

**Aging Baby Boomers: Reviewing Faith, Spirituality and Religious Affiliation  
in the Next Stage of Life.**

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## **Abstract**

In the years from 1980 to 2006 the population of Te Anau, where I live and minister as the pastor of the local Presbyterian Church, experienced an increase of people over the age of sixty living in the community of over 100% (Statistics NZ). In the corresponding time period the under fifteen year's age group only increased by 15% (Statistics NZ). This growth was mostly the result of people retiring into the area. These people who retired here were people who were born before the Second World War. Many organisations have started up to cater to these retirees, such as the Bowling Club, Golden Age Club and Probus. Existing organisations such as the local churches have benefitted from these retirees as well, as many had been active members in their previous churches and simply transferred membership to the churches in Te Anau. In most cases the traditional styled form of church service matched what these people had been used to elsewhere.

There now however is a new generation about to begin to retire into Te Anau, the Baby Boomer generation, a generation who were the last massed Sunday School generation and who chose to leave church.

This research project seeks to assess what, if any, merits there are to the belief that the Baby Boomers, like past generations before them, will in this next and later stage of life have a strong reconnection with the church in which they were brought up. It looks at how they came to leave the church, what their beliefs towards faith, spirituality and the church are now after being away from the church for some time. It also looks at their coming retirement and the possibility of a return to church and what that may mean for the church. Twenty eight participants from the Te Anau community who are Baby Boomers were invited to take part in the research which involved answering a questionnaire and follow up interviews with more in-depth questions.

It was found that a majority of these participants had a church background and a most of them still had positive memories and feelings about church. However very few were actively considering any return to church – the length of time away from church and the perceived relevance or irrelevance of church being a major issue to returning.

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## Introduction

The generation born post Second World War (1946-1965) in the midst of a baby boom inherited the title of Baby Boomers. This generation were once described as the 'first teenagers'. Their formative years were shaped by the huge cultural changes of the late 1950's and 1960's, in a social revolution that shaped their attitudes and values in such a way that it stood in sharp contrast to the generations born before the Second World War.

This social revolution began to challenge many of the accepted values, traditions and institutions of the past generations, including their Christian values. Many of these Baby Boomers were taken to church or Sunday School as children. A good number also were involved in bible class movements. However, by and large, most of this generation drifted away from the church, rejecting it like many other institutions, as a hindrance to the liberation and freedom that 'free love, drugs and rock and roll' were promising.

This generation now approaches the end of their working lives. 2011 will see the first of the Baby Boomers, those born in 1946, turn sixty five and the start of a new stage in life. They do possibly as no generation before them have. Riding on the waves of consumerism and advances in technology, they come to retirement as the wealthiest and healthiest generation. What's more, just as they sought to define their attitudes and values as teenagers in their own terms, they appear now to be redefining what it means to be an aging generation. The saying sixty is now the new forty bear's adage to this redefining of aging by the Baby Boomers. Traditional associations and stereotypes of old age are being rejected and replaced with ones that fit with who the Baby Boomers are and where they are at. There is an assumption that this approaching change in the seasons of their lives may see Baby Boomers begin to reassess other areas of their lives including their spiritual/religious beliefs.

This research seeks to ascertain how safe an assumption is it that as members of a particular generation age their religious beliefs and involvement increase with age, especially as the

generation in question are the Baby Boomers, a generation who chose to leave the church. Is there any evidence that they are looking to return to the church? The Baby Boomers mistrust in institutions, like the church, has been well documented and other major milestones, such as settling down and having a family, have not triggered a return to the church as some may have hoped for, so what would indicate any change now?

Alongside examining the question, will the Baby Boomers return to church as they enter older age, there are a number of other areas of interest that will be explored? A secondary area of interest in the research was, had the course of time had any affect on their views about the church and about having a belief/faith in God? What was their understanding about spiritual matters and did they consider themselves spiritual? For many of these Baby Boomers, especially those nearest to retirement there may be nearly forty plus years since they left the church. A third area of interest in the research looked at their upcoming retirement and what issues that may be raising for them. Some time is also spent exploring how prepared the church is for any possible return of the Baby Boomers, and what this may mean for the church.

The research has been set into six chapters and is set out as follows: Chapter one is a brief outline of the research methodology and description of the participants who took part in the research and how they were selected.

Chapter two is the Literary Review which covers who are the Baby Boomers, where did they come from? What events shaped who they are and the values that seem to define them? It also covers their and other generations experiences at leaving church and how the church may best respond to them.

Chapter three is the first of two chapters with the research results from the questionnaire and interviews. This chapter explores the church backgrounds of the participants, their leaving of the church, and where they are now in terms of a faith and belief in God.

Chapter four is the second half of the research; it explores the participant's understandings of spirituality, before turning to their looming retirement. Participants responses to how they view retirement and aging are addressed. As well, any thoughts about life after death are revealed before the question is addressed as to any thoughts about a possible return to church, and what role they see the church still has to play in society.

Chapter five is the analysis and discussion from the previous two chapters as well as some suggested implications for the church.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter and includes some suggestions of other possible research areas that may come out of this research.

## **Chapter One: Research Methodology**

The intention of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of how the Baby Boomers may be viewing issues around faith, spirituality and the church as they contemplate getting older. It also sought to look at the Baby Boomers approaching retirement and any possibility of a return to church in this later stage of life.

The research was carried out with a selected group of people within the local Fiordland community who fall within the age range of the Baby Boomer generation and who have little or no involvement with any of the local churches. In an effort to obtain a reasonable number of people to participate in the research, I wrote to the Fiordland Rotary Club (Appendix 1), of which I am a member, to seek their help in my research. This Rotary Club is a very active club with a good number of members in the proposed age range of study, and they were happy and willing to allow their members who wished to take part in the research to do so. An information sheet for participants (Appendix 2) as well as a consent form (Appendix 3) was sent out to the members of the club who fitted within the required age range for the research.

Rather than simply gathering data, it made sense that a *qualitative* research approach be used. This involved fieldwork using both a questionnaire (Appendix 4) and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire used was a combination of open and closed questions. Some of the questions simply required the circling of a word or a phrase; however since I was looking for in-depth responses to the area of research a good deal of the questions asked for written explanations as well.

In the follow-up interviews a smaller group of ten of the participants from those who took part in answering the questionnaire were used. They were selected based on how they had answered a particular question or questions in the main questionnaire. The questions used for these interviews were tailor made for each interviewee.

Simply compiling the research data was not the focus of this research. Clear lines of linkage to wider research and theories were also explored and examined. The objective of this research was to explore the assumption that the Baby Boomers are, due to their impending retirement, going to return to the church, and whether this assumption is correct. Or is it a false hope that many in the church have, that needs to be challenged?

A good deal of research has already been done on the Baby Boomers with regard to their break from institutional religion and the lasting consequences that has had on both the institutions they left and Boomers themselves. There is also research written about how churches can reach out to Baby Boomers and their possible return to the church fold. This research can be divided into two groups. The first is written during the late 1980's to the mid 1990's when there was a good deal of expectation that the Baby Boomers would return to church with their families. Many of these books outline ways in which the church might reach Baby Boomers. The later books and articles address issues arising from the earlier research, as to where the Baby Boomers are at with retirement now looming, and why there was no major return to church by the Baby Boomers as was expected.

These and other writings, dealing with people leaving and returning to church, make up some of the wider research that was used as part of this research paper.

## Chapter Two: Literary Review

The image of a tidal wave of change sweeping over a culture, church or organisation has been used before to describe sudden and often overwhelming change.<sup>1</sup> A similar image can be drawn for the upcoming movement of the Baby Boomers as they begin to move into retirement. 2011 signals the start of the oldest of the Baby Boomers beginning to retire. John McCrone uses language more fitting to our current New Zealand setting when he describes this major societal shift as an “age quake”<sup>2</sup> which is about to hit us. There can be no doubting that the generational blip, that is the Baby Boomers, has through its’ sheer weight in numbers brought about cultural changes; some intentionally, others simply because there was so many of them as a generational group. In fact two things have almost remained constant as the Baby Boomers have grown; firstly, at each new stage of life the Baby Boomers have redefined how society views that age group, either actively seeking to make change or by their sheer weight of numbers. Secondly, at each change society has been caught out or unprepared for the changes that have come about.<sup>3</sup> As the Baby Boomer generation passes this next milestone on the generational timeline they again seem to be arriving at a societal change which much of society seems remarkably unprepared for.

The rate and size of the demographic change that is about to occur in New Zealand with regard to the percentage of population over the age of 65 is staggering. In the early 1990’s the over sixty fives were in the minority of the population with a rate of around one in ten of the population. By the 2006 census the over sixty fives were 17 % of the population, by 2050 this will have risen to 25% or one in four of the population. By 2020 there will be three times as many over sixty fives as we presently have.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, uses this image powerfully as too does Leonard Sweet in his book *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> J. McCrone, “Greying of the Boomers,” *The Press* September 26 2008, < <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the.press/lifestyle/mainlander/646909>, > (26/04/2011).

<sup>3</sup> R. Standing, *Re-Emerging Church: Strategies for Reaching a Returning Generation*, Abingdon: Bible Reading fellowship, 2008, 30.

<sup>4</sup> McCrone’s, *Greying of the Boomers*, 1.

Economists and politicians have over the last couple of decades been pointing to this time and warning that society needs to be ready for the changes it will bring. Social commentators such as Marie de Hennezel have become international bestselling authors by writing to her fellow Baby Boomers on the need to embrace rather than fight aging.<sup>5</sup>

The intention of this paper is to explore what effect the Baby Boomer generations' move into retirement will have on their views on spirituality, faith and the church. Is the church in a position to help this generation address these issues or will they simply pass the church by, seeing it as an institution they actively chose to leave at a much earlier stage in their lives?

The Baby Boomer generation derive their name from the large increase in babies born directly after the Second World War through until about 1964.<sup>6</sup> In New Zealand during these years the number of children born per mother rose from an average of 2.9 before the war to a high of 4.3. A pre war rate of about 40,000 babies a year grew to 50,000 after the war and rose to 65,000 at its peak.<sup>7</sup> A corresponding growth rate can also be seen in other Western countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada and United States.

Born as they were directly after the Second World War, the boomer generation arrived into a century which had been raked with violence and conflict, and ripe for change. The sheer size of the numbers of babies born meant that as a cohort group they have, as Standing suggests, forced society to adjust to their needs;

*When the boom began in the United States there were shortages of baby food, nappies and toys. Then as they took their first steps, the footwear photographic and sticking plaster industries flourished. When they reached school age, there were not enough places; when they reached adolescence youth culture was born for the first time*

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<sup>5</sup> Marie de Hennezel, *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents Your Body from Rusting*, Melbourne: Scribe Publishing, 2011, cited in Alice Thomson "The Best is yet to Come," *The Southland Times*, Saturday, March 26, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Demographics Researcher Ian Pool, of Waikato University has suggested that New Zealand's baby boom went slightly longer than that of countries like the USA, Canada and Britain; New Zealand family sizes of four to five children didn't start to decline until 1973, cited in McCrone, *Greying of the Boomers*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> K. Ward, *Losing My Religion? Church decline, growth and change in post sixties western societies* (an unpublished manuscript) 11.

*with the emergence of rock' n' roll. And so it has continued throughout the years.*<sup>8</sup>

It wasn't just the population size bringing about change. The years following the war were a time of greater affluence and the optimism of a brave new world. In countries like New Zealand and Britain, a social welfare system promised to provide a security net for everyone from the 'cradle to the grave'.<sup>9</sup> This affluence gave rise to a change in societal values; from needs that meet physical and security requirements, to ones that were more focussed around individual and private needs of the individual. Ronald Inglehart describes these needs as needs for belonging, esteem, and intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> This environment of affluence in which the Baby Boomers were born and spent their formative years helped develop in them what Daniel Yankelovich describes as '*The Psychology of Entitlement*'.<sup>11</sup> What in past generations had been considered a privilege, this new emerging generation considered as a right.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1950's and 60's the word 'teenager' first began to be used of the Baby Boomers, a new age emerged as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. This transitional period became a time of experimentation and study. Not only did this new generation now have greater access to further education, they also had more choice and spending power than their parents had when they were of a similar age.<sup>13</sup>

Rich with time and resources this generation grew up, and started to develop culture counter to the one that their parent's generation knew. Michael Collyer describes the counter-cultural movement as taking the nature of protest<sup>14</sup>, spurred on by a belief that the

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<sup>8</sup> Standing, *Re-Emerging Church: Strategies for reaching a returning generation*, Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008, 30.

<sup>9</sup> C. Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation: Fresh Expressions of Church for Baby Boomers*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008, 3.

<sup>10</sup> R. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural Economic & Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 33-35, cited in K. Ward, *Losing My Religion*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> D. Yankelovich, *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 1970's*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1974, cited in K. Ward, *Losing My Religion*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> M. Collyer, "What Church for the Saga Generation? Cultural Shifts in Younger Old", *Crucible: The Christian Journal of Social Ethics*, April – June, 2008.5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

previous generations had through two world wars destroyed lives and nature. Protests were often in the form of an intentional change in attitudes and values that were in sharp contrast to the previous generations. What was accepted by the pre-war generation was open for debate or rejection.

A leading element of change was a strong dislike of institutions of any sort. Institutions of any kind were viewed with a deep cynicism, being as they were seen to be encroaching onto the growing acceptance of personal freedom and individual rights. If an institution appeared to no longer serve individual needs then people felt free to no longer contribute to, or belong to the institution.<sup>15</sup> This distrust was to have a profound impact on the church. For the pre-war generation going to church was simply part of belonging to society and attending church was a sign both to the church and society of their loyalty. Wade Roof and William McKinney described the affect that the growing anti-establishment was to have on religion.

*This was not a climate in which religious belonging flourished.... To many in the anti-establishment climate of the 1970's these churches and synagogues seemed deeply implicated in a culture that itself had gone awry.<sup>16</sup>*

Harrington writing from a British perspective captures the essence of the growing rejection of traditional Christianity.

