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You can share them by emailing stories@baptist.org.nz

Feedback

If you would like to give feedback on this newsletter, write to our Communications Director at the Baptist Support Centre: **PO Box 12 149, Penrose, Auckland 1642, New Zealand.**



CHRISTINE STRIDE

Baptist legend receives King's Service Medal

Christine Stride is Executive Assistant to the Baptist National Leader and works at the Baptist National Support Centre in Auckland. She is a member of Titirangi Baptist Church in Auckland.

You'd have to search high and low in the New Zealand Baptist world to find someone who doesn't know of Merrilyn Withers.

For nearly 50 years, Merr, as she's known to most, has dedicated herself to enhancing the well-being of young people in New Zealand.

Merr's work was acknowledged in this year's King's Birthday Honours list released on Monday, 2 June. Fittingly, she was attending the King's Birthday (KB) Leadership Training weekend in Rotorua and was able to celebrate the news surrounded by hundreds of young people and Baptist youth ministry workers.

She says her first reaction to receiving the official email from the Honours Unit – Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet was to wonder if it was a joke or a scam.

"I saw the 'Private and Confidential' and I thought, 'Good heavens, someone's having me on.'"

True to form, Merr deflects the honour, saying, "It may have my name on it... but I accept it on behalf of all the people in New Zealand who work for and love young people."

Merr was nominated for the KSM by two people who were in a youth group she led in the 1990s and who have kept in contact with her.

Now 73, Merr has been actively involved in youth leadership for most of her life. From 1979 to 2004, she led youth groups and led regionally in Canterbury and Wellington, giving up evenings and weekends, organising events, clocking up kilometres of travel,

supporting caregivers, creating curriculums and materials, writing talks, and always advocating for young people.

Based in Lower Hutt, she helps lead a local youth group but has this year called time on running the annual five-day Xtend camps for more than 200 young people; this year's 30 June - 5 July camp in Palmerston North will be her last.

Merr's contribution to the development of youth leaders and workers in New Zealand is significant. She has taught NZQA-approved papers at Carey Baptist College and has run numerous workshops at local churches and in communities.

She has also provided senior and governance leadership to the Baptist Union of New Zealand. From 2004 to 2012, Merr gave nine years of leadership to Baptist Youth Ministries, and her strategic governance resulted in the formation of a national movement that sparked transformation and growth.

Here are some testimonies about Merr from people who know and love her:

"Whenever I am with Merrilyn, there are constantly young people coming up to give her a hug, to thank her for a card, a text, or a phone call where she has encouraged them. She is a legend."

"Some believe that to engage young people, you must be relevant, fashionable, or cool: Merr was none of these things! Instead, she won young people over with authenticity and love."

"She was instrumental in helping to ground [my teenage children's] faith in a God who wasn't just there in the good times but also in the tough times."

"Merr's love for everyone and her selflessness to give and serve make her a beacon of light to people..."

Photo: Baptist Youth Catalyst Ethan Miller and Merrilyn Withers at the 2025 KB Training Weekend in Rotorua. Screenshot from video by Sam Kilpatrick.

Merrilyn Withers features in episode 7 of the Baptist People podcast: Loving youth

Find the podcast online at baptist.nz/podcasts



GRANT HARRIS

Carey's new Principal



Grant Harris is the Chair of the Carey Baptist College Board and the Lead Pastor at Windsor Park Baptist Church in Auckland.

We, the Carey Baptist College Board, are pleased to announce the appointment of Dr Paul Jones to the role of Principal of Carey, starting later in June 2025, beginning in time for the second semester at Carey in July.

The election process ended yesterday, with close-to-unanimous support at 97.72% of voting churches affirming the nomination. From our 235 churches and fellowships, 202 are fully constituted member churches of the Baptist Union of New Zealand and are able to vote in elections. Over the 3-week election process, following the endorsement by National Council and Mission Council, 85 churches voted.

The Principal Recruitment Team undertook a prayerful, thorough, and transparent process of discernment. We believe the Spirit has led us to make this appointment, which has now been approved by the member churches of the Baptist Union of New Zealand. We believe Dr Paul Jones has the skills, experience, and character to lead Carey into its next chapter as the College marks its centenary and prepares to move to a new campus later this year. Dr Jones is a collaborative leader who has already endeared himself to many through the application and discernment process.

Paul and his family have been based in Brisbane, Australia, where they have lived for the past nine years. During this time Paul has worked at Trinity College Queensland, initially as a lecturer in Old Testament and Homiletics, and for the last six years as Principal and Director of Education for Ministry.

Paul brings a rich blend of international and local church experience. He was raised in Africa, where his parents served as missionaries with SIM. After returning to Melbourne as a teenager, he became involved in Murrumbeena Baptist Church, Templestowe Baptist Church, and South Yarra Community Baptist Church. After studying, working, and living in England, Paul and his family moved to Brisbane where they have been actively involved in the life of Ashgrove Baptist Church.

Paul also has a historical connection to New Zealand Baptists—his grandfather, Rev. A. Neville Horn, regularly travelled to New Zealand between the 1950s and 1970s to lead evangelistic events in his role as Director of Evangelism for the Baptist Union of Victoria.

