the missions convention in 1982 was a stimulant to involvement in helping the poor of Asia. The visit in 1986 of Jackie Pullinger (from Hong Kong, where she worked with drug addicts and street walkers) to speak at the missions convention provided the impulse to concern for the poor and

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<sup>39</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter,' April and August 1986.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Brierley found this same pattern of relatively rapid growth from the mid 1970s to mid 1980s, then slowing down, among Baptist Churches in Britain and in fact in the church around the world. He attributes it to the rapid growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements. See *Future Church: A Global Analysis of the Church to the Year 2000* (London: Monarch Books, 1998), 13-16, 20-23.



needy in the local community as well. A concern for this had begun earlier with the Community Help Centre and, as the church began to seek the 'will of God' for their future direction, believed they were being directed to close down the home groups and begin to dream as to how they could be 'the hands and feet of Jesus' in their local community. This was another factor in the decision to close down the home groups. They were seen as being 'inward looking' or even 'navel gazing' and the call now was to be engaged in mission. By early 1987, 50 mission groups were ready to start and out of these a whole lot of new community ministries came into being. In addition to the Community Centre, teaching work skills, running community ministries and operating a shop amongst the poor, these have included: a 'Kingdom Bank' which loans money at no interest and provides budget advisers to help restructure loan finance for those trapped in the debt cycle; 'Arahura', a Christian medical and counselling centre; 'Manakiki Tanga' operating clubs for at risk children from dysfunctional families, young people and pregnant teens; a series of homes by the 'Sarena Community' and 'Stepping Stones' to care for people who are being rehabilitated in the community following psychiatric or other illnesses; a Daycare centre for children. Other ministries to develop included a prison ministry, farm ministry and ministry to disadvantaged women.

While other areas of church life remained fairly static over this period it was in this area of ministries into the community that the real life and growth of this period occurred. The number of people who were in contact with and impacted by the life of the church in some way or another during a week increased quite significantly. There is a feeling though that the focus on mission was such that inadequate support and pastoral care was provided for leaders and people in ministry, a

situation exacerbated by the loss of the caring and support previously found in home groups. As a result a number of people were burnt out. 'We were leading one of those mission groups at the time and were told to run with the dream and had absolutely no pastoral support until we were burnt out and the whole thing blew apart and it took us five years of wilderness after that to find the Lord again.' 'I have heard that story from several people.' 'I was a young mum then and I could never make it to these mission groups and feeling like here I was coming to terms with little babies and I'm meant to be doing mission as well when I actually needed someone to share with and help me in this.'<sup>41</sup>

The development of this concern for justice issues, and for the physical and emotional needs of the poor, as well as their spiritual health, was unusual in a church focused about personal conversion and experiencing the power of the Spirit in the charismatic dimension. It completed the four dimensions that, as the church proceeded into the last decade of the century, have become integral to its life: the first was the importance of sound biblical teaching and preaching at its centre, Robertson's first focus; the second was a concern for mission, demonstrated in the development of evangelistic visitation as well as involvement in overseas mission; the third was the charismatic dimension of the power of the spirit, and place of spiritual gifts in the life of the church; the fourth this commitment to justice issues and concern for the poor.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Discussion in a group interview 11/04/11.

<sup>42</sup> The last three of these have been outlined by Robertson in an article published in *Transformation* as well as in several other places. The first point is my own addition from my observation of Spreydon over 30 years, and now acknowledged by Robertson as being central the whole

In church life however the bottom line is often to do with figures, especially of attendances and membership. These plateaued in this period. Total Sunday attendances over the period 1984 to 1993 showed only a slight increase, from an average of about 1200 to a little over 1300. In this ten year period church membership had increased by only around 30%, compared with 450% over the previous ten year period. In Baptist churches, as we have mentioned, the number of baptisms are often seen as an indicator of effective evangelism. Whereas in the previous ten years the numbers being baptised each year was invariably at least 15% of the current membership, they never rose above 10% in this period. Even in gross terms the actual number of people being baptised was significantly lower than previously. It could be argued that many of those baptised in the previous period were not actually new Christians, and that a much greater percentage of those baptised in this period were. There is probably some truth in this perspective, but the figure still did not give an indication that the church was being as effective in its present mode of operation as it had been previously.