*Elvis became the King, and Dylan the prophet. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones became the heralds of a new gospel, where 'all you need is love' and the eleventh commandment was 'Let it Rock'.<sup>17</sup>*

It would be simple to assume that a rejection of the church or Christianity was a rejection of God or of all things spiritual. But it's not that simple. Collyer points out post World War Two

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<sup>15</sup> Ward, *Losing My Religion*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> W. C. Roof and W. McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: It's Changing Shape & Future*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation*, 3.

it was as if God died in the trenches and gas chambers.<sup>18</sup> Theologies about the death of God did grow, both from within and outside the church. Yet the rise of the hippy movement of the 1960's and the birth of the New Age movements indicate that people were still searching for meaning to their lives but not from the sources that their parents had. Again Collyer points to the music of that era to show this rejection.

*John Lennon & Paul McCartney's song writing partnership gave birth to the song 'Imagine' with its whole vision of the death of religion, of there being no heaven and no hell, and of that being a really good, positive and helpful thing. Security was sought through personal spirituality and experience rather than knowledge and dogma.<sup>19</sup>*

Setting aside the issues and causes for leaving church for a moment, two further issues need to be addressed. Firstly, is the boomers leaving church something specific to their generational cohort or can we see this within past or even present generations since the boomers? Secondly, what type of values came to be significant for the boomers and what effect does this have for the church?

In *Bridging Divided Worlds*<sup>20</sup> Carroll and Roof define the difference between life-cycle effects and generational, or cohort effects. Life-cycle effects refer to those things that affect all people as they mature over the course of time. In contrast to the course of time generational or cohort effects are events of historical significance which stay with people as they age.<sup>21</sup> When one looks at the trends for leaving and returning to church as Carroll and Wade have, research has shown it is not at all uncommon to see teenagers drop out of church or religious involvement only to return once they were married and had children.<sup>22</sup> Given this has happened throughout different generations these events can be identified as a life-cycle pattern. Earlier research by Roof however highlights how the boomers differ as a cohort group. Firstly, unlike other generations there was not a big return to religious

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<sup>18</sup> Collyer, *What Church for the Saga Generation*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> J. W. Carroll and W. C. Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations*, San Francisco: Jessey – Bass, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

involvement following getting married and having children.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, a second wave of boomers dropped out of religious involvement once their own children had grown up and left home.<sup>24</sup> This second wave of boomers is interesting in that it goes against the more traditional life course expectations that people having raised their families in a church remain active within church throughout the rest of their lives.<sup>25</sup> Steve Hollinghurst's research with church attendance in Britain in 2005 identified that in past generations church attendance increased after the arrival of children and continued to rise as the population aged, with the mid fifties to early seventies having the highest attendance per head of population than any other age group.<sup>26</sup> The significance with Hollinghurst's research is those in their 60's – mid 70's in his research are pre-war or war generation, what will happen once the Baby Boomers are the ones dominating this age bracket? Is it a safe assumption to make that as the boomer generation move through into retirement and then into old age, that at some point they may well begin to ask important and searching spiritual questions. This is a question Standing asks in a roundabout fashion; *"If the Baby Boomers begin to try and reconnect with the church of their youth, what will they find?"*<sup>27</sup> This is a rather big 'if' given the results of Roof's research reveals that the last time they met a significant milestone in the life-cycle as young adults and new parents, when it was expected they would return to church, they didn't. William Easum, like many contemporary writers in the early 1990's wrote expecting a return of the Baby Boomers.

*How can mainstream Protestant churches prepare themselves to minister to the diverse spiritual needs of the Baby Boomer? How can mainstream Protestant churches bring these young adults into a redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ? What choices are necessary if mainstream Protestant churches are to be a viable witness to Jesus Christ in the twenty first century? This book attempts to answer these questions.*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> W.C. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 53.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> Carroll & Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> Rev Steve Hollinghurst is a researcher in Evangelism to Post-Christian Culture, Church Army Sheffield, cited in M. Collyer, "What Church for the Saga Generation?" *Church Army, Discovering Faith in Later Life*, March 2007, No 6, 5. This is a slightly longer article written by Collyer with the same name but more information and tables in it.

<sup>27</sup> Standing, *Re-emerging Church*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> W. Easum, *How to Reach Baby Boomers*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991, 17.

It is not the intention of this paper to judge the merits of such claims, suffice to say that it may have helped to attract and hold some of the Baby Boomers, but for a good many more it did not.

The Baby Boomers have by the sheer force of numbers reshaped virtually every social institution and view that they have chosen to touch or ignore. Their demographic weight has imposed their values on every life-cycle stage they have moved through.<sup>29</sup> There is no reason why we should not expect the boomers to redefine what this next stage of life will be like to a way that suits their values and needs. Already the boomer view of aging is evident in sayings like sixty is the new forty, which replaces the forty is the new twenty. Just another way the boomers are redefining the aging process in a way that helps keep them young, and in the process aging fits with who they are. There is no reason that as they reach this new stage in their life that some issues about church and faith won't be addressed, but if they do it will be on their terms. So the church is faced with the dual issues of what can the church do to reach this prodigal generation who have been used to getting things their own way? More importantly what are those ways? What are the values the church needs to understand and work with in order to reach and work with the Baby Boomers?

Philip Richter and Leslie Francis in their book *Gone but not Forgotten*,<sup>30</sup> present findings for the Church Leaving Applied Research Project in Britain. Although the research is not solely targeted towards the Baby Boomers, they do spend a chapter of the book exploring the significance of changing social values and what part they play in the leaving process. They compare what differences may be found between the Baby Boomer generation and the Baby Buster generation (Gen X) with regard to their views on church and reasons for leaving.<sup>31</sup> While similar in many characteristics the two age groups differ in important areas especially with regard to their views on church and reasons for leaving. Richter and Francis list as some of the characteristics of boomer values. In the area of church and faith,

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<sup>29</sup> K H. Sidey "Boomer Boom and Bust", *Christianity Today*, 37 No 9, August 16<sup>th</sup> 1993, 14.

<sup>30</sup> P. Richter & L.J. Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning*, London: Derton, Longman & Todd, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-52.

experience took priority over belief and doctrine, personal authenticity against a mechanistic nature of denominational beliefs and worship, a diversity of choice which Richter and Francis, describe as a 'pick and mix' spirituality and a tolerance towards others of different lifestyles.<sup>32</sup> In comparison, Generation X, while exhibiting some of these same traits, also showed a suspicion of easy answers, scepticism towards any form of hype or manipulation, unwillingness to just be a passive consumer, and a more holistic faith that encompasses all their senses.<sup>33</sup>

Ward offers a summary of the cultural changes that have affected the church and are still embraced by boomers; individualism, privatism, pluralism, relativism, and anti-institutionalism.<sup>34</sup> Similar research to Richter & Francis was carried out in New Zealand by Alan Jamieson and presented in his book *A Churchless Faith*.<sup>35</sup> Jamieson's research, like that of Richter & Francis, looked at a wide age group of church leavers, though having said this the largest percentage (69%) of the interviews were Baby Boomers.<sup>36</sup> Most of these boomers were born in the later part of the baby boom from 1955-1964, and had left church reasonably recently unlike some of the older boomers who left church as teenagers in the early 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, these later boomers left while still having dependent children and in doing so they were, as Jamieson notes, "*taking the children away from the socialising influence of the church and the provision of a nurturing environment for their children's Christian faith.*"<sup>37</sup> This goes against earlier research by the likes of Roof which suggested that having children could be a strong influence on church involvement.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, Jamieson's research suggests that the correlation between a person's belief system and their continued involvement in church activity and attendance may not be as

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41-45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>34</sup> Ward, *Losing my Religion*, 11-15.

<sup>35</sup> A. Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal & Charismatic Churches*, Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>38</sup> W C. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, San Francisco: Harper, 1993, 156-57.

strong as we have been led to believe.<sup>39</sup> Simply put, just because people don't attend church does not mean they have lost their faith or have no faith.

There is no doubt that the Christian church faces a critical point in its history whereby the church of modernity is slowly replaced by the church of post-modernity, and a future that is not yet all that clear. Gary Nelson describes this transitional period as a time to *"allow God to reshape and to reveal the questions required to challenge the faulty presuppositions that have been held by the church."*<sup>40</sup> Some of these faulty presuppositions may very well involve how the church may reach the Baby Boomers. Harrington poses the question, *"Why have the Baby Boomers drifted off the mission radar of the church?"*<sup>41</sup> He puts forward three suggestions for why this may be happening. Firstly, there is an assumption that they have already been reached since many of this generation were brought up going to church. Secondly, most churches that seek to engage with older people have generally tended to focus on those born before the Second World War, an approach which will certainly not work with the baby boomers. Thirdly, there is the desperate cry being heard in many churches – the church needs more young people. In the clamour to reach more families and young people, older generations, including the Baby Boomers, are being sidelined.<sup>42</sup>

For the church to be meaningful to people's faith journeys it needs to connect to every part and stage, John Drane suggests that for faith to be more meaningful *"it has to connect more obviously with the issues of lifestyle with which we now have to wrestle, and that means it has to relate to this life here and now."*<sup>43</sup> The values of our present culture have by and large come from the boomer generation and because of the sheer weight in numbers, they will continue in some ways to influence these values. Understanding these values and addressing these in meaningful ways will go a long way to help the church embed faith into people's lives and society in ways that are meaningful to the culture of today.

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<sup>39</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> G V. Nelson, *Borderland Churches: A Congregation's Introduction to Missional Living*, St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-10.

<sup>43</sup> J. Drane, *After McDonaldisation: Mission, Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty*, Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 2008, 3.

### **Chapter Three: Participants church past and leaving**

The Rotary Club of Fiordland is a relatively young Rotary club as Rotary club's go in New Zealand, the club being established in 1978. Because of its' late start, the clubs' makeup and character is different to many older and more established clubs. This is evident in its membership. Firstly the Fiordland Rotary Club embraced women into its membership not long after its establishment. Secondly, the demographics of the generational ages within the club are quite well spread between three different generations as well as a small number in a fourth generation. These being pre-war and war generation, Baby Boomers and generation X along with a couple of generation Y's. At present there are fifty members in the Fiordland Rotary Club. Of these, nine fall into the pre-war and war generation, thirty are Baby Boomers; nine are from generation X and two from generation Y.

This high percentage of Baby Boomers, generation X's and now two generation Y's has led to a club that has a more relaxed and casual dress code and meeting structure than many older and more traditional Rotary clubs elsewhere in New Zealand. This relaxed and casual ethos is evidence of the boomer and younger generations changing the institution or environment to be more in line with their own likes and preferences.

The Fiordland Rotary Club draws its membership from the Te Anau and Manapouri townships and surrounding farming areas.<sup>44</sup> In the 2006 NZ census figures, 6,207 people were recorded as living within these areas. Of these 2,411 or 38.8% (Statistics NZ) were Baby Boomers. This percentage is slightly higher than the 34% which the Southland Regional District recorded and 7% higher than the 31.7% (Statistics NZ) which was recorded at a national level.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For the sake of this research the figures used are recorded as coming from Te Anau, Manapouri, Mararoa River and Fiordland. These are the areas which the New Zealand Statistics Department used for the census figures for the recorded area in which the research was carried out.

<sup>45</sup> This slightly higher figure can be explained by the fact that Te Anau, and Manapouri to a lesser degree, is already experiencing the early stages of Boomers retiring into the area. Many of these had moved to Te Anau, buying businesses with the intention of selling them on reaching retirement. Even in the Rotary Club a good number moved to Te Anau to work & then retire there.

When we compare these to the makeup of the Rotary Club we find that the boomer generation is significantly higher, this is caused by the fact that there are only three main generations within the Rotary Club. The makeup of the three generations within the Rotary Club are comparable to the same age groups within Te Anau as well as regionally and nationally.

Of the thirty members of the Rotary Club who are Baby Boomers twenty eight of them agreed to take part in this research. These twenty eight were made up of nine women and twenty one men. They were well spread across the eighteen years that make up the years from 1946 to 1964 which are usually attributed to the Baby Boomers; nine were aged between 61-65 years of age, seven between 56-60 years old, eight between 51-55 years old and four between 45-50 years old. When answering the 2006 New Zealand Census question 'what religious affiliation they have?' four recorded themselves as Anglican, nine as Presbyterian, and five as Roman Catholic. One each recorded themselves as Methodist, Baptist, Salvation Army and Christian Science; six recorded themselves as having no religion. The high recording of Presbyterians speaks much of the Presbyterian heritage in Southland, with 47.4% (Statistics NZ) of people in the 30-64 age group who recorded themselves as having a Christian affiliation, recording themselves as Presbyterian.

There were six Rotary members who recorded themselves as having no religion, four of them however answered 'yes' to the question: Did you have a religious upbringing of any sort? This means only two of the participating members had no religious upbringing of any sort. When this is taken into account 96.5% of the participants had a church background of some sort. Sixty two percent of these had been christened or confirmed, 53% of them had attended Sunday School, and a further 46% of these had participated in either bible class or a youth group programme.

This high percentage of church backgrounds matches findings in Britain. Standing's research showed that in 1964 one in five children were attending Sunday School, in comparison in

1946 at the start of the Baby Boom this number was one in three.<sup>46</sup> While a decline in attendance at Sunday School between the starting and closing period of the baby boom is evident from the figures, the numbers still are evidence of the high percentage of Baby Boomers with a church/Sunday School background. Hollinghurst's research with the Church Army in Britain has produced a wealth of data that helps give us a visual picture of just how much the Baby Boomers serve as a hinge generation, set between the previous generations who were high church attendees and the later generations who have increasingly had little attendance at church.