Paul has communicated a strong resonance with Carey's core commitments: a biblical theology that leads people to Jesus, interdisciplinary theological education, community-based transformative learning, and cultural engagement alongside scriptural study.

In his words:

“My theology is thoroughly and deeply biblical, though I also believe that Scripture is not an end in itself; rather, its composition has been superintended by the Holy Spirit over hundreds of years to lead us to Jesus (John 5.39). I am thoroughly convinced of the importance of interdisciplinary theology, because juxtaposing theology with psychology, or history, or medical practices, or the arts, are all important ways of demonstrating that a forensic understanding of the gospel is inadequate. The good news of Jesus permeates and saturates all of life, and integrative learning exposes this truth. Related to this is the importance of exegeting both Scripture and culture together, so that the Word may truly be a light unto our path (Psalm 119.105). Theological education should be transformative (by definition) and this requires community, where human flourishing is celebrated and where new understandings become tangible as the Spirit moves, convicts, and empowers change.”

Paul has an extensive and relevant background including:

- *Substantial ministry and leadership experience.*
- *Baptist heritage and connections.*
- *Third Culture Kid status (born in Nigeria to missionary parents who also served in Benin).*
- *Education at highly regarded academic institutions (Melbourne School of Theology and the Australian Catholic University, Regent College, Durham University).*
- *Recent service as Principal of Trinity College, Queensland – a theological institution of the Uniting Church in Australia.*

“Over the past thirty years, I have engaged in a wide range of ministry opportunities that have matured my understanding of educational leadership and academic administration. These experiences have included overseas mission, church leadership, University chaplaincy, secondary teaching, higher education (undergraduate and graduate teaching), and academic administration as Principal for a denominational college in Brisbane. Undergirding these roles or jobs—and equally important—have been experiences of spiritual discernment, perseverance through suffering, and creative expressions of Christian hope.”

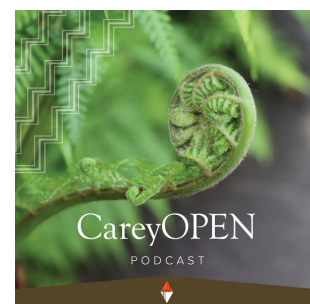
Paul is married to Katy and they have two daughters, aged 13 and 11 (in photo). The family will relocate to Auckland.

If you have any questions you are very welcome to contact me, the chair of Carey's board, Grant Harris, on 021 408 883 or email grant.harris@windsorpark.org.nz.

Photo: supplied by Paul Jones.

Listen to recorded talks and events at Carey Baptist College on the CareyOPEN podcast.

Find the podcast online at baptist.nz/podcasts



BEULAH WOOD

Publishing in Pakistan: Lois Rusbatch



Who leaves New Zealand to work as a missionary without knowing what skills they will offer? That was Lois Rusbatch in 1978. She arrived in Pakistan as an Interserve missionary, aged 32, with a library diploma but no expectation of library work. She hoped to go to Afghanistan, but the visa never came. She studied Urdu for two years, trusting there was a right task ahead. She even said ‘No’ to a job she wanted to do, believing it was not God’s plan.

Born in Dunedin in 1946, Lois grew up on a South Island farm near Waimate, a third sister with a younger brother. Her determination showed early at home and in passing piano exams, school exams and a library diploma. She left for an overseas experience, worked in London, travelled in Europe, visited her sister in Afghanistan and helped with food distribution. It was there that she came to faith in Christ. That changed her life. She studied at the Bible College of New Zealand, commencing in 1974, joined Blockhouse Bay Baptist, Auckland, the same year, applied to Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship, BMMF (now Interserve), reached Pakistan by boat and travelled to Lahore for two years learning Urdu.



In Pakistan

Living in Pakistan took commitment. Even then, there were 76 million people. Now estimated at 252 million, it is the fifth most populous country in the world, after China, India, the USA and Indonesia. Lahore, close to the border with India, had a long history of invaders, including Alexander the Great, the Mughals, and the British Raj. You can still see Kim’s gun, the bronze cannon described in Rudyard Kipling’s epic novel ‘Kim’. The city of 2.7 million was excessively hot and crowded even in 1978. Now it has 6 million, with correspondingly intense traffic and heat. Lois got around by bus or autorickshaw, finding a mix of old and new areas, extremely poor or quite posh.

Publishing

Then Lois was invited to work for Masihi Isaat Khana (MIK), a Christian Publishing House, which works for all denominations and seminaries in Pakistan. (Yes, Christian publishing is permitted in Pakistan.)

Lois started as the one-person Art and Graphics Department, designing book covers. Designing? She had to quickly learn something of Pakistan’s long culture of writing, poetry, and art, especially intricate design patterns, which she could commission for book covers.

There were no computers in those days. Every page had to be prepared by hand, laid out, and pasted precisely. Book covers needed a separate sheet for each colour, layered fastidiously on the previous, intricate and exacting. As the main artist at MIK for 20 years, Lois became one of the few Christians in the country who could do design and layout.

For a while, the company employed a young lady who helped with the layout. Next, an untrained young man, Daud, whose ability delighted Lois, and she could train him. He became a huge asset. Formatting the inside of books is fiddly, and fine attention to detail is needed. Daud learned quickly, and they spurred each other often with reminders, “You have to be so exact!” laughing and trying to reach the highest standard of accuracy.