On top of this a downturn in the giving meant that the church began to run into financial difficulties. There were too many salaries to be paid out of what was being given. In 1989 Robertson was speaking of the 'four barren years' in referring to 1985 to 1988. At the beginning of the 1990s a number of prophecies had been given about the tide changing. 'We have been having some very encouraging prophecies lately about the fact that we have waited a long time for the tide to turn

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way through. See 'Renewal Brings New Life,' *Transformation* Vol . 8, No. 4, Oct. 1991, 19-22.

here but it has now turned and that we are going to see the tide come in to higher levels than we have in the past.<sup>43</sup>

As the decade unfolded, though, the expected tide did not appear to be coming in. This began a period of much soul searching about how things were being done, and in particular the area congregation model. It was felt that the strategy of planting congregations was right but that there were issues about how they were doing things that affected their performance. These were addressed in a paper presented by Murray Robertson to the staff and elders in 1991 called 'Strategy, Tactics and Morale.' In it he saw the two key factors that had impacted negatively on what would otherwise have been a successful model. First they had started too many congregations too quickly and this had had a devastating effect on the morale of the main congregation at Spreydon which fell below 'critical mass'. This he felt very strongly personally, as it was the primary place he was involved. The second was the rapid turnover of staff in the congregations, with this provided by interns who left after they had finished training. The average length of stay was two and a half years and every time it changed attendance fell. In light of this it was decided to keep staff on beyond the training period and to provide staff leaders for all the congregations.

Two other issues were raised. One was the loss of the small group ministry which meant that newcomers were not being assimilated and often leaving after staying for a while. The other was the loss of creativity in the worship, which had become 'Vineyardised'<sup>44</sup> and was not addressing the real is-

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<sup>43</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter', March 1989..

<sup>44</sup> This was a term used by Robertson to describe the dominance in the music both of songs coming out of the Vineyard churches started by John Wimber, and also a style of worship modelled on their approach. This

sues of life for people. There was though a strong affirmation that the model of mother/daughter congregations was the right one. The paper ended with a belief that following this model they could reach a minimal goal of 1800 people worshipping on Sunday by 1997 (compared with between 1400 and 1500 currently) and optimistically 2300.<sup>45</sup> This follows an interesting pattern in all the reports made over this period. Despite the concern of lack of growth, low numbers of conversions or static attendances, an optimistic outlook based on a strong pragmatic belief that if only the system could be tweaked to correct the flaws then a return to the growth of the hey days could be again achieved. It is interesting how often a church of over 2000 is talked about, something that had still not been approached by the end of the century, and toward the end of 1999 a major focus in planning for the following year became how to get over the 1500 barrier.

By the end of 1992, though, a significant financial shortfall had led to ongoing revaluation of the model. Temporary relief was provided when three of the staff moved off elsewhere in early 1993, but despite the fact that attendances reached their highest point, often above 1600, the giving was still insufficient to support all that was being carried on.<sup>46</sup> So,

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meant the strongly local content in worship that had characterised Spreydon before this was now largely absent.

<sup>45</sup> The figure reached was actually 1434, only slightly up on the 1991 attendance.

<sup>46</sup> In October 1992 Robertson had reported that giving was \$1000 a month below budget. In May 1993 he reported that for the year so far the average deficit was \$400 a week, which was an improvement but would 'still leave a shortfall of \$20,000.' Then in November a paper distributed to church members titled 'October was a Bad Month!' he announced that giving for the month was \$1400 a week below budget. On top of that giving for missions was \$1800 below budget.

with construction on a new building beginning, it was decided to move towards becoming a cell church and to close down at least the majority, if not all, of the area congregations and move the worship back to Spreydon.

### **1993 to 1999.**

In 1993 these changes began to be effected. In August five recommendations put forward by Robertson were agreed to by the eldership and pastoral staff, and accepted at a church meeting.