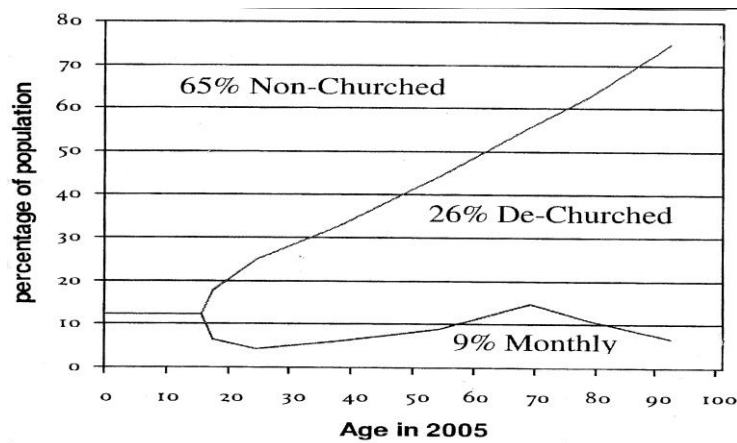
The chart below is from Hollinghurst's research on church attendance past and present in Britain in 2005.<sup>47</sup> The bottom line shows church attendance per age group as a percentage of the population. So we can see that up until about fifteen years of age about 12% attend church, this drops away quite quickly, in the mid twenties it starts to rise again as the population ages. It reaches a peak at about 68 years of age before dropping away in older age as health and related issues make getting to church harder. The top line shows those who, when they were under fifteen, attended church and or Sunday School fairly regularly. So we can see that for those in their nineties about 80% of them had been to church as children. This, as the chart shows, drops as the population gets younger. The oldest of the Baby Boomers at this time were sixty and at 50% of the population we can see that since then less and less of the population have ever been taken to church as children.

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<sup>46</sup> Standing, *Re-emerging Church*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Rev Steve Hollinghurst, "Research in Evangelism to Post-Christian Culture," *Church Army Sheffield Centre*, as cited in Michael Collyer, "What Church for the Saga Generation?" *Church Army, Discovering Faith in Later Life*, March 2007, No 6, 5.

Table 1: Church Attendance in Britain Past & Present in 2005



The Baby Boomers were the last mass Sunday School generation and so stand as a hinge generation between their parent's generation who were raised in a Christendom era and the subsequent generations who will come after them and will grow up in a post-Christendom era. An era where church attendees at a young age are a very small percentage of the population.

Of the twenty six Rotary members with a church background only four still belong to a church, yet twenty two of them still ticked the census question on religious affiliation linking a connection to their church past. Just on 50% answered the question; do you regard yourself as having a connection in any way to a religious organisation? with a 'yes'. When asked to explain 'how so' the following responses were given, "*my family upbringing*", "*historical connections*", "*friends in the community who are church members and local minister*", "*I still consider myself Catholic even though I seldom attend and am on church cleaning roster*", "*I still go to church occasionally and am on the flower roster*", "*I still call myself Presbyterian*".

In follow up interviews on the same question one interviewee shared, "*I still like to go to church at Christmas and Easter. I also go with my elderly mother when I am visiting her. At these times I enjoy the connection with the church as it reminds me of my past.*" Another interviewee shared,

*I consider myself still connected to my church background because it has helped to shape who I am and how I act to a large degree. I suppose it is similar to the teachers at the schools I attended, they helped to shape me and I still have fond memories and a sense of connection to them. So it is with my church past. I appreciate it even if I don't attend.*

Clearly for these interviewees their church background still has meaning for them even if they have stopped going to church or attend only at seasonal events such as Christmas and Easter. Sociologist Grace Davie would describe this as '*residual belief*'.<sup>48</sup> This residual belief within a culture, or in this case a generation, may remain at a high level even if there has not been accompanied by 'belonging' to a local church. This residual belief may be evident in the interviewees attitudes towards church now, 42.3% of them indicated they had either very positive or reasonably positive attitudes to church, 30.7% of them held neutral attitudes to the church, while 23.1% had a somewhat negative attitude. None ticked to having a very negative attitude to church.

These reasonably positive attitudes to the church may have something to do with the length of time it has been since these Baby Boomers left the church and their reasons for leaving. Other than two interviewees that stopped attending church in their twenties the rest fell into two groups of leavers; the first, and by far the biggest at 60%, was the people who left church between the ages of 15-20. This group overwhelmingly described their leaving church as a sudden event. For a good number of these leaving not only home but the local community in which they lived to attend university was a major reason for their getting out of the habit of going to church. These interviewees indicated, a loss or doubt of their faith; questioning the churches teachings or practices, church values at odds with their own values, alongside getting out of the habit as reasons for stopping going to church. Family dynamics also played a part for some in this age group; both parents working so unable to take them to church and parents allowing them to choose whether they went to church were given as reasons for stopping. Again, these people tended to have stopped going to church quite quickly and indicated that church was either no longer relevant or failed to connect with everyday life. One interviewee simply said church had become '*time wasting*

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<sup>48</sup> G. Davie, *Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda*, London: Sage Publications, 2007.

*and boring*'. For the vast majority of these early leavers their leaving process was sudden and often without a great deal of thought. One of the interviewees said,

*On going to university in a city away from my family and small community I simply got out of the habit of going, as there were too many other things going on. It was only at the end of the year when I returned home and went to church with my family that I began to realise I hadn't missed going to church, so I simply stopped. I couldn't see the point in going to something that was no longer relevant.*

Richter and Francis in their research point out that these sudden changes in a person's life, 'life changes', as they call them can attribute to at least a third of church leavers sudden disengagement with church.<sup>49</sup> These early leavers were either in their teenage or early adulthood, most but not all, had moved away from their familiar communities into new, often urban and cosmopolitan cities, which offered an environment that either hindered or actively discouraged involvement with church.

The second group of leavers left the church somewhere between their mid thirties to their mid forties, when their children had either stopped going to Sunday School or had left home. Carroll and Roof found evidence of boomers who had dropped out of active involvement in church once their own children had grown up.<sup>50</sup> My research found the leaving process was far more gradual and had a degree of reflection about it than those who simply stopped going to church at an early age. One of the interviewees shared about her leaving process;

*I attended church regularly up to adulthood. My partner – come – husband was a non-believer but was happy for our children to be baptised into my church as long as they were allowed to make their own choice about religion and church attendance as they got older. All the children had completed all the levels/ graduations needed to be fully integrated members of the church, after this was done our attendance has gone by the wayside. Mainly we only attend church at Christmas now which the children are happy to do.*

When asked why they took their children to church most who were followed up with on interview, shared that they wanted their children to have a Sunday School/Christian experience, so that they could understand and make up their own mind about their own

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<sup>49</sup> Richter & Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten*, 65.

<sup>50</sup> Carroll & Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds*, 75.

faith. These later leavers were able to express their leaving in greater detail. One of the responses to the request for a brief explanation of their experience of leaving recorded.

*Church became an increasingly social and community activity. It was very nice to belong to, however the sense of community and friendship far outlasted any help from church doctrine or dogma. As life changed and I moved away from the community church was increasingly irrelevant.*

One of the other members in an interview spoke with some degree of frustration;

*In the past we had (their church) one or two very evangelical ministers and congregations who seemed more interested in blind, literal biblical interpretation rather than its word and relevance to everyday life.*

Many of these later leavers exhibit a process of leaving as described by Jamieson in his research on people that leave church. The process is a gradual one, which may in fact, take months or even years. It is as Jamieson says,

*a process of feeling dissatisfied, questioning and reducing their participation over a period of time followed by a reduced frequency of church attendance, until they decide to no longer go to church.<sup>51</sup>*

Herein lies a difference between the two groups of leavers. The early leavers simply got out of the habit of going, but still have favourable memories of their church past. Many answers expressed appreciation for the social events that the church had provided for them in their youth; *“I enjoyed the fellowship and fun”, “church was where my family and friends were – church was the basis of my socialising, church was the basis of two clubs that I belonged to.”* As time has passed many of these leavers had tended to develop a tendency towards either a neutral feeling towards the church; *“It’s fine for those that want to believe – I’m just not interested anymore, it’s not something I do now”* or it has become a negative view. For some this negative attitude has developed from a life outside of the church’s embrace – which they would now find hard to reconcile; *“It would be hard for me to reconnect with new ideas in church”, “although I believe in living within the Ten Commandments, my interest and education in science makes it difficult to believe in God”.*

For others, the negative view came from how the church has treated them or others. One interviewee on a personal level shared; *“I was force fed religion as a child, I gradually framed*

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<sup>51</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 41.

*my own opinions/disbelief/doubts as a teen/adult.”* For some the negative treatment happened in their early adult life; *“I was unable to be married in church due to its policy on divorce.”* Many mentions were made of the scandals which have been made public; *“I am unhappy with abuse especially with Roman Catholic priests, I also dislike compulsory tithing in some of the newer churches and the negative influence this has had on often struggling families.”* Any connection these leavers have to church and faith is based on the past, and often any negative attitudes are not so much a basis for their leaving, but rather a reason for not returning. These leavers differ from the likes of the people that Jamieson mentions who have often left church hurt and angry often because of grumbles with the church.<sup>52</sup> Some of these grumbles may be for a specific thing or event, for others it may be a questioning of the foundations of faith that the church has taught. Whatever it is these leavers have given some amount of conscious thought about their leaving church and what this means or has done to their faith. For the leavers of this research most had given very little thought to church leaving or faith. As one interviewee stated; *“I’ve simply stopped thinking about church beliefs and things like that – I’ve seemed to get along quite well without it.”*

This stands in contrast to the later group of church leavers. These people had stayed in church until their children had stopped going to church. Their reflections on church again show more depth of thought and reflection;

*The fellowship was good, services were stimulating, I enjoyed the hymns and Bible studies, I liked the ceremonial aspect – music – celebration of special events like Christmas and Easter, Church helped instil a sense of right and wrong.*

This group’s reasons for leaving or stopping going to church were quite varied. A number indicated that once their children had stopped going to Sunday School or left home that they had done their ‘duty’ in helping giving them a foundation of Christian belief for their own lives. Most simply stopped going to church or got out of the habit. A second group indicated that with the children now left home life seemed to take on a new direction which started to take time away from going to church. An interviewees comment of; *“time, to a certain extent pressures of work, aging parents, travelling all the time for family reasons”,*

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<sup>52</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 58.

was common to a number of the people questioned. Both of these groups tended to get out of the habit of going to church. A third group however had much more specific reasons not unlike some of that Jamieson had interviewed. One of the interviewees, who I've already quoted, had major problems with several ministers and their literal Biblical interpretation of Scripture. In interviewing them they shared on church and faith now; *"I find it easier to try and do Christian things and follow a Christian example in everyday life and other areas of responsibility"*. A second interviewee shared, *"Because of a few incidents involving hypocritical people who held office in the church"*, they had stopped going to church. For this group of leavers there was a much more reflective process in the leaving and where they are now with attitudes to church. The first participant is not unlike the group of leavers Jamieson called *"disillusioned followers"*.<sup>53</sup> While they have left church they have not given up on their personal core beliefs. They also embody the boldness in their beliefs that Jamieson describes of those who while having stopped going to church have not stopped believing. The other interviewee is quite different, in many ways they match what Jamieson termed *"Transitional Explorers"*,<sup>54</sup> for this interviewee there has been an almost complete deconstruction of their faith – to what would best be described as now having an agnostic belief. This interviewee's parting comments rather vividly capture this. *"Increasingly I regard churches as dangerous rather than irrelevant, churches/religion are a huge force for evil in the world, religion gives to unscrupulous people the right to act inhumanly."*

When we consider the early leavers and the late leavers then a number of points can be made. Firstly, getting out of the habit of going to church was at 53% the biggest reason for stopping going to church. This reason, while most common for the early leavers, still was the pervasive reason for the later leavers as well. For most of these people church still held relatively positive memories. These positive memories may be a starting point at which the church may start to reconnect with these Baby Boomers. However changing habits may not necessarily be that easy since many who attributed their leaving to getting out of the habit also scored high on seeing the church as no longer relevant. At 38% the issue of relevance, or the lack of it, was a clear second reason for stopping going to church. Secondly, for a

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 84.

small percentage (10%), questioning church teachings or practices was the reason attributed for leaving the church. These people often were from the group who had stayed longer in church, leaving after their children had stopped going to Sunday School or had left home. This group were also the ones who indicated that a loss or doubting of their faith and a failure to connect faith to their everyday life were reasons for stopping going to church. Thirdly, when reflecting on their church experiences, most couched their positive memories in the social aspect of church rather than the faith aspect of church. Both groups of believers appreciated the community of friends and the support they received from the church. This is not to say that belief wasn't important, as many appreciated the values and upbringing they received from the church, but it does highlight the importance that the sense of community meant to these people. For those whose attitudes are negative because dogma and regulations, they still appreciate the sense of community and support the church had offered them, but it has been drowned out.

Before turning attention to the present and the future life cycle that these Baby Boomers are about to start facing we need to pause and see what effect leaving church has had on these people's faith and belief in or about God. In writing in the student magazine "Salient" of Victoria University, Tim MacKenzie a chaplain at the University asked the students the question: *"Do you believe in God? Don't be shy. It might be a socially embarrassing question in 21<sup>st</sup> century New Zealand, but since no one can see your answer you can go right ahead. So, what's your response?"*<sup>55</sup> One might think that getting an answer from that might be simple but as MacKenzie's quoting of research carried out in New Zealand shows, it's not; *"There's about a one in two chance that you answered 'yes'. About one in four of you will have answered 'no', and about another one in four of you will be sitting on the fence."*<sup>56</sup> When the Rotary members were put the same question they were given four options to answer; yes definitely, probably, not sure, definitely no. Like the results MacKenzie quoted these Baby Boomer church leavers had a very wide spread of answers. At 25% each, yes definitely and no definitely were even. That left 50% sitting on the fence, 10% of these said

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<sup>55</sup> T. MacKenzie "Lest We Forget" *Salient Magazine* Mon, 23, April 2007. 3. <<http://www.salient.org.nz/features/lest-we-forget.html>. > (6 June 2011).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, MacKenzie's quote comes from the buzz-the-people survey <<http://www.buzzthepeople.co.nz/recentresults/NZGodCloseUP.aspx>>

there probably was a God and the other 40% were not sure. By themselves, statistics like this don't tell us much, however when asked what best described their belief in God 35% of them still saw God as a personal being involved in the lives today, another 31% were not sure or were unable to give an answer, while a further 23% described God as not personal, something like a cosmic life force.<sup>57</sup> Clearly for this group there is no clear cut answer about God's existence and despite the course of time only 25% of them doubted God's existence. This left 75% who were either sure of God's existence or were open to the possibility that God exists. For some of these their answers may have come from what Davie had described as 'residual belief'. Their past church experience was or is still helping to shape how they view things on matters of faith and belief in God. But for a good deal of them, 50% of them, it has come from time spent outside of the church. When asked; "Do you think going to church has made a difference to believing in God? The group was evenly split. Fifty percent of the participants responded with either 'yes' (14.3%) or 'probably' (35.7%) while the other 50% responded with 'not sure' (14.3%) and 'no' (35.7%). At 35% percent the no's were far stronger than the yes' at 14.3%. When asked to give reasons for their answers those answering as 'yes' shared some of the following reasons; "*it is part of Christian education*", "*the company and beliefs of same minded people help encourage and support beliefs*".