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Lois had become outstanding at proofreading, even in Urdu. Her Pakistani CEO, Peter Calvin, believed God gave her a specific ability to glance down a page of Urdu and immediately spot the error. MIK became known for its high-quality presentation and the accuracy of its publications. Peter grew proud of the good name, largely due to Lois' work.

MIK, which is the only organisation in Pakistan that regularly publishes Christian books, gradually built a catalogue. Lois did or oversaw the preprint of every book—devotionals, biographies, Bible study, fiction, hymnals, Bible commentaries, church history and books for evangelism. Her skills made it all possible.

The Big Projects

Some layouts took years. Early on, the two longest projects were the Urdu Dictionary of the Bible and the Urdu Concordance of Bible Words. They published the first edition of the dictionary in 1984 after five years of work. Every word was handwritten, and every page was laid out by hand. Later, it was all transferred onto computers. "That was an achievement. It was a beautiful thing to see," Lois commented. The concordance followed—another mammoth task.

Then, when computers came, Lois had to learn the whole preprint task on a computer, starting in the late 1980s, through the 1990s and onwards. She became a computer expert as well.

"I didn't know anything," she explained. "I didn't even know what 'menu' meant. Then the office suggested, 'Maybe you should get a graphics programme.' We got a cheap one. I had to somehow find out how to work it.

These days, I couldn't imagine life without it. Imagine doing those thousands of pages by hand. And the graphics. Imagine it!"



The South Asia Bible Commentary, produced in the 21st century, was perhaps the largest project. Lois formatted every page of that commentary, with 1807 pages in the English volume. Urdu takes up more room, and that commentary had to be published as two volumes, each well over 1000 pages. It was a mammoth task and often delayed by waiting for the second pair of eyes, in this case, the CEO, who always had too much other work. The second volume was eventually finished in 2024.

Coaching Sunday School Teachers

Lois also worked for years for Sunday Schools, largely at her Bethany Church in Lahore. Along with Ingrid Hauer from Germany, Lois pioneered Sunday Schools in the Brethren churches of Pakistan and greatly assisted other churches. They trained Sunday School teachers, wrote a curriculum for age groups 6–8 years and another for 8–13 years, and spent part of each year running camps for teachers and for Sunday School children. They then visited multiple Sunday Schools to upskill the teachers. It reached a wonderful stage where teachers function well without Lois now. They have learnt so much. Some are the sons and daughters of the children she taught earlier.

Using her love of piano from her early years, Lois also taught several church members to read music to play for church services. When they taught others, the ability spread through the Bethany churches.

A pattern grew for Lois. Years at a time in Pakistan, long months in Lahore, summer visits to the mountains to the Hill station, Murree, summer children's camps and training teachers, back to the

office, and a visit to New Zealand every three or four years. Lois kept this up for 47 years, greatly valuing friends in New Zealand and Pakistan, thankful for Blockhouse Bay Baptist and grateful for support.

A Tribute from Pakistan

In September 2024, Lois returned from Auckland to Pakistan to do a few last months for MIK, but in November, she was diagnosed with a tumour. She had already packed her things and emptied her home of decades in Lahore. There was a swift return to Auckland.

In April 2025, her long-time Pakistani colleague Peter and his wife Jingle came to New Zealand to farewell Lois. (The MIK Board paid the fare and told them, “Take our blessing to Lois. After all Lois has done for Pakistan, sending you to her is the least we can do.”) As a result, we could interview Peter in Auckland and include his great appreciation of Lois here:

Lois was hugely important to us, not just in art and Graphics. She was a leader in the organisation, but always out of sight. When I came as business Manager in 1990, I leaned heavily on Lois’s wisdom, and when MIK thrived, it was in large part due to Lois. We achieved things which, humanly speaking, would have been impossible without her.

She was meticulous, meticulous. Her proofreading was brilliant. The Lord gave her peculiar eyesight to pick up the mistakes. Our books became highly reputed, largely due to Lois. She trained staff and they do well. We admired her Sunday School work too. The Lessons have been used for 20 years and have served the church in Pakistan very effectively. The present church leadership is the product of the Sunday School material Lois and Ingrid developed. Lois also wrote Sunday School songs in Urdu.

Lois took initiative but was also a wonderful team member and a gentle, wise voice in decisions. She was a godly woman, selfless, sacrificing, a faithful friend with a quiet, wry humour. The present MIK team has a spirit of servanthood, largely due to Lois’s impact. Her Urdu was wonderful, yet she was so self-effacing that she would not lead a staff devotional—just not a public speaker. She loved the people of Pakistan.

Lois was also highly focused. She could work for

hours on end and finish difficult tasks. No distractions were accepted, and few breaks. Work was the thing. She was independent of nature and kept using public transport even when she was in her seventies. In the last three years, after her handbag was snatched several times, we used to send a car for her. In the heat of Lahore, nobody could beat her. Sweating all over, she placed a towel under her elbows so sweat could not dampen her papers. She could work in 45 degrees Celsius. Only in recent years did we convince her to have AC in her home. She served God and Pakistan for 47 years.

Lois passed away on Easter Monday, 21st April 2025, and her funeral was on 26th April at Blockhouse Bay Baptist with a full church. One of her favourite Bible passages was read:

“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water... I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name, I will lift up my hands... I cling to you; your right hand upholds me.” (Psalm 63:1, 4, 8).