- 1) The era of the area congregations is over. 2) We will develop the relational and discipling life of the church in small groups during the week. 3) We will deploy the staff of the church to ministries rather than congregations. 4) In the future we will plant intentional mission congregations. 5) We will move toward having multiple service options at Spreydon.<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the year the Upper Riccarton congregation had ceased to function and most of the people had moved back to Spreydon. Also during the year Ted Wiggins was taken on to the staff with responsibility for redeveloping the church on a multi-cell model and Murray and Marj Robertson left on an overseas trip that included spending some time in Singapore at Faith Community Baptist Church with Ralph Neighbour, the leading proponent of the cell church model.

The plan at this stage was not to become a church with just one congregation on Sunday morning, as was seen in the final two of the recommendations agreed to. It was the Area Congregation led by a staff member and focussed on a geographical area that was being abandoned. The intent was to

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<sup>47</sup> M. Robertson, 'Time for Change,' August 1993.

have a 'much greater diversity of... smaller alternative congregations that do not require a staff person to lead them... meeting on Sunday mornings and at other times.'<sup>48</sup> Somehow this initial vision got lost in the next few years and by the end of the decade nothing had developed.<sup>49</sup> This perspective appears to have been diverted by two factors: the difficult politics that followed in closing some of the other congregations and the move to follow the Willow Creek model of church,<sup>50</sup> which was much more strongly driven from the top.

In 1994 Addington and Somerfield were also closed down, although not as happily as Upper Riccarton had been, and a number of members from those congregations moved off elsewhere or dropped out of church life, rather than return to Spreydon. Dissatisfaction grew among quite a number of church members who were unhappy with the direction that was now being piloted. These issues were to continue to occupy the time and energy of the church leadership over the next three years, until the last of the area congregations, Ilam, became independent in 1997. Bryndwr left to become again an independent Baptist church, and Ilam, after consideration of it continuing as a mission congregation to students was finally rejected, also became an independent Baptist Church.

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<sup>48</sup> Robertson, 'A New Shape for the Church,' Feb 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Still in 1995 Robertson was stating that he saw 'other services developing in the future that have different emphases that complement what we are doing in the main services.' Robertson, 'Worship: Where Are We Headed?' March 1995.

<sup>50</sup> Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, led by Bill Hybels, had by 1990 become the largest church in the USA with over 15,000 attending. Having only commenced in 1971, during the 1990s it was to become, perhaps, the most influential church in the world in providing a model and resources for other churches to follow.

Another group of people, mainly drawn from the Addington, Somerfield and Spreydon congregations, wanted to set up a worshipping congregation as part of Spreydon in the Somerfield area. While this fitted with the concept of an alternative congregation there were relational issues that eventually led to the leadership rejecting the proposal, arguing that they had said 'no' to any model of area congregations. These factors created a considerable undercurrent of dissatisfaction with some people who decided to stay. By 1999 the issue of different kinds of congregations had begun to emerge again, with the youth, twenties and some mid-lifers wanting to explore some alternative styles of worship.

The opening of a new multipurpose gym in 1994 where worship was now held created a great sense of excitement and anticipation. This provided an ideal centre for the other major development in this period, the decision to develop Seeker Services, aimed at non-Christians, on Sunday nights. A group had been to a conference in Auckland to hear Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, which had developed a model using music that was understandable to unchurched people, very little worship, dramas that explored life issues and messages that addressed those same issues. It has proved very effective in building a large church.

Our Sunday seeker oriented services have been going from strength to strength. What is happening is a tremendous encouragement to us. Most weeks we hear stories of people who are coming to faith in Jesus through coming to these services. This is a far greater response than we would ever have dreamed of a year ago. It is so encouraging to see how many people really do invite their unbelieving friends along. It makes me realise how for years we haven't been doing much as a church leadership to encourage people in their day to day evangelism by giving



them a church service they could invite their non-Christian friends to. These are sobering lessons to learn. I remember about 18 months ago preaching a message about the resistance of western culture to the gospel. I am not sure I would preach the same message now. I am realising a great deal of what I had taken as hardness in people's hearts may in fact have been a difficulty in finding a foothold in getting into the church for those who are genuinely looking.<sup>51</sup>