Those answering no shared; "*You can be closer to God in other environments*", "*I believe God can be worshipped wherever you are*", "*my beliefs have stayed the same despite not going to church*", "*what one 'believes' is personal and not tied to traditional churches*". The last two statements are the most telling as they suggest that faith and beliefs can exist outside of established churches and are not dependent on those churches. Grace Davie in her research on faith in Britain since the Second World War coined the phrase '*believing without belonging*'<sup>58</sup> which has come to describe those people who hold to Christian beliefs but for different reasons choose not to belong to some form of the established church. Stuart Murray in his book *Church after Christendom*,<sup>59</sup> spends the first chapter revisiting the move in belief from what Murray calls the Christendom era of 'believing and belonging' which was

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<sup>57</sup> There were a number of participants that didn't answer that question. These were most likely to be those who said they believed there was no God.

<sup>58</sup> G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> S. Murray, *Church after Christendom*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004.

mandatory and what you believed determined if you could belong within the church, through to a post-Christendom era where the order is changed to 'belonging before believing'. This summary has its' limitations but it does help to in some way illustrate a growing understanding that belief in God can, and is, increasingly been expressed or experienced outside of the established church. A good number of the people in Jamieson's research were seeking and for some finding, ways to express faith that was outside of the established churches that they had left.

Without realising it many of the boomers in my research are still practising some form of faith outside of the church. When asked "did they ever pray to God?" half of them responded with a yes. Of those that prayed, 30% said they did at least twice a week, while the other 70% said they prayed only occasionally. When asked; "did they think not going to church would stop God from answering their prayers?" all of them answered 'no', the following response is a good summary to how they viewed prayer; *"I believe God does not make it a condition that an individual belongs to an organised group"*. Prayer obviously still means a great deal to many of these church leavers, but the most significant indication that faith still plays a part in their lives was the answer to the question; "do you consider you have a faith even though you don't go to church?" 70% of the respondents to this question said yes. That is 85% of those who had said either yes there was a God or that there was probably a God, considered that they have a faith. How or what that faith entails we are about to examine but for now there is a clear indication that for some of the group believing has continued outside of the established church.

## **Chapter Four: Participants current beliefs and possible returning**

*One of the key motivations still driving the academic curiosity that fuels my career as an atheistic psychological scientist who studied religion is my own seemingly instinctual fear of being punished by God, and thinking about God more generally. I wanted to know where in the world these ideas were coming from. Could it really be possible that they were innate? Is there something like a belief instinct?<sup>60</sup>*

Jessie Bering's curiosity asked 'where did these ideas and thoughts come from' in a boy raised in a non Christian/non-religious home, where God had played no part in his upbringing. He raises questions for which many seek answers; a search for meaning, purpose and belonging. Roof in researching the beliefs of Baby Boomers would suggest, as he notes most social scientists do *"that religion has to do with two major foci of concerns – personal meaning and social belonging."*<sup>61</sup> From Roof's perspective it is the former that dominates today's focus and energy. For Roof and writers like him today's society<sup>62</sup> is awash with a hunger for the search of spiritual meaning. Thus terms like *quest, seeking* and *searching*<sup>63</sup> are prominent on the radar of much of society today. There is, as Roof suggests, *"a qualitative shift from unquestioned belief to a more open, questioning mood"*.<sup>64</sup> As the back cover of Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace*, says, *"in large bookstores the 'religion' section has been replaced with an ever expanding number of topics on spiritual matters"*. The church is no longer the sole domain for speaking about spiritual matters. In fact for many Baby Boomers, with their high degree of suspicion of institutions, the church is the last place many would go to seek answers. Setting aside for the moment what the church may need to do to help become a place of connection to people's spiritual search, we will look at this search for personal meaning in people's lives.

One of the insights coming from the concept of believing without belonging, is that faith's supposed movement to outside the institutional established church opens wide the question

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<sup>60</sup> J Bering, *"The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls Destiny, and the meaning of Life"*, New York: Norton & Company, 2011, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Roof is addressing spiritual belief in America. While there are differences between the likes of America, Britain, Europe, Australia and New Zealand in their cultural context to religion and belief, all of them have and are being affected by the shift in society from modernity to post-modernity.

<sup>63</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

of how we now describe belief? If we separate believing from the structure, in this case the church, which for many has been the means to understand what we believe, then we remove this search for personal meaning, this spiritual seeking, from the shackles of religion. Religion in this sense is the image of institutional church which so many have turned their backs on. In this view, not going to church doesn't necessarily mean you don't believe. In a recent letter to 'The Southland Times' newspaper the writer, drawing on the 2006 census figures pointed to the growing number of people who ticked 'no religion' as an indication that their atheistic belief was in growing company. The assumption by the writer being that 'no religion' equated to 'no belief', yet it is not that simple. In books, magazines, television and movies there appears to be an openness to all things spiritual. There is a searching for meaning that goes beyond one's self. The language of spirituality can both embrace and at the same time be separate from religion in the traditional sense. In seeking to define spirituality Roof notes that as we speak of spirituality today,

*The term may mean and often does, include religion in the sense of tradition, yet for many it is not bound by doctrinal, creedal or ecclesiastical categories. Some people claim to be spiritual but with little, if any, grounding in any faith tradition; still others claim to be spiritual but are opposed to the religious.<sup>65</sup>*

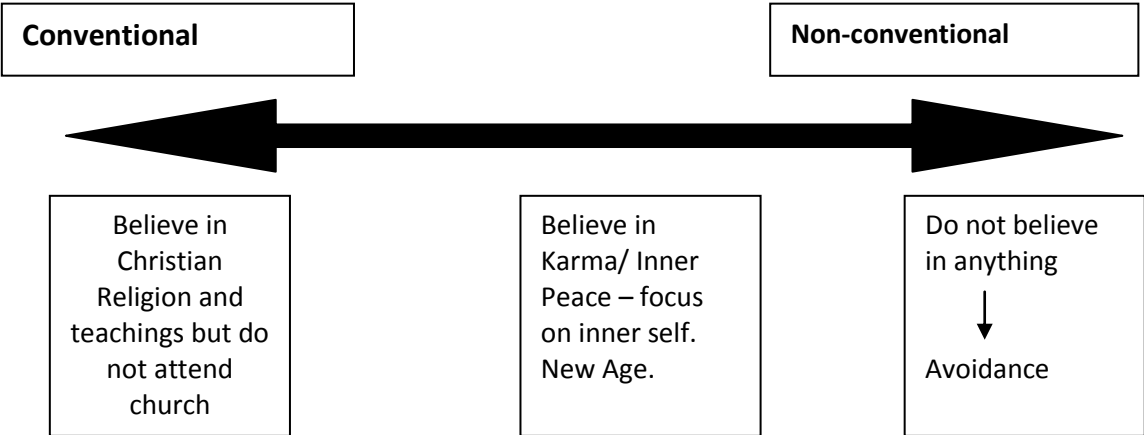
This seeming embracing of church and spirituality and at the same time setting it outside of church comes through with the participants of this research project. When asked to describe what first comes to mind when they heard the word spiritual? The responses varied from; "a person who worships God", "God-Church", "believing in spiritual things/events", "members of my old church", through to, "something you must have which is constant and never changing", "a being or recognition of a force greater than myself or worldly explanation", "something that can be felt but not touched", to, "experiences I have had in nature", "ghosts" or "contact with the dead". The responses move from a close connection to the church, to a more personalising and depth of thinking about spirituality, to experiences that stand outside of the church.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 84.

This diverse spectrum of answers about spirituality is not to be unexpected. Research compiled by A. C. Nielsen’s in New Zealand in 2002 of non-churchgoer’s key triggers and barriers to different forms of spiritual life and connections to church, found a sense of spirituality that spanned a continuum of beliefs.<sup>66</sup> This continuum ranged from conventional Christian beliefs at one end to non-conventional expressions of spirituality. These non-conventional beliefs varied from a belief in Karma/inner peace, the New Age to not believing in anything or a total avoidance of all things spiritual.

Table 2: Spectrum of Spiritual Beliefs within New Zealand (A.C. Neilson 2002)



Like the boomers in my Rotary club, the participants in A. C. Nielsen’s research had a past experience of church but were no longer attending church. Fifty three percent of participants in my research indicated that their church past has played a part in their understanding of spirituality. When asked if they considered themselves a spiritual person the participants responded with 14% saying ‘yes’, 50% saying ‘no’ and 36% answering ‘not sure’. However when interviewed about their understanding of spirituality a response from one participant was a good summary of most of the participants;

*I was raised going to church and they told you what to think about God and things like that ... the longer I’ve been away from church I still believe there is a higher power around us but now I don’t think I need religion to tell me what to think ... it’s something that’s personal, an inner belief of sorts.*

<sup>66</sup> *Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life*, a Report prepared for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/ New Zealand, by A.C.Nielsen (NZ) Limited, November 2002, 5.

Another interviewee helped give some sense of their separating church/religion from spirituality when they stated;

*When I think of church/religion it brings up images of controlling dogmas and doctrine ... you know, don't do this or that or you must do this ... however for me spirituality is the things I encounter in everyday life or doing things that help me think of things outside of myself.*

In this sense of searching, spirituality is seen as something that is not static, it changes and adapts as people change as they travel through their life journey. As such many things may have not been considered spiritual in the past are now open to being explored. David Runcorn expresses this well when he suggests,

*There may be an awakening of life previously labelled as 'outside' church and faith – creative arts, non-Christian spiritualities, creation, human relationships, and a sense of the sacred in very ordinary moments of routine living. These can be experienced as more spiritually alive than what the church offers.<sup>67</sup>*

Robert Webber highlights how much spirituality has moved outside the church, when he quotes research by Barbara Denman that spirituality is now being seen in 'Corporate America'.<sup>68</sup> Given this research was in 1999 it would be interesting to see how much of this spirituality in corporate America still exists given the financial collapses that have occurred in recent years. However the essence that Webber is explaining is the one from 'religion' to 'spirituality' from 'legalism' to 'freedom'. Religion is experienced, for many, as legalism with its handy list of do's and don'ts, while spirituality is experienced in ways that allow people to become fully human.<sup>69</sup> Clearly language and how we understand what meanings we attach to words like religion and spirituality has a part to play here when we talk about things spiritual. Even some of the participants expressed some of this uncertainty when they commented; *"I find the concept of spirituality a little 'fuzzy'... I mean it can mean one thing to you and another thing to me."* John Drane in his book *Do Christians know How to be*

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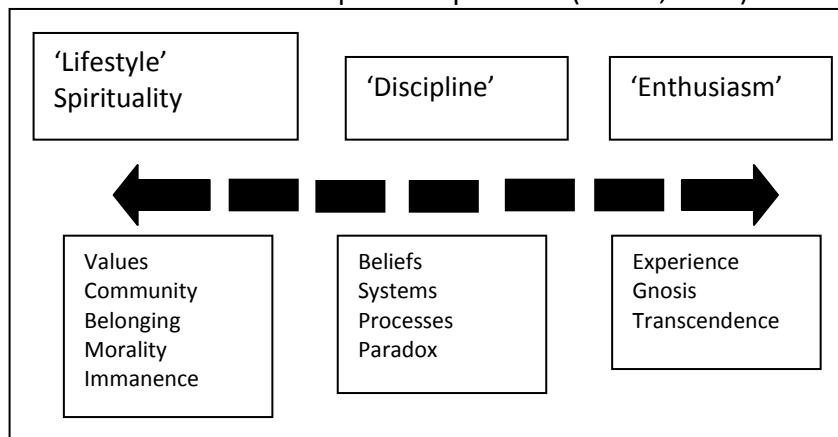
<sup>67</sup> D. Runcorn, *The Road to Growth Less Travelled: Spiritual Paths in a Missionary Church*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008, 7.

<sup>68</sup> B. Denman, "The Soul at Work", *Cross Culture*, March / April 1999, 5, cited in R. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*; Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 2002, 174.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

*Spiritual?*<sup>70</sup> explores the various ways in which the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ are used in everyday language. Drane proposed a spectrum that moved from what he called ‘lifestyle spirituality’ to ‘disciplines’ to ‘enthusiasm’ at the other end. Lifestyle spirituality incorporated such things as values, community, belonging, morality and immanence, for some people Drane suggests a spiritual experience can be as apparently ordinary as a meal with friends and family.<sup>71</sup>

Table 3: The Spiritual Spectrum (Drane, 2005)



Many of these factors bear similarities to the participants from this research. When asked which of the following definitions best fits their understanding of spirituality, a source of values and meaning beyond self, a way of understanding, personal integrity, an inner awareness or a mix of all of them, the participants overwhelmingly indicated the latter. These areas are what Roof suggests encompass spirituality and contemporary quests for spirituality, as defined by Drane as lifestyle spirituality or expressed by participants of this research, *“are really yearnings for a reconstructed interior life”*.<sup>72</sup> Such reconstruction helps to give the personal meaning to their lives which many people are seeking. As one participant when followed up with an interview about this answered; *“I supposed it’s those things deep inside me that help drive how I do things it’s not like I think about them, they’re just there ... they help give my life direction and meaning.”* On examination the connection of the participants to these definitions of spirituality would appear to have some connection

<sup>70</sup> J. Drane, *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual? The Rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church*, London: Derton, Longman & Todd, 2005.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>72</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 35.

to their church past. As already noted when asked if they felt that their church tradition had any part to play in their spirituality, 53% of them answered 'yes'. Those who answered 'yes' shared that the church had given them an awareness of spirituality or had taught them the values they sought to live by. Those answering 'no' were a little less sure about what then helped shape their spirituality. Answers that were given varied around books they had read or friends and family members who they admired. A number of participants from both those who answered 'yes' and 'no' noted creation, in this case Fiordland National Park, often had a profound effect on them. As one interviewee said,

*I am often profoundly moved when I spend time in the 'Park'...as I walk through it I have a sense that there is something greater than myself out there ... those times can often be very refreshing and uplifting.*

It would be hard to argue here that what is being described here is not a spiritual experience, and this fits with Drane's lifestyle spirituality.