Sources

Lois’ Missionary presentation, August 2024

Interview with MIK CEO, Peter Calvin, April 2025

Funeral eulogies, April 2025

Photos: Supplied by Beulah Wood

HANNAH COSSEY

Southern Easter Camp



Hannah Cossey is the Young Adults Coach for the Upper South Baptist Association.

Eastercamp is for teenagers, but the number that gathers is the Kingdom; from babies through to adults in the “retired” age category, we gather together and are blessed because of it. As God’s gathered church, we are also a blessing. Many young people are invited by friends each year and

get to hear about God in a meaningful way for the first time; they learn how they can be in a relationship with God themselves in the context of a church community. Not only that, but we often have a few of our adult volunteers share that they had felt distant from God but that God spoke to them, too.



Jesus taught His disciples to pray,
Our Father, you are Holy
Let your kingdom come and your will be done, here
on earth, as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
Forgive us, and lead us to forgive the ones who hurt
us, just as you forgive
Save us from temptation, deliver us from evil
Yours is the kingdom, now, and forever.

At Eastercamp, we see God's answers to our prayers.

We focus on Jesus and everything He revealed to us about God, Father, Son and Spirit. We gather to worship.

We eat well, and many celebrate the food.

We create space for the vulnerability of being forgiven and learning to forgive.

We seek the ministry of God; we ask the Holy Spirit to lead and minister to see people set free from the effects of evil.

We pass on the faith knowing that God's Kingdom is Forever and for every generation.

Jesus also had His own prayers, and in John 17:20-23 we read one of those prayers: *I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to*

complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

At Eastercamp, we gather as God's Church, celebrating the good that is experienced by doing things together. We see God's glory. Our unity is an answer to Jesus' prayer.

Young people from Motueka said their highlights were:

- Loved the prayer tent (JB 16 Female)
- Great workshops, esp the one about Praying for other people (KV 16 Female)
- Good food, Pie Day (RV 15 Male)
- Sunday night and praying together afterwards (EC 16 Female)
- I loved working with other groups to make it all happen (Pastor)

Young people from Blenheim said:

- I really enjoyed camp—it helped me grow closer to God. The food was also amazing! (Mavis)
- It was an amazing experience that helped me learn the true story of Easter. I'm glad I made the decision to become a Christian. (Aurora)
- It was pretty good—I had a great time and might even do it again. (Maddox)
- It was an honour to be able to take a small group of rangatahi to camp that have minimal engagement with the church. (Youth Pastor)

Young people from Ilam said:

- I liked that it wasn't just a place for beginner Christians. It felt like a place to grow.
- Ten out of ten mud. Would eat it again.
- I really loved it. Big top dancing was great and the speaker on the last night was really good.
- I loved the foot-washing analogy about forgiveness.

Young people from Kaiapoi said their highlights included:

- Hurricane and making friends
- The Finding God in the Silence workshop
- Making a bestie and being there with Jesus
- Prayer tent
- My highlight of camp was seeing the relationships/connections amongst our group grow and getting good sleep. (Youth Pastor)

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Young people from Timaru said:

- The best thing was the atmosphere of worshipping together (Hunter)
- Good to know there is such a big Christian community of young people (Grace)
- Last night of Big Top and the feet washing made me feel God's presence, and it was special to be there with a friend (Alyssa)
- See young people building relationships with each other (Youth leader)
- I was so impressed by the number of our youth (including two year-9s) who waited over an hour to get into the prayer tent to experience being prayed for prophetically. They were not disappointed! I also loved the space to be able to connect with and provide a little bit of support for our youth leaders. (Pastor)

Young people from Papanui said:

- I felt God prompting me to let Him into my life, so I want to give myself to Jesus and learn more about His story. (Will, 16)
- At EC25, Jesus filled me with the Holy Spirit and told me that I should forgive the people who have done me wrong. (Madie, 16)
- Seeing our young people actively participating in ministry time was so encouraging; they were courageous in praying for one another as the Spirit nudged them to do so! (Youth Pastor).

Reflections from New Generation:

Our young people said that learning about identity in the workshop was so good and how to find their identity in God. It was so helpful having speakers talk about issues that young people face through things like the internet and social media that keep them distant from God. When we avoid talking about these things that young people are struggling with, it means they struggle longer. We will be creating resources to keep talking about these things together since they have now been talked about so publicly at Eastercamp. (Youth Pastor)

Reflections from Oxford Terrace:

Friday night at camp was really good. We had 11 of our youth respond. Many of them responded that they were thirsty. And some also wanted to make a recommitment to Jesus. It was so good seeing the counterfeits or thirst traps of the world exposed and then seeing the courage many young people had to stand up in response because they

were searching for more and wanting to lay down and get rid of those counterfeits in their lives. The gospel message was strongly shared. (Youth Leader)

A young person from Oxford shared:

I asked for prayer for my ears because they hurt a lot. My leaders prayed for my ears, but they also gave me a word of encouragement to not worry about the future. That was nice, and it was what I needed. I often worried about my future, but not anymore.



