

# towards ► belief

## The Church

### WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

The Church across the Western World has experienced significant decline in the last 100 years. In Australia in the 1950s about 44% attended church regularly (at least once per month). Now that figure has declined to about 17%. In the UK 150 years ago 50% attended regularly; now it's less than 7%. In the Australian community the perception is that the institution of the Church is virtually irrelevant, certainly outdated and becoming obsolete. Also these days there are plenty of people who see the decline of the traditional church as a natural evolution away from the authoritarian, moralistic and superstitious institution towards a more rational scientific understanding of reality. Many feel the Church will eventually die out as the older members pass away.

### WATCH THE DVD

### THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH

#### JESUS IS BUILDING IT

**Matthew 16:13-20;**

Q1. Discuss what Jesus meant by 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it'.

*As Jesus promised, "The reality is that Christianity remains vibrant and engaging for large sections of the population. The life and teaching of Jesus continues to enthral those who connect with Him and His message."* Karl Faase

Q2. Will the Church decline into non-existence?

Throughout its history the Church has gone through serious periods of decline only to be renewed, reformed and reinvigorated. As noted above in the West overall the Church has declined. But this trend as now slowed and pockets of growth are occurring. In the city of London there has been a significant increase in church attendance; up 70% since 1996. And today in many parts of the developing world, notably Southern Africa, South America and Asia the Church is booming. In China, South Korea, and Tanzania, for example, the Church has experienced enormous growth over the last 30 years. The implication of Jesus' promise is that the Church will always exist and, in many places, be vibrant and growing.

#### JESUS AS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

**Matthew 11:28-30; Colossians 1:15-20**

Q3. What do people crave today and how can Jesus provide the answers?

Many people in the West are spiritually hungry for meaning in their lives, for a purpose to engage them and a hope for the future to inspire them. Jesus offers these and much more. He is 'God-incarnate' come to live, die and rise again; so becoming Head of His body, the Church. As the risen Saviour and Lord He offers us the opportunity to be reconciled with our Creator and join His family. As Head of His body He offers us the source of life, vitality, guidance and nurture. So while many people in the West are experiencing a high standard of living with abundant possessions they are also expressing deep anxiety and dissatisfaction. Jesus is the true answer they seek. Jesus works through healthy churches.

## **A HEALTHY COMMUNITY**

**Acts 2:40-47, Deuteronomy 6:1-13**

Q5. What are the important characteristics of the Church as described in Acts 2.

This passage is foundational for any healthy view of the local Church. As the gospel is preached (by Peter) 3,000 respond to God's call and are added to the Church in Jerusalem (evangelism and baptism). Then these new believers need to grow so they listen to the Apostles teaching (discipleship), they share life together (fellowship), they share communion, rejoice and pray together (worship); they share possessions and finances (good works); they met in larger and smaller gatherings (services and life-groups); and they impacted their wider community (social action & care). Each of these characteristics are vital for a healthy, growing Church.

Q3. Historically the Church has responded to decline by reforming and transforming itself to meet new challenges and opportunities. How is that happening today? What can change? What shouldn't change?

Worship is essential to human beings. That doesn't change. Nor does the Gospel message; that the one true God, the Creator, who first raised Israel from slavery in Egypt has raised His Son, Messiah Jesus, from the dead to be the world's only Lord and Saviour. However ways of sharing the Gospel, expressions of worship, styles of fellowship, mid-week gatherings, music and singing, service, and social action within the wider community will vary greatly depending on the circumstances and opportunities.

*"I'm really excited about the future of the Church because Jesus is alive and Jesus is at work right across the world."* Nicky Gumbel.

## **A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL COMMUNITY**

**Colossians 3:9-17; 4:2-6; Luke 10:25-37**

Q3. How should church members treat each other and outsiders?

'Love' is the key to any healthy church: love for God and love for neighbours. This neighbour-love must overcome all aspects of discrimination; all racism, gender inequality, class distinctions and ageism. While it is OK for a local church to 'target' a certain group for evangelism, e.g. children, it isn't ok to exclude others who are outside the target group. As Paul says, 'make the most of every opportunity' towards outsiders vv.5-6.

*"Christian communities bring together people from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences and call them to unite in love, focussing on caring for each other and people in need. When it operates at its best the church offers a unique, vibrant and transforming community that remains enormously attractive and compelling."* Karl Faase.

## **SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO SAY THE CHURCH'S DECLINE CALLS IT INTO QUESTION?**

- i. The church will always have a positive future because it is grounded on the promise of Jesus. It may not be so in some places but abundantly so in other places.
- ii. It's true that in the West the church has declined in the last 50 years. But in that same time frame it has grown significantly in many other parts of the world.
- iii. A healthy growing church, like that in Acts 2:40-47, will be characterised by love, for God and others, and have a strong focus on building up the body and mission.
- iv. The Church is better equipped and, in many cases, is doing better than the wider community in meeting people's deepest needs.

## **SHARE & PRAYER**