The middle of Drane's spectrum was what he called 'discipline'. In this group people would only regard something as spiritual if it had a clear connection with the structures of a given belief system.<sup>73</sup> In this regard traditional Christian beliefs, such as the ones held by the participants would be imagined though Drane does allow for other beliefs as well.<sup>74</sup> The other end of Drane's spectrum is 'enthusiasm', which encompasses those people for whom nothing spiritual could occur without some direct encounter with the transcendent, whereby one goes beyond the expected norms of what we know as everyday life. In this regard Drane lists the likes of receiving messages from aliens or angels, mystical or ecstatic experiences or even speaking in tongues.<sup>75</sup> None of the participants would fit into the latter parts of the spectrum. The middle of the spectrum has more in common with someone still involved or connected to a church, while the final one would simply be too radical for any of those involved with this research.<sup>76</sup> It would be hard to say that many of the participants are active spiritual seekers in the sense of who Roof refers to as 'questers', the image of journeying in the sense of life's journeys may better suit the participants. But this too has

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<sup>73</sup> Drane, *Do Christians know*, 79.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>76</sup> This is not discounting the value of those for whom the latter is how they experience or understand spirituality, but rather to simply say no-one in this research fitted this end of the spectrum.

its' limitations, only about 14% described themselves as spiritual, another 36% are not sure. For many of these who answered 'not sure' the issues of spirituality may simply have not been on their conscious thoughts at all. In fact one interviewee commented after we had finished our interview that they had never really given any of this stuff, 'spirituality', much thought until they agreed to be part of this research.

This is where these participants as church leavers differ from those that Jamieson interviewed for his research. Many of Jamieson's participants were more recent church leavers, and some had not even yet left the church, but all of them had in varying degrees gone through personal struggles, often at great cost, as they sought to leave their church traditions. For some their faith found other expressions, for a handful faith was lost or discarded.

The participants of my research to a large extent had stopped going to church simply by getting out of the habit. In doing so issues around spirituality while not being totally discarded, were not given much thought. That is until now, for many of these participants speaking of the spiritual was still linked to their church past. This is the shade of 'habitual belief' which was spoken of earlier. It is there in the background shaping some of the ways they live and operate without them really being aware of it. For this reason Drane's description of lifestyle spiritually seems to be a good fit for many of the participants. Firstly many of the interviewees spoke of the values they received from the church – that these values still played a part in their lives, those who had taken their children to church did so, so that they would also receive similar values. Moreover a small group of participants indicated that they would be willing to take their grandchildren to church to receive these values as well.

Values for these participants are a part of their spiritual 'DNA' and therefore also a starting point for the church to reconnect. The same can be seen with the desire for community and belonging. The fact that these participants are part of a club like Rotary indicates they already have a strong sense or need for a community to which they can belong. In fact many of the participants in speaking about the fellowship they receive in Rotary are using language

more often linked to the church and for which spirituality has a part to play. Again the need for belonging, of being in community, can be a starting point for the church to help boomers explore ideas around this spiritual lifestyle. Secondly, as Drane notes his spectrum is a broken line, which symbolises that people are at different points along it.<sup>77</sup> Likewise the participants are at different points in their understanding of what it is to be 'spiritual'. They however have one thing in common, they are about to start entering a new stage in their life journey/cycle. This is a stage which has traditionally had a higher involvement in religious belief or spiritual practices. The question is will this generation show an interest in returning to the church? Before seeking to address this question we first need to look at how the Baby Boomers are approaching the issues of aging and retirement.

*When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now.  
Will you still be sending me a Valentine,  
Birthday greetings, bottle of wine.....  
Will you still need me, will you still feed me  
When I'm sixty four.*

Paul McCartney penned these 'tongue in cheek' words for his father when he turned 64, not long after that the Beatles recorded it for the '*Sgt. Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band*' album in 1967. Sean Roberts writing for the New York Times in June of 2006, on the eve of McCartney himself turning 64 highlights the dreaming of what might be and the reality of what is, in McCartney's lyrics;

*Mr McCartney's lyrics delivered to a self-consciously youth generation an enduring if satirical definition what their golden age might be like "many years from now". Today, many of those who embraced that quaint vision of enduring love, caring, knitting and puttering in retirement – "will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" – couldn't have been more wrong.<sup>78</sup>*

Unlike his song McCartney has not yet lost his hair, and while he does have three children their names are not '*Vera, Chuck and Dave*' as the song suggests. Moreover he is also the father of a seven year old. Twice married, widowed, divorced and now engaged for the third

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<sup>77</sup> Drane, *Do Christians know*, 78.

<sup>78</sup> S. Roberts, "So he's 64. Now What? A Future Unimagined" *New York Times*, June 16, 2006, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/arts/music/16and-paul.html>> (14/6/2011).

time, he hardly lives up to the lyrics of his song of a lifelong relationship, *'mine forever'*. McCartney, as Robert's notes, is closer to fulfilling Bob Dylan's song *'Forever Young'* than Pete Townsend's *'Hope I die before I get old'*.<sup>79</sup>

While technically not a Baby Boomer, McCartney's<sup>80</sup> song and even how he has lived his life reflects the boomer generation views on old age and growing old. A recent T.V. advert featuring another Baby Boomer, Jane Fonda, has the line *"don't hide your age – defy it"*. This advert is clearly aimed at the boomers. Marketing companies have found there is much profit to be made from well-heeled boomers who have a growing preoccupation with holding back the years and can afford to do so.<sup>81</sup> The Baby Boomers arrive at retirement age as the wealthiest and healthiest generation ever to do so, and they seem set to redefine what old age means. Writing for *'Coming of Age: Bring on the Baby Boomers!'*<sup>82</sup> Dennis Povey lists the following as a redefining of "Old Age";

Table 4: Redefining Old Age

- 55-60 pre retirement
- 60-65 early retirement
- 65-70 mid retirement
- 70-75 late retirement
- 75-80 early old age
- 80-85 middle old age
- 85-90+ old old age

This New Zealand redefining of aging matches similar lists that Collyer notes have come out of Britain.<sup>83</sup>

- Pre-Seniors – 55-65 age group, working, active and independent
- Seniors – 65-80 age group, retired, active and mostly independent

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>80</sup> Paul McCartney was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1942, which sets him just outside the normally defined years of 1946-64 for Baby Boomers.

<sup>81</sup> Harrington, *Reclaiming the Saga Generation*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> D M. Povey, *"Coming of Age: Bring on the Baby Boomers"* is a study resource published by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Wellington, October 2007, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Collyer, *What Church for the Saga Generation*, 11.

- Elderly – 80 years and over, mostly dependent and living alone.

The Church of England in their Church of England Newspaper<sup>84</sup> expands this group out further;

- 55-64 – the younger old
- 65-74 – the third age
- 75-84 – the active frail
- 85+ - the inactive frail

Whichever profile we choose to use to think of aging and retirement, it is about to undergo major changes as the Baby Boomers arrive. McCrone foresees that for a good many of the early boomers moving to retirement, it will not be a sudden, ‘this is my last day at work’ retirement.<sup>85</sup> Rather he sees some kind of low-stress part-time work, a gentle winding down into their late sixties and seventies.<sup>86</sup> Certainly for a number of the participants of my research this was very much how they were approaching their retirement. When asked to describe how they saw their approaching retirement a number responded in the manner of one interviewee, *“I don’t plan to retire, just slow down a little”* another echoed that in saying *“I plan to continue doing what I’m doing now but just not as many hours so I’ve got time to enjoy family and friends”*. Some will have to continue to work, for as both McCrone and Harrington note, while some boomers have done well and will be able to afford to retire early, and retire in comfort, a larger number will have to face soldiering on in the workforce or accept a big change in their lifestyle. For those who can retire comfortably then a diverse range of life choices lies before them. Some will have long planned travel, 61% of the participants in this research indicated this as part of their plans for retirement. Some will have more time for more activities in their community, again 42% of the participants indicated that they planned to do things that they had been putting off or had not had enough time to be involved with. One interviewee answered they *“hoped to be financially secure enough to be able to spend time with people that they may be able to help”*. By far

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<sup>84</sup> *Older People and the Church*, Church of England Newspaper, 16 August 2005, 11. As cited by Collyer, *What Church for the Saga Generation*, 11.

<sup>85</sup> McCrone, *Greying of the Boomers*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and away the most anticipated benefit of retirement was having more time to spend with family, especially their grandchildren. One statement best summarised this sentiment “*I look forward to being a more positive influence in the lives of my children and grandchildren and enhance their lives*”.

In many respects the participants bear much similarity to the boomers in Britain who feature in Harrington’s research.<sup>87</sup> Firstly, Harrington notes that the whole boomer phenomenon of “*life begins at fifty is yet another example of the generation stepping outside perceived life-cycle events and readjusting it to fit their choices and values.*”<sup>88</sup> For those retiring comfortably then now is the chance to live their dreams and desires. Toy’s such as Harley Davidson’s, sports cars, travel, clothes and fine dining are there for their enjoyment. A good number of the participants of this research would fit into Harrington’s description. Some have already started scaling back work so that they can enjoy this. This may not be the case for all boomers, but what it does illustrate is that McCartney’s images of aging and retiring in “*When I’m 64*”, are not how this new batch of retirees views the aging process.

The second similarity deals with traditional associations and stereotypes of old age are being rejected by these new and emerging retirees.<sup>89</sup> As already noted advertising slogans for boomers are calling on them to ‘defy’ their aging. Not only are there growing companies competing for the boomers dollars with products that will help hold back the years but boomers take pride in the fact that their children and in some cases their grandchildren, dance to the same music, wear the same clothes and share the same appetite for travel and adventure.<sup>90</sup> In 2010 the Australian rock group ACDC held two concerts in New Zealand, one in Auckland and the other in Wellington. Four of the participants from this research travelled to that concert. At the same concert another participant had an auntie (a Baby Boomer), her son (gen X) and a niece (gen Y) who would be the same age as some of the boomers grandchildren. Three generations at the same concert, this wouldn’t have been

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<sup>87</sup> A good deal of the research on the Baby Boomers in Britain that Harrington quotes comes from the independent think-tank Demos, whose work can be accessed at [www.demos.co.uk](http://www.demos.co.uk)

<sup>88</sup> Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation*, 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> McCrone, *Greying of the Boomers*, 3.

heard of in the 1950's, 60's or 70's.<sup>91</sup> Baby Boomers don't want to be seen as getting old, participants who were interviewed about their age spoke of the things they enjoy doing now, which they have done for most of their lives; cycling (this includes both competitive road cycling and mountain biking), hunting and fishing, sailing, tennis, running; this is not an exhaustive list, these things are all very recreational and this says something of the people who are moving to Te Anau to retire. Recreational activities and the access to them is one of the reasons places like Te Anau, Queenstown and Wanaka are fast becoming the areas boomers are retiring to. These recreational activities are very active by nature and require a good degree of fitness – not only did most of the participants have this they saw no reason in the near future for them to stop. Traditional recreational activities such as bowls hardly featured, the only exception being one interviewee who suggested “*he might take it up when he gets older*”.

The third similarity to Harrington's research has to do with the fear of aging. Harrington notes that while aging is a natural part of life, the boomers “*are more fearful of aging than any previous generation*”.<sup>92</sup> When asked to identify any issues they had with their coming retirement 60% of them indicated that they had concerns around future health issues, the next closest to that with 25% was simply the fear or uncertainty of what the future may hold for them. Harrington would suggest that some of that fear is of being sidelined, or being seen as redundant, and unlike past generations who accepted aging and especially the expectation that they would retire at a given age the Baby Boomers will not.<sup>93</sup> While most of the participants of this research own their own businesses, their fears of retirement or heading into it are of not being able to sell their businesses. One interviewee shared that their worry was that “*many of the young generations coming behind them don't have the financial means to buy these businesses*”. These businesses, as McCrone notes, are often their retirement savings plan and any retirement hinges on them selling them. In fact McCrone's article sounds a rather ominous warning to the boomers in this situation; “*If they*

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<sup>91</sup> Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation*, 10.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

*all start dashing for the exit at the same time, where are all the buyers going to come from?*<sup>94</sup>

In small places like Te Anau this is a real concern, but even in bigger urban areas signs of this are already showing as well. For those Baby Boomers in the paid workforce their approaching retirement is raising questions for them as well as their employers. 'Ageism' is fast replacing 'sexism' as a major issue in the workplace, Susan Hornsby-Geluk writing for the Business Day points out that the Supreme Court has upheld the Employment Court rulings that it is unlawful to discriminate against an employee on the basis of age.<sup>95</sup> As already noted one of the participants, who is in paid employment, is not planning on retiring right away. In conjunction with their employer they will scale back their working hours. This flexibility will need to become a part of the workplace, for as Hornsby-Geluk notes, from 2006 to 2021 the labour force in New Zealand over the age of sixty-five is expected to increase from 61,000 to more than 100,000.<sup>96</sup> Many Baby Boomers may choose to remain in the workforce beyond their retirement date. For some this may be for financial reasons but for others it may be more psychological. For some their work has given them meaning and purpose – to retire then becomes a scary place of finding out who they are now and what purpose their life now holds. As all participants of this research are members of the Rotary Club they have at least one good connection to the community outside their workplace. Hornsby-Geluk notes that for some older workers retirement is a fearful place because they simply have little or no connection to the communities in which they live, other than what they had in their workplace.<sup>97</sup>

Of interest for this research was whether or not the approaching life change of retirement and thus entering a later stage of life would involve any thoughts about death and what comes after that, as well as any possible return to church. In answer to the question; 'does the aging process raise questions about death/after life for you?' 75% responded with 'no'

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<sup>94</sup> McCrone, *Greying of the Baby Boomers*, 3.