The evidence of God on the move can be seen happening globally. And if you've heard stories from other parts of the world and then asked, "God, when will it happen here?" Be encouraged; we are seeing God move powerfully in this country, too. God is gracious and kind, abounding in love, patient and bearing with us in our human struggle to get on the same page with Him. **Jesus** is in our midst. He is making a way for people to see He is the **Way** to God. He is able to change lives, and we are seeing young people choose to do what it takes for Jesus to be the answer they accept as the **Truth** for a better **Life**.

One of my personal highlights was seeing young people walking over to one of our marquees at 7 am on Sunday morning at camp because they wanted to take the option to get up early and pray for their schools together.

Our young people are on fire for Jesus. Keep up your support through relationship and encouragement, through prayer and through the finance that helps our youth to keep attending these spaces that grow their faith and connect them with other Christian peers.

"I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" - Jesus

Jesus, let your Kingdom come!

Photos: From Southern Eastercamp Facebook page

CHRISTINE STRIDE

Increase in church attendance and baptisms



Photo: Imagine this many people being baptised every week! Our 2024 data show that, on average, there were about 15 baptisms in New Zealand Baptist churches every week.

Christine Stride is Executive Assistant to the Baptist National Leader and works at the Baptist National Support Centre in Auckland. She is a member of Titirangi Baptist Church.

Attendance at Baptist churches in Aotearoa New Zealand has increased for the second consecutive year, according to data from the latest Church Statistics that our churches complete each year.

Also, baptism numbers were up considerably on the previous year, with 710 baptisms celebrated – that’s about 15 people a week.

This is up 39% on the 512 baptisms in 2023 and is very close to the 727 baptisms in pre-COVID 2019.

Just under 60% of those baptised were aged 25 and under, highlighting the significant work of our Children, Youth and Family ministries and our He Rito initiative.

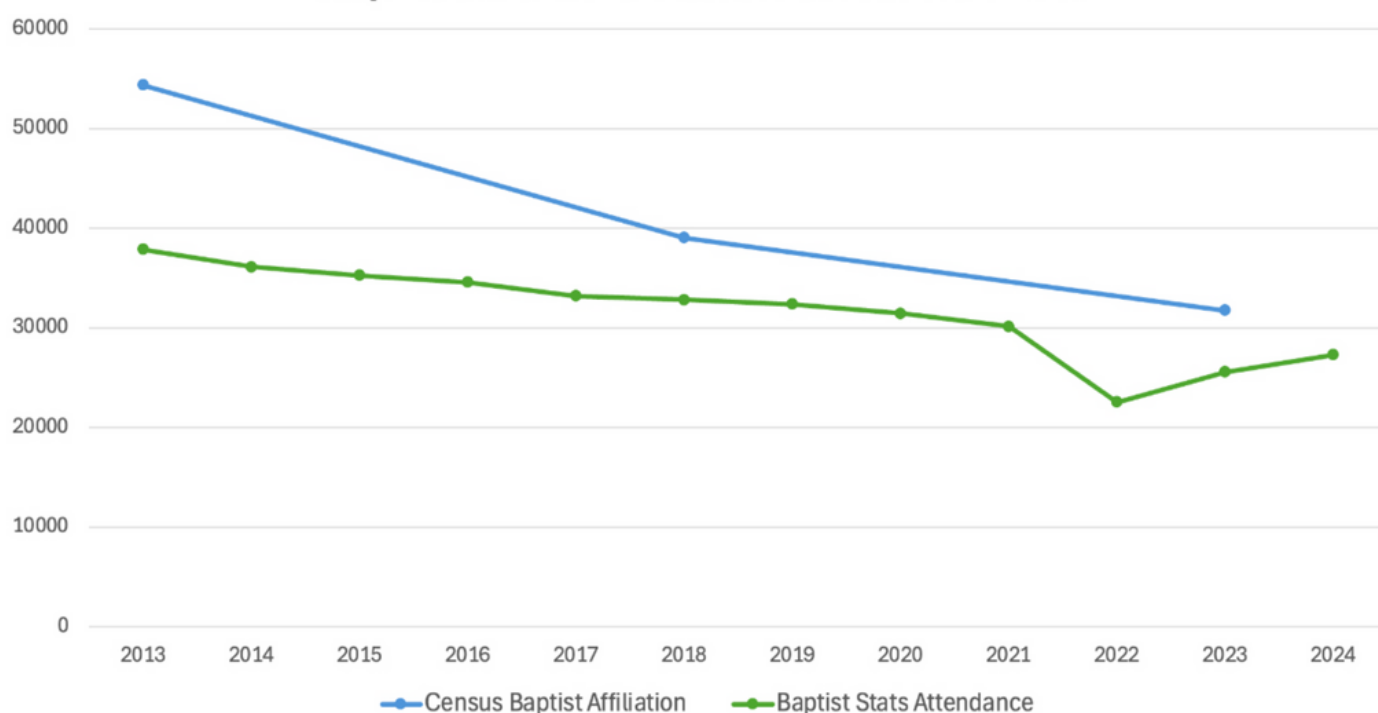
These encouraging statistics are a testament to the hard work being done in our churches by pastors and people in ministry and mission, says Baptist Union National Leader Charles Hewlett.

“I appreciate there’s still a lot of work to be done, but our efforts in gospel renewal are making a difference,” he said.

“Most weeks I hear stories of people who have made first-time commitments to Jesus, of the many baptisms taking place and of our local churches impacting their local communities.”