For Robertson it meant a departure from the style of preaching he had always used, biblical exposition. The influence of Willow Creek in shaping the life of Spreydon was further heightened when a team from Spreydon visited Willow Creek in 1996, and has been ongoing with yearly visits by Bill Hybels, and other members of the Willow Creek staff. These seeker services seemed to reach their peak in 1998 with between 600 and 700 often attending, but since then have tended to stalemate and in 1999 to decline. It appears that while there have been people coming to faith through these, Robertson's analysis may have been a little too optimistic. Many of the attenders are visitors from other churches and most of those coming to faith have, as has been the case throughout the whole of the church's life over this period, a previous church background, either as an adult or, if not, as a child or young person. This is indicated both in the testimonies they give at their baptisms and by my own research on the background of current attenders who were baptised in the church.

As well as these two developments of cell groups and seeker services there has been a strong refocusing on reaching out into the community. It was felt that in the area congregation era too much energy went into what happened on Sunday,

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<sup>51</sup> Robertson, 'Newsletter,' October 1995.

with a diminishing focus on reaching the community. This period saw the development of a number of new community ministries. In addition there has been a focus on more intentional evangelism outside of the Sunday Services, with the use of the Alpha programme<sup>52</sup> and 'Contagious Christians',<sup>53</sup> a programme aimed at training church members in personal faith sharing. Alpha in particular has proved very effective in reaching people and helping them come to faith. Also important in this period have been the very rapid growth of the church youth ministry under the creative leadership of Dave Bates. Now as 'SYC' (Spreydon Youth Community) it has an identity all of its own, with a wide network of strands into the schools and community. Important also in attracting families into the church has been a highly creative and effective children's ministry, 'Kidz Alive', which has now begun after school and holiday programmes as well.

These new initiatives have certainly helped to refocus the church and produce a renewed sense of energy and vitality. They have given an appearance of life and growth, with people being baptised and becoming members all making their commitments in the one place instead of being spread through a number of centres. However, when the numbers being baptised and coming through into church membership are examined they actually show a decrease over the rate during the area congregation period (taken as a percentage of the total membership they average 4.5% a year compared with 6.3% in the previous period). Consequently questions of assimilation

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<sup>52</sup> A small group evangelistic approach, developed by Holy Trinity Brompton Church in London, and now marketed world-wide, and used very extensively in churches.

<sup>53</sup> A training programme in evangelism developed and marketed by Willow Creek.

and commitment have again begun to be raised. After the inevitable drop in attendance totals with congregations leaving or closing in 1996, 1997 and 1998 they began to climb again, although never reaching the high point of 1993. In 1999 attendances began to plateau.

One important observation in analysing what has happened in the church over this period has been to ask where the church has looked to for direction. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a lot of experimenting, seeking for guidance from God and the development of local initiatives. In this last period direction has come from looking at what appears to be working overseas and seeking to implement them at Spreydon. As we have seen the two major moves, Seeker Services and Cells were both based on overseas models and involved visits by church leaders to study them. When a new direction began to be sought at the end of 1999 again an overseas model was looked to, and in early 2000 a team travelled to Los Angeles to look at Saddleback Community Church. In looking at the development of other programmes in the church many of these were overseas programmes: Divorce Care, Alpha, Contagious Christians, Network. Most of the church music came from Hillsong in Australia<sup>54</sup> and the Dramas from Willow Creek. This shift in focus is I think a significant factor in analysing the effectiveness of the church in the different periods of the story we are following.

## **Conclusions**

In the context of the New Zealand church Spreydon Baptist church has done remarkably well in sustaining vitality, attract-

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<sup>54</sup> A music ministry based on Hill's Christian Centre in Sydney, the largest church in Australia.

ing new people, including a steady stream of those who may not normally have been expected to end up in church, and sustaining growth in a number of areas over a long period. Some of the reasons that have been identified by people are: the quality of Robertson's preaching, which has an ability to relate the message of the Bible in a practical way to the lives of people, and is delivered in an engaging 'Kiwi' style, full of anecdotes and stories; particularly important in the 70s and 80s was the creation of a very accepting and caring environment through small groups and later area congregations; a consistent focus on mission that has created an outward focus and kept intentional evangelism at the top of the church priorities; the longevity of Robertson's ministry, which has meant that the church has not in this period suffered the instability and decline that often follows the departure of an effective minister; Robertson's widespread connections and reputation which have meant that right from the beginning of his ministry newcomers to Christchurch, or those dissatisfied with the church they are in, have often looked to Spreydon in choosing a new church.