<sup>95</sup> S. Hornsby-Geluk, "Handling Ageing Staff a Thorny Issue," *Business Day*, March 29 2011, <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/opinion/4820468/Handling-ageing-staff-a-thorny-issue.html>> (26/4/2011).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

answers. Responses to why they thought that varied from, *“When I die, I die – end of story”*, to, *“It is a natural progression through life to death, is fine with me”*, to, *“I don’t believe in the spiritual world, death is simply the natural completion of this life we have”*.

Of the 25% who said ‘yes’ the responses varied from someone who had a reasonably good understanding of what they believed, *“Yes, I have always held a belief that there is another life to come after this one”*, through to someone with an uncertain belief, *“I believe there is a spiritual life after death but have no understanding of it”*. A number saw it as a nice idea or thought and the following comment is a good summary, *“not totally convinced but the thought would be nice”*. As a follow up question the participants were asked if they would see the church as a place to help give answers to questions about death and life after death or not? Fifty four percent responded with a ‘no’, that left the other 46% saying ‘yes’. The follow up interviews were held with those who had responded as ‘no’ to the first question but yes to the later one to understand their reasoning for answering as they did. For two of the participants this was the first time questions about death/after life had been asked of them. Until then they had not given it any thought, or in depth thought, one respondent stated, *“it’s not something I’ve ever given too much thought to, it always seemed a little negative to dwell on”*. Their answer was more an unconscious response than one that they had considered in depth. When pressed for why they considered the church a place to find answers about death/afterlife the common response was, *“I’m not sure, I suppose the teaching I got from the church is still with me even if I don’t think about it all that much”*.

Four participants had answered ‘no’ to the first question simply because they no longer believed in any such concept of life after death. When asked to explain why they had then answered that the church would be the place to answer such questions, the following response is a good summary of these participants; *“that’s what the church teaches isn’t it, I mean things like heaven/ hell, good and evil, all those sort of religious things – so I suppose if I wanted to get answers for this I might turn to the church”*. The second group indicated that a question about death/after life had no relevance to them. This does not mean they have completely rejected the church, as indicated the church was still seen as the first place they would go to find answers if they did want them.

This leads us to the question of any possibility of a return to church as these boomers enter their retirement years and new stage in life. As noted earlier Carroll and Roof in defining life cycle events as individuals mature, show that levels of religious involvement tend to increase as people age.<sup>98</sup> However the Baby Boomers have already shown a propensity not to follow traditional trends in religious involvement, in they did not return in significant numbers when they got married and had children, moreover they also dropped out of active religious involvement after their children left Sunday School.<sup>99</sup> This trend was very much evident with the participants in this research. This raises the question as to whether this new stage of life will raise any thoughts of a return to church or exploring faith/spirituality from a different perspective.

The participants were asked to respond to the question 'do you think in the future you might become a regular attender of a church or other religious organisation?' with the choice of one of the following responses, 'most probably', 'I am open to the possibility', 'seems rather unlikely' and 'is no way I can envisage it'. Only 2% indicated that it was 'most probable' that they would return to church. At the other end of the spectrum 20% could not envisage any possibility of them going back to church. The two biggest groups were in the middle of the spectrum. Twenty five percent were open to the possibility of a return to church while 48% felt it was rather unlikely that they would return. In follow up interviews with these two groups a number of points were made. Firstly, the participants most open to return were those who had stopped attending church after their children had either stopped going to Sunday School or left home. These were the ones with the most recent memories of church, who had appreciated the support, fellowship and community that the church had offered them. Secondly, the other group were by and large those who had left church in their teenage or early adulthood years. Most of these had got out of the habit of going to church – church had played little or no part for most of their lives and they could see no reason why this might change. Thirdly, across both groups most of the participants still held positive, or

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<sup>98</sup> Carroll & Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds*, 74.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

relatively positive, feelings and memories of their church past. However, most also questioned the relevance of church in today's society.

Richter and Francis, in their research with those leaving and returning to church indicate that the three main reasons for leaving church were '*unfulfilled expectations*', '*changes and chances*' and a '*loss of faith*'.<sup>100</sup> 'Changes and chances' were those who were described as individuals who had got out of the habit of going to church, be it through the likes of moving away from home/town, or from family or work commitments taking up time that would have been used to go to church. It is this group of leavers that Richter & Francis note are most likely to return to church.<sup>101</sup> This group like the participants in this research are open to return to church but the question is will the church be ready for them. Being open to returning and actually making the steps to return can be a rather big 'if', 'might' or 'possibly'. It will pose challenges which we examine in the next chapter, however before that some observations can be made about how these boomer participants view the church and its role in society today.

One of the last questions asked of the participants was 'what role do you see the church has to play in today's society?' Of all the questions asked this one received the most responses. When grouped together they fall into four distinct groups. The first group would be spiritual development; that is participants saw the church still had a role to play today to help foster people's spiritual development. One participant saw it as, "*providing an environment for group work, spiritual sharing and for people who want to attend church*". This comment was interesting as they separated the spiritual group out from attending a church service. Another participant suggested "*provide spiritual support in a way that makes Christianity relevant to our daily lives, don't judge – leave that for God!*"

The second group saw what could be described as traditional roles of the church; this being funerals/weddings, pastoral care and fellowship. Five participants made mention of the role churches can help with people who are dying or for families that have had a family member

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<sup>100</sup> Richard Francis, *Gone but not Forgotten*, 136-137.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

pass away. Pastoral Care and support was seen as key for a number, the following comment is a good summary of what many said, *“the church provides a safe and caring environment for many people, it provides spiritual help and guidance as well as friendship”*.

The third group saw the church still had a role in education that had helped to install values and principles to live by. One participant shared, *“the church is like a school, it helps enlighten people about the Bible, and it gives comfort for those in need”*. Five saw this teaching role as important for young people, the following comment was common on this theme, *“the church can help teach younger people good values and principles to live life by”*. Education of younger people is important for these boomers, including for nearly half of them spiritual education.

A follow up question asked how many had taken their children to Sunday School. Fifty four percent had done so. When asked if the opportunity arose to take their grandchildren to church if they weren't already being taken? Forty percent said they would, though many said as their grandchildren lived away from where they are this may not get to happen too often.

The fourth group saw the church still had a role to play in society through social service. One participant felt, *“the church should lead by example in helping to care for the poor and needy and picking up where the government and community agencies don't, can't or won't help”*.

All these suggestions offer hope to the church in how they can connect with society and with members of the boomer generation who by and large, still carry remnants of the faith that they were brought up in, even if very few of them attend church at this point or are looking at coming back to church any time soon.

## **Chapter Five: Analysis & Discussion**

### *On The Threshold of Time*

*Lord Jesus, as we look into the future, let no fears assail us. Help us to be confident that Thou will be with us in the future as we know thou hast been in the past ... Hear us as we pray, standing on the threshold of time. Thou alone canst equip us for the tasks and the duties that are ours that we may do our very best and quit us like men. In thy strong name we pray.  
Amen.<sup>102</sup>*

The Baby Boomers and the church both stand on the threshold of time. For the boomers there is the entry to a new stage of life; retirement beckons them with all its' plans, and hope filled expectations of doing things that have been long put on hold till this time. So too does the uncertainty of what aging will bring to them. Health issues, loss of meaning as work which has given them most of their meaning and purpose is replaced with 'what now?' Likewise the church stands on the same threshold. These transition points in people's life stages have often been key points when people may choose to interact with the church. Here we have a generation who are about to pass a significant life stage point, but this generation have to a large extent already 'done' church and chose to leave it. If the church is to make the most of the opportunities that this life stage may present with the boomer generation, then it needs to be flexible and welcoming, not validating negative stereotypes about being demanding and judgemental which many of the boomers already hold.

Before seeking to analyse and discuss the findings of the research there are a number of limitations with the research that became apparent during the interview stage or in writing up of the research. Firstly, because those involved in answering the questionnaires and in the interviews were from the Rotary Club, most were self employed business owners. Those who were not were in salaried positions, this involved teachers, managers of businesses and a chief executive officer: In the questionnaire financial insecurities were not any issue for this group of participants. In this respect they do not have many of the same fears of retirement of those who have worked on low wages most of their life and are retiring with little or no savings. Secondly all the Rotarians were of one culture, that being New Zealand European. As such, the research is limited to this particular ethnic group.

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<sup>102</sup> C. Marshall. ed, *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*, London, Peter Davies, 1955, 50.

Thirdly, it became apparent in writing up this research that nearly all participants came from a rural background. This tended to lean towards a more conservative background and worldview and with regard to church attendance, especially youth related events, there was often a much more social component as much as a religious one. Finally the number of participants along with the above issues would lead towards any analysis being more of a descriptive nature rather than a prescriptive one. Having said this, a lot of the information data coming from the participants matched research on the same generational group from around New Zealand as well as overseas, particularly from Britain in whom we share a good deal of common heritage.

In seeking to present the analysis of the research I shall follow the framework of the questionnaire that the participants answered. This being; church background, faith and belief, spirituality, retirement, return to church. I will also add implications I believe this has for the church coming from wider research that is already out there.

### Church Attendance and Leaving

A very high percentage of participants attended church as children and young people. At 96% it is considerably higher than the 50% of Baby Boomers with church background that Collyer identified in his research.<sup>103</sup> In seeking to understand why such a high percentage of church attendance was recorded the most obvious answer is their rural upbringing. As stated above nearly all of the participants had grown up in rural communities, mostly in the Otago/Southland area but some had moved south having grown up in other rural areas around New Zealand. For these participants the churches in their rural areas would have played a more social role in their lives than for those growing up in a city. Church would have been the meeting place for much of their community. Going to church for many would have been the socially accepted thing to do, as much as a religious thing to do. As young people in their early teens, or at least till they left home, the local church youth group would have been one of the few social activities open to most of them. This was evident in many

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<sup>103</sup> Collyer, "What Church for the Saga Generation", *Church Army*, 5.

of the participant's reflections of their church past which focussed on their youth group activities.

Despite the high percentage of church attendance one thing that these participants had in common, with the likes of Collyer's, was the steep drop off in how many took their children to church. Only 54% of the participants took their children to church. Such a big drop in church involvement at a young age adds weight to the picture of the Baby Boomers being the last massed Sunday School generation. The church army research graph (pg 24) highlighted that since 2005, when the Baby Boomers turned sixty, it has been increasingly likely that subsequent generations will not have had much of a Christian upbringing.<sup>104</sup> It has not happened overnight but since the Baby Boomers were parents until today's parents of young children, less and less have been choosing to take their children to church to receive a Christian education. This decision not to bring their children to church highlights some points of interest with these boomers leaving church.

The research showed that the participants had left church in two quite distinct time periods. The first group left church in their teenage years through to their early twenties. This is not an uncommon action for young people in this age bracket to do, as noted early in life cycle events, leaving church has been recorded before. The Baby Boomer generation certainly weren't the first to do this. It is the second group of leavers that set the Baby Boomers apart from previous generations; the second group left either when their children had finished Sunday School or when they had left home. Normally it would have been expected to see the earlier leavers return when they got married and had children, and for church involvement to grow and increase once the children left home, neither of these happened.

The boomers leaving church and failure to return with their children to the church to receive the socialising and nurturing that the church has always given to families, seem to have been

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 5.

passed onto subsequent generations. Jamieson's research highlighted that increasingly parents were willing to leave church and take their children with them.<sup>105</sup>

Traditional reasons for attending church like bringing their children were broken with the Baby Boomers. New parents may choose to bring their children to church still, but it would be very hard to see a whole generation doing this again in large numbers.

The research revealed that the biggest reason for leaving the church was simply getting out of the habit. For most of the participants that happened when they left home to either start work or go to University. This appears to have had a number of 'flow on' effects with these boomers with regard to church and their memories of church. Firstly, because of the manner in which they left, most still have relatively positive memories of their involvement in church. This was particularly the case with those who had left early and hence have been away from church for a considerable length of time.<sup>106</sup> Those that leave simply through getting out of the habit not only appear to hold these positive memories, they may also be the easiest of the church leavers to reconnect back with church. This is not to say that it will be simple. For the participants of this research the relevance of what the church has to offer will be hard to overcome especially for those earlier leavers who have been away for some considerable time. They have worked hard and done well for themselves because of that hard work. They are in a position to retire reasonably comfortably and they've got there without the need for the church, so why start back now? This may be different for those who face retirement where they may need the social service support that the church can offer, but for those boomers who got there largely by themselves, it is not.

### Faith and Belief

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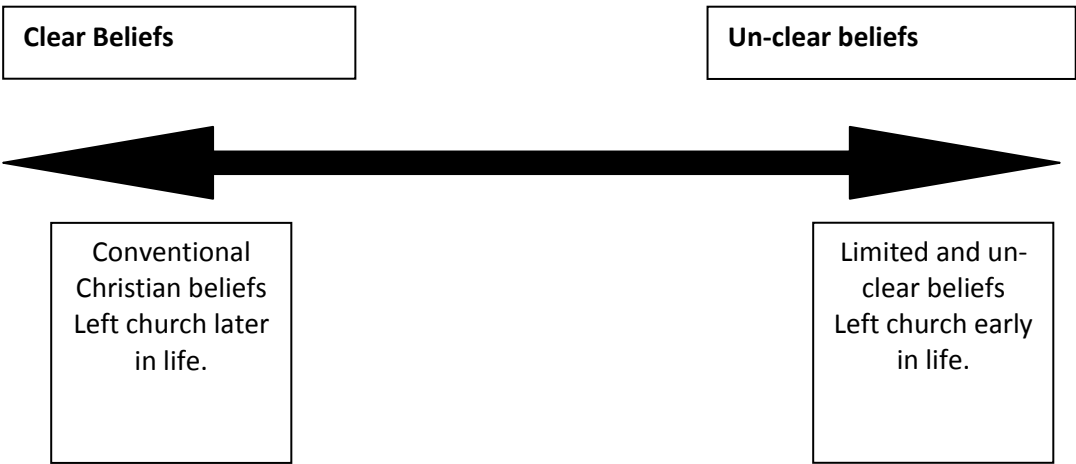
<sup>105</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> The exceptions to this are the handful of participants who had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church. The heavy church involvement and teachings had turned many of these boomers off church.