Overall, Baptist churches recorded a total weekly onsite attendance of 27,327 people, made up of 20,824 adults, 2525 teenagers and 3978 children. These numbers are from our own annual data collection that the churches in our collective gather, and there is close alignment here with the latest (2023) national census figures, where 31,737 people added the word ‘Baptist’ for their Religious Affiliation. The general Christian Affiliation numbers over the past five decades in New Zealand are showing something of a correction from a cultural affiliation with faith to the reality of an actual practice of faith.

Baptist Affiliation and Attendance 2013-2024



While onsite attendance numbers are still 9% lower than in 2021, last year's figure is a 6.8% increase on 2023, making this the second consecutive year that there has been an increase in recorded attendance. The increase for the 2022 to 2023 period was 13.4%. The last time our union of churches experienced year-on-year attendance growth was the five years between 1999 and 2004, with a 7.4% increase over that time.

Just over 61% of Baptist churches have less than 100 people in average weekly onsite attendance. This represents an improvement from the 2023 figure of 69%.

According to the data from our churches, seven churches now have over 500 attenders (up from four churches in 2023), with one of those reporting having more than 1000 weekly attenders onsite.

As for online attendance, 88 churches reported that they had congregations or services with an online presence, with numbers of attenders ranging from 1 to 250.

ANDREW BALDWIN

Better Together – Revitalising the Lower North Island Baptist Association



Andrew Baldwin is pastor at Petone Baptist Church and part of the Transitional Board of the Lower North Island Baptist Association.

The Transition Board of the Lower North Island Baptist Association has recently released its report recommending significant changes to simplify and clarify the structure and organisation of the regional association and how it fits into the national structure of the Baptist Union.

“We want to put relationships at the heart of our association, so have recommended shifting

responsibility for the governance and administration of the regional association to the level of the National Support Centre,” says Co-Chair Elliot Rice.

“We believe that this will allow the relationships between local churches to focus on fostering a sense of belonging, supporting each other with mutual resourcing and seeking shared gospel renewal across our region,” agrees Derek Wenmoth, fellow Co-Chair of the Board.

Regional Leader Mike Warring is enthusiastic about the proposed changes. “This report is potentially game-changing for our region and the wider Baptist movement. It will allow us to focus our regional coordination and cooperation on the things that really matter.”

“This process has also allowed us to consider the underlying spiritual foundations of the association and to identify areas where a spiritual reset might be needed,” says Mike.

The Transition Board was formed when the AGM of the Association held in October last year recognised a need to revitalise and restructure the Association to address concerns around financial sustainability, governance issues, communication breakdowns, and lack of shared ownership among member churches.

The AGM mandated the Transition Board to explore restructuring the Lower North Island Baptist Association (LNIBA) and bring recommendations back to the region's churches soon after Easter 2025.

The Transition Board has spent the last six months prayerfully discerning, researching, engaging with churches and collaborating together to come up with a number of recommendations.

The Transition Board's central recommendation is a structural and cultural reset of the LNIBA. The core shift involves moving away from a governance-focused regional association toward a regionally embedded action arm of the Baptist Union of New Zealand (BUNZ).

“This new structure will enable our churches to associate more effectively, support one another, and collaborate toward our shared purpose as part of the wider Baptist movement,” says Elliot.

This change will involve disbanding the LNIBA

Executive in its current form and establishing in its place a Regional Support Team, formed by the Regional Leader, that will focus on connection, support and shared action.

The Regional Support Team will seek to foster deeper relational connections between pastors, leaders, and churches in the region and look for opportunities for churches to collaborate on shared mission and ministry endeavours.

The report also recommends creating a Specialist Advice and Support Team that will provide practical help to churches in areas such as human resources, governance, and property management.

Derek concludes, “This proposal is not simply about structure. It is about cultivating a shared spirit—one marked by humility, service, relationship, and a renewed commitment to the call of Christ on our churches. The recommendations provide a framework for stronger, more sustainable support for our leaders and communities—so that, together, we can embody the gospel more fully across the Lower North Island.”

The Lower North Island Baptist Association was formed in 2022 when the Wellington Association expanded to include the churches of Taranaki, Hawkes Bay and Manawatu-Whanganui. It is made up of around 51 faith communities.

Photo: Supplied by Andrew Baldwin. Elliot Rice, Co-chair of the LNIBA Transition Board, reads the Board's recently released report.

RACHAEL AYRES

My everyday encounters with God

Rachael Ayres is a lifelong learner, wild dreamer, sourdough baker and traveller who loves solitude, words, ideas, fibre arts, walking long distances and spending time with family and friends. She is a member of Auckland's Titirangi Baptist Church.

The year is 1974, and the location is a typical suburban Kiwi neighbourhood. Zoom in on the scene, and you'll see a brick house with a covered back porch and three steps up to the kitchen doorstep. Zoom in closer, and you'll spot a little girl sitting on the doorstep. She's busily making her way through the biggest bar of chocolate you could

buy at the time.

Suddenly, her mother finds them both, the child and the chocolate, and asks, “Who told you that you could have that?” It's probably a rhetorical question in her mind; clearly, no one has given permission. But the four-year-old child, unaware of the imminent telling-off brewing, finishes chewing, swallows the sweetness and answers believingly, “Jesus did.”