One of the main frameworks for my research came from Dean Kelley's argument in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.<sup>55</sup> Kelley argued it was because the clear beliefs they held created churches which were socially strong. Spreydon would certainly be classified as a strong church in these terms. It has over this period clearly and unashamedly identified itself as an evangelical church. Robertson's preaching has always been based on a strong adherence to the authority of Scripture and he has always emphasised the need for people to come to Jesus Christ for salvation. There is an expectation that people

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<sup>55</sup> Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

will be converted and some kind of response is expected to indicate this. Indications of this strong belief framework can be found in the results of the New Zealand Church Life Survey on Spreydon, done in 1997.<sup>56</sup> As far as attitude to Scripture is concerned 52.7% regard it as 'Word of God, to be taken literally word for word' and a further 37.9% as 'the word of God to be interpreted in the light of its historical and cultural context.' This totals 90.6% for these two categories, which are those demonstrating the highest view of the authority of Scripture of the seven offered, compared with 64.3% for all congregations surveyed. When it comes to communion 83% indicated that, for them, the most important aspect is 'to recall to mind that Jesus died for us', compared with only 48% for the survey as a whole. This indicates a high importance placed on finding personal salvation through the atoning death of Jesus, a central evangelical conviction.

In recent years Kelley's argument has been modified somewhat. Kelley argued that in order to be strong churches also had to be strict in insisting on adherence to codes of behaviour and practice. Further research, such as that by Shibley and Perrin and Mauss,<sup>57</sup> has found however that churches such as Vineyard and Calvary, which have grown rapidly, while they have strong beliefs are not strict in demanding conformity to any particular codes of behaviour or practice. It has been churches which are strong on belief but 'socially liberal'

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<sup>56</sup> The Church Life Survey New Zealand was done by Christian Research Association in conjunction with Vision NZ, on Sunday 25 May, among 1250 congregations from 13 different denominations.

<sup>57</sup> M. Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States. Mapping Cultural Change Since 1970* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996). R.D. Perrin and A.L. Mauss, 'Strictly Speaking...: Kelley's Quandry and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 32, No. 2, 1993, 125-135.

which have tended to thrive from the 1980s on rather than the older forms of conservative church, such as Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God. Spreydon fits this category of being strong but not strict. It has not demanded conformity on lifestyle issues such as dress, appearance or alcohol use for instance, nor has it taken a strong stand on issues such as abortion, divorce, the role of women or homosexuality. This has enabled baby boom New Zealanders to feel reasonably comfortable while living a lifestyle not markedly different in social terms from others of their generation outside of the church.

Donald Miller,<sup>58</sup> in analysing the growing 'new paradigm churches' in the United States, such as Vineyard and Calvary Chapel, sees an important factor is that, while holding to a strong belief framework, they are doctrinal minimalists. He sees this as coming out of the way they use the Bible in the church, in a narrative fashion, preaching expositionally verse by verse, rather than doctrinally or topically. This factor has also been an important dimension at Spreydon over the whole of this period with the core teaching ministry always being largely preaching through books of the Bible. This has meant that while other churches in New Zealand have been fractured and split over doctrinal issues, Spreydon has not suffered any of these. It has kept to a few major core beliefs which has allowed some reasonable diversity of belief. This has meant that people from a wide diversity of church backgrounds have been able to come into the church and be assimilated. My survey indicated the largest group had come from a mainline Protestant (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist) background (153, 33%), followed by other Baptist churches (108, 23%), Pente-

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<sup>58</sup> D.E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

costal and independent Charismatic (105, 22%) and Conservative Evangelicals (70, 15%).