Given the high percentage of participants that had a church upbringing it was not at all surprising to see a corresponding number show up with the questions on belief in God and their personal faith. Eighty five percent of the participants affirmed they still had a belief in God, 78% of them still ticked a denominational church tie in the census figures and 40% of them said they still pray to God. In seeking to understand the significance of these figures the following observations can be made. Firstly, in both the questionnaires and in the interviews, it was obvious that there was a wide spectrum of what people meant when they said they believed in God.

Like the participants of A.C.Nielsen’s research which was mentioned earlier, the spectrum with these participants ranged from conventional Christian beliefs through to being unsure of exactly what they believed, but they felt there was some form of higher power out there. Those holding the more conventional Christian beliefs were most often those that left the church later in life, they could articulate well what it was they believed. At the other end of the spectrum were those that had left church early in their teenage years. Here the belief was often quite limited with regard to being able to articulate what it was they believed. That is, any belief they had was deep seated, often evidenced in some of their values or behaviours (ie: don’t steal, don’t kill) which they had learned in their early childhood. Apart from that belief was given little or no thought.

Table 5: Spiritual Beliefs within Rotary Club Members



A secondary observation is that of belief without belonging. It is clear, especially with the later leavers who held quite strong beliefs that many participants beliefs had continued even though they no longer attended church. In many ways this group fit well with Murray's description of believing without belonging, "*Many people believe in God, pray frequently, accept core Christian convictions and attempt to live by Christian values. Some previously belonged to a church.*"<sup>107</sup>

It would be wrong of the church to assume just because these boomers have stopped going to church they have stopped believing. Their church upbringing, even for those that left early still plays a part in how they think and act and for a number of them, the belief and faith they received from the church has continued even after they stopped attending church. What the participants all shared in common when discussing their beliefs was that it was '*their beliefs*'. Belief was seen by all as a personal thing which they did not feel they needed to share with other people. In fact for a number of them doing so was something they saw as offensive. This individualising and personalising faith were two of the cultural changes that have affected the church, which came in the cultural changes that the boomers helped usher in.<sup>108</sup>

### Spirituality

In addressing the questions about spirituality the research revealed that for these Baby Boomer participants spiritual seeking was not particularly strong. Many struggled to describe what the concept of spirituality meant to them. In this regard these participants were quite different from much of the other research that has been referred to in this paper. Many of these spoke of the spiritual searching that has been defined and often led by the boomers. Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* is a clear example of this. While all the reasons for why there was so little searching were not able to be explored, there were two reasons for many not being that interested in spiritual things. Firstly, there was the lifestyle and work many had chosen. As mentioned

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<sup>107</sup> Murray, *Church after Christendom*, 12.

<sup>108</sup> Ward, *Losing My Religion*, 11.

above, most participants were business people who had devoted a large amount of their time and energy to business. The success of these businesses has granted them a lifestyle which, when time allows, lets them pursue things that interest them. Secondly, most of the participants understanding of spirituality was still tied to their church background. For most any attempts to describe spirituality was closely linked to church. As most had chosen to leave church it is not hard to see that to link spirituality with church would lead many to not see spirituality as of any importance to them.

Having made these observations, two observations came up during the compiling of the research and the interviews. Firstly, for a small group the closeness to nature and the majestic scenery of Fiordland National Park was a source of spiritual inspiration. Having experienced that same feeling myself in 'the park' I can appreciate what these participants are saying. Without realising it they have been experiencing the God of creation in creation. The Apostle Paul's words to the church in Rome resonate with what these participants spoke of;

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, (Rom 1:20 NIV)*

While this particular passage deals with creation holding all humanity accountable it also expresses the know-ability of God through creation. The sacredness of the place and experience was more moving than any form or structure that organised religion had to offer. These types of experience serve to help these boomers and many see that God isn't locked up in the past, in traditions and practices they may have chosen to have little or nothing to do with. It opens up a whole new understanding of God and for many new ways of expressing and experiencing God.

Secondly, the churches use of language to express things like spirituality needs to change. For many of the participants of this research terms like journey, quest or searching, when talking about spirituality were new, fresh and disarming. It is disarming in the sense that they do not carry the baggage that other church language like 'faith' or 'belief' did. They were also terms that they could relate to in their everyday life. In the preface to his book

*Naked Spirituality*, Brian McLaren captures this need for a disarming effect when he speaks of naked spirituality.

*This is a book about getting naked – not physically, but spirituality. It’s about stripping away the symbols and status of public religion – the Sunday dress version people often call “organised religion”. And it’s about attending to the well-being of the soul clothed only in naked human skin.*<sup>109</sup>

When the spirituality was framed in language that was free from the church baggage that much church language often carries, then these participants often opened up and spoke more freely. It was interesting to see some of those interviewed begin to see that things of God, our spiritual dimension, was still part of their lives too.

### Retirement

These participants face retirement with a high degree of optimism. They bear much in common with those in Harrington’s research which described them as the healthiest and wealthiest generation to retire.<sup>110</sup> As such most of these participants are looking forward to retirement. Other than possible health issues later in life, they have few concerns. In this respect they will differ from many other boomers who face retirement after a life of working for a wage and little or no savings with only the pension to rely on.

All the participants were in agreement that their upcoming retirement will be a life-stage event when changes will be made. Just what those changes are remains to be seen, but one observation can be made. With regard to aging, these boomer participants are no different to other boomers when it comes to talking about getting old. That is, at this point they do not consider themselves old, like the tables earlier on, they are pushing old age out further from where they are now. They are the new old – young at heart, and with time and energy to continue to make a difference in their communities, in a way that previous generations may not have been able to.

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<sup>109</sup> B.D. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality: A Life with God in 12 Simple Words*, New York: Harper Collins, 2011, vii.

<sup>110</sup> Harrington, *Reaching the Saga Generation*, 4.

## Returning to Church

This was really the key aim of the research. In answer to the question about the possibility of returning to church the 'no's at 25% were stronger than the 2% that said 'yes', however, they were not a deafening 'no'. In fact the two biggest groups were either open to the possibility or felt it was rather unlikely. At a combined total of 73% this is a very large group that would be commonly known as 'undecided'. So what are we to make of these figures? Firstly, I believe, they call into question any concept or thought that simply getting older will see this generation return to church. Standing in his concluding comments infers this when he says, "*on a whim, these Boomers will return to church, seeking help in making sense of their question.*"<sup>111</sup> While this might be a nice hope, it is just that, a hope. It is a hope not unlike the assumption Alan Roxburgh seeks to challenge with what he calls 'attractional' church; "*The assumption of attractional imagination is that average people outside church are looking for a church and know they should belong to one, and therefore, church leaders should create the most attractional church possible.*"<sup>112</sup>

For a very large percent of the participants of this research a return to church is simply not of their conscious thoughts at this time. This is not to say that this won't ever change, but the assumption that they will return simply because they are getting older needs to be challenged. For many of the participants of this research the biggest stumbling block to any return is the issue of relevance. They have, for a good many of them, not needed the church in their lives. They have already past two other major life – cycle events, in marriage and the birth of their children, neither of which caused them to return to church. They have had, in most cases, twenty to thirty years away from church without much need for church and this does not look like changing in any sort of a hurry.

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<sup>111</sup> Standing, *Re-Emerging Church*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> A.J. Bond, M.S. Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it Matters, How to Become One*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009, 18.

This is not to say that there is no hope of return. Alongside the large percentage who I have described as 'undecided', are also the same participants who still could see a role for church to play in today's society. These were summarised as, spiritual development, traditional church roles such as weddings/funerals, pastoral care, education and teaching values to young people and social services. Pastoral care and especially funerals are important in rural areas, like here in Te Anau. They are a real point of contact with people and as these boomer participants age it will increasingly be so. Done well, they can become a process of breaking down some of their issues of relevance and can be a visual demonstration of God's love in action through the church. Living as most of the participants do on the edge of New Zealand's largest national park, the environment is very important to these boomers. Environmental issues and action can possibly serve as another way for the church to interact with these boomers, again challenging some of the preconceived relevance issues they have with church. Spiritual development and education I shall leave to discuss with the implications for the church.

### Church Implications

The questions about the church in this research have tended to focus on three areas; the participants past church experience and backgrounds, the possibility of return to church as they enter retirement and what future do they see for the church. From their responses to these areas and some of the wider readings there are a number of issues worth noting.

Firstly, the upcoming retirement and aging of the boomer generation will be a life cycle event when changes and new choices or options may be explored. As the A.C.Nielsen report indicated, life cycle events can be a point of contact,<sup>113</sup> or reconnection with the church. At this point in time most of the participants have indicated a return to church is not in their thoughts. However given the high number that indicated they haven't totally discounted it, the church needs to be open and aware to the chances that things might change. It may

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<sup>113</sup> *Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life*, 21.

only take something like a sudden illness, death of a loved one or some other struggle to open the possibilities of church having something to offer or support them.

Secondly, movement towards a return to church will have to overcome the stumbling block of relevance. In some ways the church can do little to address things like the years that have elapsed since many left church, or some of the high profile negative images of church/religion that appear in the media. The church does however have control of things like the type of language they use and the ways they interact with these possible returnees. Many of the participants highlighted past issues of church dogma and doctrine as 'off putting' to them. Any language that comes across as judgemental and therefore intolerant of others will be a 'turn off'. It has been interesting to note in sharing some of this research with other church leaders, that when the mention of the boomers still having a faith or belief is made the instant response from nearly all has been, "*well, what is it that they believe?*" It has not been hard to miss the need for doctrinal certainty in their response – sadly that stands against the hope that could come from seeing their belief, at whatever point it is, as a starting point for conversations as to where they are with God at this point in their life.

Our church language needs to develop more spiritual themes to it; terms like journey, quest and searching have already been mentioned, but there is so much more that can be added as well. Runcorn's excellent book *The Road to Growth Less Travelled*, which had been mentioned earlier, is a great example. Runcorn uses the imagery of exiles to explore spirituality and touches on themes like; '*the way of darkness*', '*from anxiety to love*' and '*from coercion to community*'.<sup>114</sup> The boomers, compared to any other generation, are open to the language of spirituality. They are the generation that while rejecting the church helped give rise to the 'New Age' movement. The fact that the participants of this research still saw spiritual development as a role the church has to offer would, I hope, lead us to find ways to help them explore this in a way that overcomes the issues of relevance some may have.

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<sup>114</sup> Runcorn, *The Road to Growth Less Travelled*, 5-20.

Thirdly, the church needs to develop the art of listening. In his book *Five Years On*,<sup>115</sup> Alan Jamieson picks up his research from *A Churchless Faith* and re-interviews many of the same people to see where they are now on their spiritual journeys. In his chapter from *A Pastors Perspective*, Jamieson challenges the church when he says;

*I believe the church needs to learn how to listen: listen to people and listen to our culture. The greatest tool we have when working with church leavers is to listen. Listening helps them and it helps us as church leaders and pastors.*<sup>116</sup>

He goes on to point out the benefits that listening brings;

*When such listening is non-judgemental and accepting it provides the context in which pains, abuses, questions, confusions, doubt and heartache can be verbalised and most importantly heard.*<sup>117</sup>

This type of listening would go a long way to helping these Baby Boomer church leavers process some of their church past, and possibly help us (the church), see ways to help them explore the spiritual dimension of their lives.

Fourthly, as these boomers do move into their senior years the church is going to have to find new ways of ministering to the 'new old'. Win and Charles Arn in their book *Catching the Age Wave*<sup>118</sup>, challenge the church for its' comfortable assumptions and programs for elderly, which they see as outdated and in need of renewing as the Baby Boomers come to retirement. Harrington also hints that this is a reason for a lack of missional interest in the boomers; just because the church has done senior ministry before does not mean that it will work for this new aging generation.

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<sup>115</sup> A. Jamieson, J. McIntosh and A. Thomson, *Five Years on – Continuing Faith Journeys of those who left the Church*, Wellington: Portland Research Trust, 2006, 109.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>118</sup> W and C. Arn, *Catching the Age Wave; a Handbook for Effective Ministry with Senior Adults*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1999.

Fifthly, coming from Harrington's observation about the lack of missional interest in the boomers, is the very heavy emphasis placed on 'youth' and 'family' ministries compared to that of the Baby Boomers. Many churches who can afford to do so, have paid youth or family workers, or in some cases both. Very few, if any, have someone paid to reach out to the Baby Boomers. There is a real need for some good training and equipping of church leaders and members on how the church may effectively minister to the Baby Boomers. This is not to say that youth and family aren't important, they are, but a very sizeable group of the population is getting little or no attention from the church. Yet this is a group that already have some knowledge of the Christian faith and a past active involvement in it. Two of the participants of this research had been Sunday School teachers and one an Elder of a previous church before moving to Te Anau. People like this, if reconnected with the church, have skills and training that can be harnessed. Although it needs to be said, this should not be the motivation for reaching out to them.

A final observation to be made is in relation to church services. Church services were not the focus of this research, in fact no questions were asked about church services. However, if the boomers are to make a return to church what will that mean for the Sunday worship service? Given that this generation has shown an avoidance for anything that would make them feel old, it would be hard to see them being drawn to a church service dominated with older people. A traditional church service dominated by people of their own or more importantly their parents generation would, I believe, struggle to draw or hold the boomers. Having said this, the boomers are increasingly showing themselves to be very nostalgic. One only needs to see the number of Baby Boomer rock bands who are reforming and performing to sell out concerts of mostly boomers with their children or grandchildren tagging along to see this. Many of the participants spoke, with some fondness of the enjoyment they get going to church at Christmas to sing the traditional carols they grew up with. For this reason a youth oriented service with all modern songs will, I believe, also struggle with this generation who has enjoyed having things their way for most of their lives.