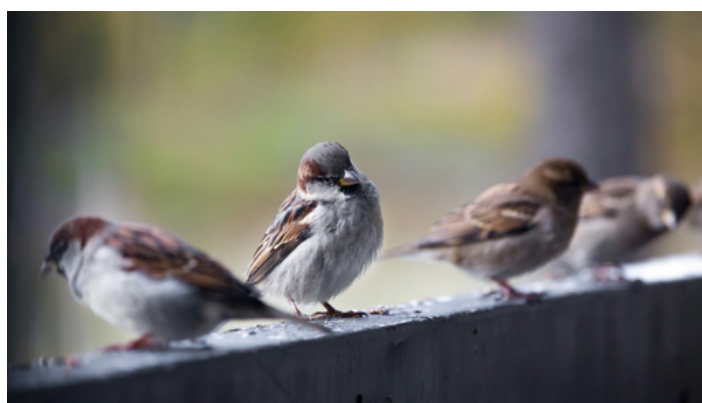
The telling-off fades, and whenever she later recounts the story, the mother will pose the question, ‘who can argue with Jesus?’

There's no telling-off, but the conversation isn't quite over.

“Hmm, Jesus just told me you've had enough.”

I was the little girl, and though half a century has now passed, I still love chocolate – and I still listen to Jesus.

As a slightly older child, I was fascinated with the idea that God knew everything. In Sunday School, I learned how Abram was told to count all the stars in the sky. On the rare occasion that I was outside at night, I was in awe of just how many stars there were – and that God knew them all and that He could count every single one, even though Abram and I couldn't. At the beach, I would watch the waves rolling in one after another, and I knew that God was making this happen. What's more, He kept doing it even after I'd gone home.



At the same time, God was also causing each blade of grass to grow, making leaves unfurl on trees and moving the clouds into constantly changing pictures in the sky. I had heard the story about God knowing if a sparrow fell to the ground, and I saw sparrows every day. I would watch them flying around the backyard, one in this direction, another in that, and it gave me a sense of security that God knew what they were doing. God was inviting me

into a relationship with Himself, even though I didn't know it at the time.

One day in my early teens, I wondered to myself, 'What is faith?' Faith was one of those religious-y words like grace and redemption and atonement and worship that got thrown around at church, and I thirsted to understand it. Imagine my surprise when I opened my Bible to Hebrews 11 and read, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." God had heard me, and He had answered.

As a young mother, I was told the existence of a stay-at-home mum was hard and mundane. Wanting a more positive narrative, and by now believing that every moment is sacred, I decided to look for the fingerprints of God in that space. I was not disappointed. I had already met God the Creator and God who would speak to me; I met Him now as God who reveals Himself in beauty. Being awake and feeding a newborn in the moments before the sun rose was when I first became aware of the dawn chorus. Taking walks outdoors with young children reminded me of the joys of watching a snail slither along a path. Moving at a child's pace gave me time to notice buds about to burst on the plum tree, a butterfly set to escape a chrysalis, and the first pea shoots emerging from the dark earth. Beauty was the light falling golden across the shock of curls snuggled on the couch behind a book. Sometimes, beauty giggled or laughed long. Once, it came in the form of a three-year-old child offering the last piece of cake to his sister. There was beauty in creation, beauty in words, beauty in music, beauty in hospitality, beauty in friendship. God has whispered to me in and through all these things.

Now, I am a grandmother and have the joy again of inviting little ones to look for the fingerprints of God as we go about our days. Together, we are discovering Him everywhere, seeing what He is doing, learning to hear His voice, and getting to know and love Him. He is constantly present, and I have discovered Him everywhere. He hasn't given me any more chocolate, but His companionship has been unending.

Photo: By Saad Chaudhry on Unsplash

DENISE TIMS

Mercy: Walking towards the awkward



Denise Tims is the course facilitator for Te Ao Māori at Carey Baptist College. This article is an excerpt from the 2024 Baptist National Hui panel discussion on how the Hui themes of justice, mercy, and humility relate to the church today and in the past.

The virtue of mercy is one of the most profound and transformative aspects of our faith. It can be challenging, confronting and awkward.

When I first joined the mission order of Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH) about 15 years ago, part of our training involved visiting other UNOH workers. I remember travelling to Thailand and walking into one of the largest slums in Bangkok, the Klong Toei slum, in the hot, sticky weather, sweat dripping down the back of my neck. As we walked through the narrow pathways past the tin shacks, the squatters' homes, a UNOH worker said to us, "If you are a person who runs towards mercy and your first response is to help, then you need to learn to pause before you act and think about how you are responding. But if you are a person who naturally holds back, who leans towards judgment and self-righteousness, who tends to classify people into categories of deserving and undeserving based on their actions or circumstances, then maybe you need to check your heart and ask yourself if you need 'to walk towards the awkward' and show love in action." Each has both good and bad aspects. Which kind of person do you relate to?

Mercy is more than feelings; it is tangible action grounded in love and compassion. Rooted in the Hebrew *chesed* (steadfast love) and Greek *eleos* (compassion and kindness), the word reflects both God's character and our response to His grace.

However, mercy often involves discomfort—stepping into the 'awkward' places, crossing social boundaries, and addressing biases.