One of the keys to Spreydon's growth has been its ability to contextualise its message and life into forms in which many New Zealanders feel comfortable and can identify with. This was particularly so in the 1970s and early 1980s when Robertson was an exceptionally good 'contextualiser' and had around him a leadership team of young New Zealanders who were very much in touch with the baby boom culture that was becoming mainstream New Zealand culture. One of the reasons I would suggest as to why the church has been less effective in the 90s is that as the leadership have been in the church for a longer period of time, and have grown older,<sup>59</sup> so they have become less and less in touch with the changing New Zealand culture, especially that of the emerging younger generations. Thus, rather than experimenting and seeing the emergence of locally indigenous new forms and expressions, much of what has been done has been imported from overseas, as has been indicated, and younger New Zealanders from outside of the church scene have been less able to identify with it.<sup>60</sup>

In any organisation or institution the role of the leader is of considerable importance. Robertson has put much stress on the importance of leadership, read widely on the subject and taken every opportunity to develop his leadership skills. In looking at what has happened in growing an organisation of under 100 to one of over 1000, Robertson is obviously a per-

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<sup>59</sup> Many of the key leaders, especially on the pastoral staff have been involved in the church and its leaderships since the 1970s.

<sup>60</sup> This was a constant area of frustration I found in talking to those under 35 in the church. The leadership was now made up almost entirely of people over 40 whom they felt did not understand how differently they saw things.

son with considerable leadership ability. When others are asked about his leadership style the two most frequent strengths that are identified are the ability to develop and impart vision and a strong task or mission focus. He has had a quite remarkable ability to keep a strong and ever developing vision in front of the church, and also has been strongly committed to keeping the organisation focused on the tasks for fulfilling that vision. He has been able to gather around him a team of people who share that vision and want to work with him toward that end. Any organisation struggles with the tension between task and people orientation. In church life this is the tension between mission and pastoral care. While Robertson's strong task orientation and mission focus has been a key factor in the growth of the church, this has meant less attention to the people and pastoral dimensions. Spreydon has at times suffered from this imbalance. The church has been at its healthiest when there have also been strong people such as Paul Askin, Gerald Tisch (in his first period) and for a brief period in the 1990s Paul Eden, who put great stress on relationships and pastoral needs. Relational difficulties have not at times been dealt with as constructively as they might have been. Robertson appears to have not always been comfortable with leaders who become strong and creative leaders in ways that might potentially challenge his perceptions about the church. This has meant that some of these leaders have ended up leaving and going elsewhere to be able to realise the full potential of their own leadership. This has meant the church has been deprived of some of the creative energies of those who may have helped keep the church expanding in the 1990s.

It is obvious from reading this study that Spreydon is a church that has gone through a number of quite significant changes since Robertson arrived in 1968. As one visiting over-



seas leader said to me he has 'an amazing ability to keep on reinventing the church.'<sup>61</sup> Robertson defines these as 'paradigm shifts;' others in the church, less enamoured with the constant changes, called them 'the lurches'. These seem to have occurred pretty consistently every seven to ten years. There is quite a bit of organisational research now which indicates that this is necessary for any organisation to do if it is to remain healthy and expanding.<sup>62</sup> In this sense this ability to keep reinventing has been a really significant factor in its on going vitality and growth. On the other hand change is also painful, and as we have seen every period has left some people feeling unhappy, disenfranchised or even betrayed and a larger or smaller number have left. In analysing its effectiveness, then, we have taken into consideration how well these changes have been managed and whether the long term impact on people of seeing this happening has led to levels of disillusionment and dissatisfaction in the 90s that have been high enough to have in some way destabilised the church and impact negatively on its vitality and growth in this period. A significant number of long term members exhibited a degree of cynicism, and even anger, over the number of lurches and changes of direction, particularly when what was once a great idea (home groups, area congregations) was abandoned without any apology. As one significant church leader put it: 'Yesterday's great idea is today's great mistake'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Sine on a visit to Christchurch in 1995.

<sup>62</sup> See Charles Handy, *The Empty Raincoat* (Essex: Arrow Books, 1995) 49-64, or applied to the church, Robert Dale, *To Dream Again* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981).