A middle option would be what Carroll and Roof calls a 'multi-generational service'.<sup>119</sup> This is where different generations have blended together into one congregation. The young generations would help appeal to the boomers, but at the same time an awareness of past generations and elements of worship that they remember from their youth will appeal to this sense of nostalgia that the boomers seem to be showing. Carroll and Roof acknowledge that this is by far the hardest way for a church to go, but the richness of different generations working together brings its' own rewards.<sup>120</sup>

Two further points can be made about a church community being made up of many different generations. Firstly, there is nothing inherently wrong with individual generations getting together, but as Jurgen Moltman points out, "*this is not yet Christian community.*"<sup>121</sup> This Christian community only comes together when different generations join together in a way which builds mutual trust, and allows each generation to see the limitations of their own generation and the strengths of the other generations.<sup>122</sup> Secondly, as Moltman points out, in the past where many generations lived together, it was "*the grandparents and parents who had their special gifts and duties in passing on faith to the coming generation.*"<sup>123</sup> This image of church as an extended family will resonate well with the boomers. One of the roles that the participants still saw for the church was to pass on spiritual values to the younger generations. In this type of community they have a part to play. In our current New Zealand setting, with its growing awareness of 'whanau' as something wider than the traditional nuclear family, the Baby Boomers may find a place to develop as the new grandparents passing on the faith and values to a new generation.

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<sup>119</sup> Carroll & Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds*, 140.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>121</sup> J. Moltman, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 237.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

When developing my thinking before starting this research I had toyed with calling the Baby Boomers the prodigal generation, and this paper would be about the possible return of these prodigals into the arms of the church. As the research progressed it became apparent that the title might not work so well since it's not so clear that these prodigals are all that ready to return yet, or at all.

A simple answer to the question 'will the Baby Boomers return to church as they retire and enter the start of their senior years?' would have to be 'no'! The problem with simple answers however, is that they often aren't as simple as they appear.

Like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable (Luke. 15: 11-32) the boomer participants of this research grew up with a strong church/religious background. In this regard they were also similar to many of the Baby Boomers in other research. The high numbers with a church background do paint them as the last mass Sunday School generation. Like the prodigal son they have chosen to leave home and turn their back – but who were they turning their back on? In the parable the father is God, but for many of the participants of this research they haven't turned their backs on God. Not completely anyway. Nearly 75% of them still claim some form of faith and belief in God. Their backs were, it appears, turned against the church. It is the church they walked away from. It is the church which many had and still have problems with. For many of these boomers faith has continued even though they have left the church. There is without doubt a large degree of difference between the participants with regard to the depth of their belief. Those who left church early in their teens weren't able to express what they believed as well as someone who had left in their late forties, but there is no doubt that many still believe in God.

Unlike the prodigal son, these prodigals, if we are to call them such, do not yet appear to have reached a place or situation which has caused them to look back and regret their decision to leave. Their coming retirement and senior years don't appear as if they will cause

that questioning either, or not yet anyway. This is not to say that some crisis or event may not cause these questions to rise to the surface.

If that time does occur then I believe for a good many of these boomer participants, church may again be a place they look to. Many of these participants still had positive memories of the church and 73% had indicated that they were either open to the possibility of a return to church or hadn't completely discounted the possibility of it.

If this were to happen however, it does raise some other issues with using the prodigal son imagery. Firstly, in the parable, the prodigal son is returning to the father, God, not the church. In many respects the church is like the older son. He was not ready for his brothers' return and was quite put out when he did. I don't think the church will be 'put out' or offended if the boomers do decide to return. However I am not so sure that they are at all ready for their return. The church needs to move from being more like the older brother to more like the father. The imagery of the father looking for, and running to meet the son, speaks of the passion in which the church should be looking for the Baby Boomers. Long before the son returned the father was looking for him, so to with the church, it needs to be making every effort to reconnect with the Baby Boomers. In the fathers embracing of the prodigal son we see the fullness of God's grace and mercy and forgiveness being modelled, as the son is brought back into a full relationship with the father. So to with the church, it needs to be modelling the grace and mercy and forgiveness it profess comes from God and brings about the healing of broken relationships; between God and people and between all of humanity.

Secondly, the son is not only restored to relationship with the father, but he is also brought back into the family as a full member. The church as a family or community needs to remember that its model of community is God himself. Christian community has, as Moltman points out, *"its genesis in the community of God shares with human beings, and grows out of the community which human beings have with one another in this community"*

*of God.”*<sup>124</sup> This community welcomes all and all have a place and role to play in it. It is not that rules and structures are wrong, but they should not hinder those who seek to find a relationship with God. The churches language and structures will need to become more welcoming and encouraging otherwise returnees may decide that what they have returned to is not what they want or need.

The Baby Boomers possible return to church raises a number of questions and issues. This research project has in some ways only scratched the top of the sacrifice for me. A number of other questions have arisen from this study that in themselves could have further study done, these being,

- What was the belief's that that those who had left church at a young age, still held to? And have they added other things to them over time?
- What might a multi-generational church service that ministers to this returned generation look like?
- What ministry needs might this new old generation need?
- Given that only one culture took part in this research it would be great to see how other cultures of the same generation are facing retirement and aging.

A wave of retirements is certainly about to begin this year in 2011, what that wave brings to the church only time will tell, but it would behove the church to be ready for it.

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

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## Appendix 1

Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> August 2010

Rotary Club of Fiordland  
c/- Anthea Levy

Attention: Rotary Directors  
Re: Help with research project through the University of Otago

Dear Fellow Rotary Club Members,

I write seeking the assistance of our Rotary Club of Fiordland in a research project I will be doing next year as part of my Master of Ministry (M. Min) through the University of Otago.

As part of my Masters I am required to undertake a twenty thousand word research project of my own choice. My intended field of study is the so called 'Baby Boomer' generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, and their attitudes and feelings to issues involving spirituality, faith and the church. At present, while there has been a small but growing field of research done around this topic overseas (i.e. Great Britain and the USA), there has been very little undertaken here in New Zealand and hence the reason for my interest in doing this research.

A portion of this research will involve the use of a questionnaire and interviews with people who were born within the proposed time frame, and it is here that I am asking for help from our Rotary Club. As our club has a good number of people who fit this proposed target group I write to ask if the Rotary Club would be willing to let me conduct my research with those members who are willing to take part in it. Having such a good number of people within the target group would make it easier to get a high enough response rate, which will be needed to help make the research more creditable and relevant. As the research is being conducted through the University of Otago it will be carefully monitored and supported by the university throughout the whole project. This support is not only for my help and protection but also for the security and protection of all those who take part.

I look forward to hearing back if the Club is able to assist me with this research project.

Kind regards

Karl Lamb

## **Appendix 2**

### **Aging Baby Boomers: Reviewing Faith, Spirituality and Religious Affiliation in the Next Stage of Life.**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements the Master of Ministry Degree which I am currently working towards

The aim of this project is to gather knowledge around the issues of personal faith, ideas about spirituality and religious affiliation within the generation often referred to as the Baby Boomers. The reason for doing this is to challenge an assumption, 'that as members of a particular generation age their religious beliefs and involvement increase with age', with regard to the Baby Boomers. This generation has been described as the last mass Sunday school generation and the generation who, by and large, choose to leave the church. I am interested to know whether the encroaching spectre of retirement and aging engender any thoughts about belief in God? And if so, in what ways? Has the course of time affected your views about the church? And if so, in what ways has it changed?

#### **What Type of Participant is being sought?**

The people required to help participate in this project are those who were born between 1945 and 1964, these being the years that generally define the Baby Boomer generation.

#### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to:

Participate in the project through the answering of a questionnaire drawn up by myself in such a way that the answers you give will reflect your beliefs, views and experiences: hence the open-ended nature of some of the questions. A number of participants will be invited to answer some further questions through a personal interview, again using open-ended questions.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

#### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

#### **What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

The only data that will be collected concerning the majority of people who participate in this project will be the questionnaire they answer. The exception is those people who will be interviewed; in these cases the interviews will be audio-taped and later transcribed and added to the research paper.

This project involves an open-questioning technique in which the precise nature of the questions which will be asked has not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops.

Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind

The purpose of collecting the data is for the writing of a research paper; 'Aging Baby Boomers: Reviewing Faith, Spirituality and Religious Affiliation in the Next Stage of Life'. During the completion of the research project the data will be seen and accessed by those who may help in the transcribing of the data, those who may help with the typing of the data and on completion staff from the University who may make photocopies of the research paper. Once the paper is complete a copy will be retained by the University of Otago and may be accessed by other researchers at the University of Otago.

The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The raw data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only the researcher, Mr Karl Lamb, and his supervisor, Dr Kevin Ward, will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed. Reasonable precautions will be taken to protect and destroy data gathered by email. However, the security of electronically transmitted information cannot be guaranteed. Caution is advised in the electronic transmission of sensitive material.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Karl Lamb

or

Rev Dr Kevin Ward

Telephone Number: - 03 249-7174

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

Telephone Number: - 03 473-0786

### Appendix 3

#### **Aging Baby Boomers: Reviewing Faith, Spirituality and Religious Affiliation in the Next Stage of Life.**

##### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. The data [*audio-tapes*] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. "This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind."
5. The results of the project may be published and available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)



- Methodist
- Roman Catholic
- Baptist
- Pentecostal
- Brethren
- Other Christian. Name.....
- Islam/Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Judaism/Jewish
- Other religion. State.....
- No religion
- Object to state

b) Did you have a religious upbringing of any sort?                      Yes/No

If you answered 'no' please go to question 4

If you circled 'yes' can you please state the religious denomination or title

.....

.....

c) If you attended church as a child did you experience or attend any of the following? (*Circle as many as applies*)

Infant Baptism (christening)    Dedication    Confirmation    Sunday School                      Bible Class

Youth Group

If you feel none of these apply to you please say so, or if you have others you wish to add please do so

.....

.....

.....

d) Did you have a state or church based education?                      State School    Church School

If you circled 'church school' can you please state whether your education was all church school based or a combination of both

.....

.....

e) Do you belong to a religious organisation?                      Yes/No

f) Do you regard yourself as having a connection in any way to a religious organisation?    Yes/No

If you circled 'yes' how so?

.....

.....

.....



Yes/No

If you circled 'yes' how so

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.....  
.....

d) How would you describe your memories of the church? ... *(Please circle one)*

Positive                      Negative                      Neutral

In the lines below can you please briefly explain why you answered the way you did

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.....  
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.....

e) Have your views about church changed the longer you have been away from it?                      Yes/No

If you circled 'yes' how so

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.....

f) With not going to church, which of the following statements would you most agree with and why? ...  
*(Please circle one)*

My life has been better                      My life has been worse                      It has made no difference

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.....  
.....  
.....

**4.**  
a) Do you believe there is a God? ... *(Please circle one)*                      Yes definitely / Probably /Not sure /Definitely no

If you answered 'Definitely no' please go onto question 5

b) What best describes your belief about God? ... (Please circle one)

A personal being involved in the lives of people today

Created the world but not involved in the world today

Not personal, something like a cosmic life force

Do not know

c) Do you think going to church makes a difference to believing in God? ... (Please circle one)

Yes/ Probably /Not sure/No

If you circled 'yes' please give a reason for your answer here

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If you circled 'no' please give a reason for your answer here

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.....

c) Do you ever pray to God? Yes/No

If you answered 'yes' do you think not going to church would stop God from answering your prayers?

Yes/No

If you answered 'yes' why so

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

If you answered 'no' why so

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

d) If you said 'yes' to praying to God how often would you pray? ... (Please circle one)

More than once daily   Once a day   Several times a week   About once a week   Only occasionally

e) Do you consider you have a faith even though you don't go to church? ... (Please circle one)

Yes/No/Not sure

If you circled 'yes' why so

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

e) Do you feel you have retained any element of your church tradition in your beliefs?                      Yes/No

If you circled 'yes', can you describe that element?

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.....  
.....  
.....

**5.**

a) What first comes to your mind when you hear the word 'Spiritual'?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

b) Which of these definitions do you think best fits your understanding of Spirituality? ... (Circle as many as might apply)

A source of value and meaning beyond self                      A way of understanding                      Personal integrity  
An inner awareness                      All of these                      other ideas (please list below)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

c) Would you consider yourself a 'spiritual' person?                      Yes/No/Not sure

d) Where might you consider looking for spiritual answers? ... (Circle as many as might apply)

Astrology    Church    Psychic    Clairvoyant    the Internet    Other Faith Traditions

Tarot cards    Reiki    other (please list below)

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.....

e) Do you believe that your church tradition has played any part in your spirituality?    Yes/No

If you circled 'yes', how has it played a part?

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.....

**6.**

a) How would you respond to the following statement?

*Generally it is expected that as members of a generation age religious belief and involvement will rise.*

(Please circle one of the following)    Agree/Disagree/Not sure

b) Have you given any thought or plans to your retirement?    Yes/No

c) Does the thought of growing older engender any of the following? ... (Circle as many as might apply)

Fear    Uncertainty    Health concerns    Loneliness    None of these    Others (Please list below)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

d) Do you see the approaching retirement as a time to? ... (Circle as many as might apply)

Start a new stage of life    Re-evaluate life    Slow down and relax    Travel

Spend more time with family and friends    Do things you've been putting off

Others (Please list below)

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.....

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.....  
e) What sort of hopes or expectations do you have for retirement?

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f) Does the aging process raise questions about death/after life for you?    Yes/No

If you circled 'yes' can please briefly explain what those questions are?

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If you circled 'no', can you please briefly explain why??

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g) Do you see the church as a place to help give answers to such questions?    Yes/No

h) As the senior years approach do you think in the future you might be or become a regular attender of a church or other religious organisation? ... *(Please circle one)*

Most probably    Am open to the possibility    Seems rather unlikely    In no way can envisage it

If you circled 'yes', can you please briefly outline your thoughts?

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If you circled 'no', can you please briefly outline your thoughts?

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**7.**

a) What role do you see the church has to play in today's society?

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b) Did you take your children to church?                      Yes/No

If you circled 'yes', can you please briefly explain your reasons for doing so?

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If you circled 'no', can you please briefly explain your reasons for not doing so?

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c) If your grandchildren weren't been taken to church and the opportunity arose to take them would you?

Yes/No

If you circled 'yes', can you please explain why?

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**Thank you,**

**Karl Lamb**