What does the Bible teach us about mercy?

In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), mercy is shown through concrete actions that transcend social barriers, revealing both compassion and justice.

Often, we can take the position of the Good Samaritan, but imagine yourself as the wounded man on the side of the road. Jesus willingly walked towards our brokenness, healing and restoring us.

In the story of Bartimaeus' healing (Mark 10:46-52), mercy engages the marginalised, affirming their worth and inviting community participation.

Together, mercy and justice are in divine harmony. The words of Micah 6:8, "Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God", illustrate the balance. Mercy and justice are not opposing forces but complementary ones. Justice ensures fairness and restoration; mercy adds compassion and love. Together, they guide how we interact with others and advocate for systemic change.

James 2:13 says, 'Mercy triumphs over judgment'; this is a reminder to approach others with grace, acknowledging our shared need for God's mercy.

Lessons from practical ministry

When we relocated to Randwick Park in Manurewa, we learned that the community's heart's desire was to see their local park redeveloped. It had concrete dumped in it from a nearby building site, the skate park was tagged, and people didn't feel it was safe to walk through day or night.

It helped that the Randwick Park Residents Association (RPRA) became registered as a legal entity to see the park redeveloped. Following this, the RPRA was able to make a submission to the Auckland Council as part of their 10-year plan. We were amazed to find that the Council approved our submission, and this developed into our local community becoming more involved in dreaming and creating a design for our park. We also started a tree-planting initiative after noticing a lack of trees on the street berms. We went from door to door asking our neighbours if they wanted a tree

on their berm. Those who agreed to have a tree were invited to help plant it and care for it. This also meant we had to ensure they were watered for two years.

Interestingly, in the process of applying for Council permission to plant trees, we learned there had been unequal distribution of trees in Auckland suburbs. There was a lower level of canopy coverage of trees in the southern suburbs, but relatively high levels in the northern and western parts of the city. It seemed that many years ago, the Council had decided not to invest in trees in areas with social housing.

We advocated for our community by joining the RPRA and creating an entity to help get the park redeveloped and the trees planted. Involving locals helped build a sense of community ownership. Committing to long-term care for the trees reflected faithfulness in the small yet significant steps toward justice.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

However, author Robert Lupton asks a challenging question in his book, *Toxic Charity*: "What happens when the fish disappear from the lake due to pollution or overfishing?"

Teaching a man to fish is an individual matter, Lupton says, but gaining control of the lake is a community issue, which is why we call it 'community development'.

'Betterment gives a man a fish. Development teaches a man how to fish.'

May these insights inspire continued acts of mercy and justice, reflecting Christ's heart in your community and beyond.

Photo: Charles Hewlett, John Tucker, Colin Gruetzmacher, Denise Tims. Baptist National Hui 2024. By Mike Crudge.

You can watch the full panel discussions from the Baptist National Hui on the Baptist NZ website.

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GUS JOHANNES

A great adventure!



Gus Johannes is the Camp Director of Finlay Park Adventure Camp. Finlay Park sits on farmland gifted in 1946 by Arthur Finlay to the Baptist church to use for Easter camps.

There's nothing quite like a camp experience, especially if the camp is called Finlay Park Adventure Camp, and the event is none other than eCamp the Great Adventure 2025.

With camp filled to the brim, 24-hour prayer teams around New Zealand actively praying, an 80-person volunteer team onsite covering catering, security, sound, video, admin, first aid, boat drivers and many other roles, and weather that could put a stop to it all, we were in for the Easter ride of a lifetime.

And yet, God had it covered as we made our way through an amazing weekend with great weather up until the last car pulled out on Monday when the heavens opened and the fields flooded with water. The timing of it all could not have been more perfect.



The Great Adventure was the theme for the weekend, and looking back, we can only wonder who God was trying to teach: us, the adults who tried to organise the event or the children who came to enjoy it?

Seeing then hundreds of children roam free, enjoying outdoor activities, food, friendship, worship, and fantastic teaching delivered by Jeremy Suisted is something wonderful that we don't see every day. It makes me realise what an essential tool Christian camping is in New Zealand. It's always been a good tool, but especially in the current environment where health and safety, busy lives, devices, and other distractions limit the experiences our children can have.

Children were running the weekend between magic carpet rides, shooting, axe throwing, screen printing, kayaking, and many other great activities. Three days seemed too short to do it all.

But the absolute highlight of the camp was Sunday night when Jeremy communicated to the children that a great adventure could be had with Jesus Christ. An overwhelming number of children responded, leaving the main auditorium almost deserted. Everywhere, leaders could be seen sitting down with their children, sharing, praying and leading them to Christ.



A lot more can be said about eCamp or Finlay Park, but I would encourage any reader to get involved in their (church) community and bring those kids to the next eCamp. If that's not you, how about you join one of the volunteer teams? We are always looking for first aiders, boat drivers, tech people, red caps (Finlay Park staff and volunteers leading activities), and anyone else who has something to offer in that space.

Or why not book your next church camp, youth camp, group retreat or home group weekend at Finlay Park Adventure Camp? There is nothing like community and getting away from our busy lives.

Email office@finlayparkco.nz or Casey@ecamp.co.nz to get some more info.

I'd love to see you there soon.

Photos: Supplied by Gus Johannes