<sup>63</sup> Among those I interviewed who had left there was very high degrees of anger, hostility and a deep sense of betrayal.

A note constantly picked up in interviews is that in the 70s and 80s there was a lot of freedom, risk taking, people following their dreams or initiatives in a fairly loose structure. Charismatic leaders emerged, and there was considerable diversity of style. But in the 90s there appears to be a move to much more centralised control and a more structured framework. A constant comparison was made between the charismatic style leaders of the 70s and 80s and the mild, relatively conservative and 'staid' staff and elders of the 90s. This may reflect what Weber has described as the 'routinisation of charisma'.<sup>64</sup> This can be seen not only in the organisation of the church as it has become more rationalised, institutionalised and bureaucratised but also in Robertson himself who appears less willing to take risks and experiment as he previously did. It may also be partially a consequence of size and success, as the need for organisation increases and the risks of failure become much greater.

A final helpful framework for analysing Spreydon is Alan Jamieson's PhD research and thesis, 'Churchless Faith',<sup>65</sup> looking at those who have left Charismatic, Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches in mid life. Jamieson's work was motivated by what he observed while he was on the pastoral staff of Spreydon. Fundamentally he found people drifting out of church in mid-life because the church did not allow them space to process the new issues of faith and life they were wrestling with, and thus it became increasingly irrelevant and unconnected to their lives. The story of Spreydon can be fitted around this theme. From the late 60s through to the mid 80s,

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<sup>64</sup> This concept is most fully explored in chapter 5 of M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

<sup>65</sup> Since been popularised and published as a book. *A Churchless Faith*, (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).

the time of rapid growth, most of the new people were baby boomers, either young adults or with young families. As these people began to grapple with mid-life faith issues, so the church became less relevant to them and they invested less energy in it. The great changes in the wider society and culture have put a great deal more demand on the time and energy of people in this phase of life, both in their work and also involvement with children, thus leaving them with less to invest in church life. This can be seen in the house group life of the church which was highly effective when the bulk of the church were young adults or with young families. However when they reached mid-life they began to drop off. It is interesting to note that in the reinvention of small groups, cells in the 90s, they have worked pretty well among youth and young adults, but only a relatively small percentage of those in mid-life and older have become involved. An observation on the church at the moment would be that in many areas there are significant numbers of young people and young adults involved, and a significant group of older (over 55) people but in the mid-life group (35 to 55) a notable absence. Alan Jamieson's research suggest this is a very significant group of leavers in New Zealand. Peter Brierley's research indicates they are now the largest group of church leavers in Britain.<sup>66</sup> Not only are there leavers, but many who were once highly involved have now moved to the margins and become largely passive attenders. So in this sense what has happened in the Spreydon story may be a significant factor in helping us understand what is happening in the church in New Zealand as a whole.

Whatever criteria are used Spreydon has clearly been a very effective church for much of the period covered by this

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<sup>66</sup> P. Brierley, *The tide is running out: what the English church attendance survey reveals* (London : Christian Research, 2000).

study. In a time when most churches have declined, it has managed to sustain consistent numerical growth since 1968. Beginning with a membership of 69 it ended with a total of 809 in 1999. An average attendance of 100 on Sundays in 1968 had increased to 1387 in 1999. If one is concerned to measure effectiveness in terms of mission, then both the number of people who have come to faith from outside of the church over the period and the church's involvement in overseas mission are signs of vital health. There have been a significant number of individuals each year who have expressed their faith commitment through being baptised, the crucial rite in a Baptist church. Many people attribute their personal spiritual growth and maturity in faith to their involvement with Spreydon. For those who want to measure a church's effectiveness by its commitment to social justice and compassionate ministries, then Spreydon has shown a very high degree of commitment. Its involvement, particularly through its community ministries, with local and national bodies and government agencies in this area has also led to its having some impact in the public social sphere. While, as I have suggested in this study, Spreydon is a flawed and at times paradoxical church, like any human organisation, it has been very effective over a long period of time and there is much in its story that can help us both in understanding the wider story of the church in New Zealand and in helping other churches to become more effective.

**Kevin Ward**

## Spreydon Baptist Church

