

A Brief History of the Church of God in New Zealand

The first evangelistic effort by the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) into New Zealand came in the form of Readers Digest advertisements which proved highly effective at the time. This led to myself subscribing to the Plain Truth in 1960 – I recall there was an article on coming trade wars between Europe and America in the first issue I received. Now over 60 years later I reflect on the journey of the NZ Church.

At this time, some listeners were able to receive the Tomorrow's World by radio from Australia though there was one private station in Gisborne that aired the program for a period. It was not till 1962 that NZ had a ministerial visit from Australia to visit the small but growing number of interested Plain Truth readers. During the first tour a group of 18 were baptised, with more being added in two subsequent visiting tours (1964 and 1966).

In the sixties a number of Kiwis went independently to live in Sydney to become a part of the Church as there was no congregation in NZ. I also was among those who moved to live in Sydney and was baptised there in 1967. At this time God was calling younger people into the Church – there was a greater proportion of men to women. During these days members were extremely committed, believing it would be only a brief time before the events unfolded leading up to the return of Jesus.

In the early days of the church in New Zealand several young Kiwis were called and went to Ambassador College in the UK at Bricket Wood. Many of these young men and women returned to accept a variety of roles to lay the foundations of the NZ Work. The earliest students went in 1963 and the last (when the college closed) in 1996.

In late 1967 the first minister (Graemme Marshall) was posted to New Zealand to care for the growing membership. The initial meeting of the church in New Zealand was a Bible Study in the evening of September 7 of that year, drawing 33 people. The first NZ church service conducted by Wayne Cole, the Regional Director based in Sydney, was held in Auckland on 28 October, immediately following that year's Feast of Tabernacles (regionally held then in Blackheath, NSW, Australia). The first Festival in New Zealand was held in Taupo in 1969 with an attendance of 333.

Expansion in those years was rapid with congregations opening in Wellington (1971), Hamilton (1972), Nelson (1973), Christchurch (1974), Dunedin (1974), Tauranga (1974), Palmerston North (1975), Whangarei (1975), New Plymouth (1976), Hawkes Bay (1979), Invercargill (1979), and Rotorua (1981).

With the church growing significantly in both New Zealand and the South Pacific, a regional office was opened in Auckland, New Zealand with Graemme Marchall as Regional Director to manage the volume of enquiries and to mail out the literature. He was joined by a small team of staff gleaned from the Sydney office to start operations with additional graduates from the church's Bricket Wood campus of Ambassador College arriving. This included Bill Hutcheson as Office Manager, followed by the

appointing of local elders to take care of growing congregations around the country as the Church grew.

Graemme Marshall as Regional Director was transferred back to Australia in 1975 to become a Regional Director in Victoria and South Australia and replaced a Kiwi Bob Morton (1975-1980), Peter Nathan (another Kiwi) (1980-1988) and then Raymond McNair (1988-1993) from the USA. This was followed consolidation due to declining membership after 1996, and the New Zealand region amalgamated with Australian under Rod Matthews (1993-2002) but with a small office retained in Auckland under Rex Morgan as Office Manager.

From the establishment of the NZ Church office in 1968 the Church in NZ continued to grow until reaching around 1500 in attendance at the Feast of Tabernacles. Regular Spokesmen Clubs, Bible Studies, Church socials, and annual summer camps were held. Mr Herbert Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong along with other senior ministers at times visited the country to speak to the brethren and to conduct evangelistic campaigns. The World Tomorrow was aired on radio and TV regularly and built an increasing listening audience. While the Church did experience various challenges during these years, few anticipated what lay ahead.

In 1990 Colin Sutcliffe, who had previously been the Pastor in Christchurch, left WCG to join with Gerald Flurry to establish the Philadelphia Church of God (PCG) in NZ. A local Elder and deacon from Christchurch joined him taking half the Christchurch congregation of 120 to join PCG along with a few members from around NZ. Meanwhile as changes to Church doctrine were gradually introduced by WCG in the nineties, resulting in further decline in membership. In 1993 the Global Church was formed attracting former WCG members who had become aware of the shift in church doctrine. Some became affiliated with Fred Coulter's Christian Biblical Church of God.

When the changes were introduced in 1995 by WCG there was a gradual exodus on members. At that time NZ had 13 ordained elders, all of which accepted the so-called new understanding promoted by WCG. What was unique was at that time the entire NZ ministry supported the changes in doctrine now promoted by the WCG leadership, even though these teachings were contrary to the traditional doctrines of WCG. The sheep began to scatter into various groups or departing from the faith.

From 1996 was a period when often members became confused and began falling away from the truth. Many close friends were lost. Few had access to the Internet at this time and were aware the extent of the changes being introduced by Pasadena and promoted by the NZ ministry. Many members, who for years had been indoctrinated to follow headquarters, were told that God was revealing new understanding to the church. The income for the NZ Church declined resulting in the number of full-time Pastors being reduced. Today the former WCG (now called Grace International) has only employed one Pastor.

In 1996 the United Church of God (UCG) was set up with its own Board and Trustees in New Zealand. As there were no elders in NZ UCG in the USA appointed David House, a

UK Pastor to be responsible for NZ. After his death Peter Hawkins from South Africa was appointed the Pastor for NZ. Both ministers were able to visit NZ to coordinate with the UCG membership. Membership grew as more departed from WCG. We built up the circulation of the Good News magazine and held weekly Church services in Auckland.

In 1998 the Global Church of God split with most members joining the new Living Church of God. This split caused some to reject being involved in organised church organisation, preferring to keep their faith alone. Some later joined groups such as RCG and PCOG but became disillusioned and scattered.

In 2000 the Home Office appointed Jeff Caudle as Pastor for NZ who remained in this position until he left UCG along with the Local Elder when the Church split to join the Church of God a Worldwide Association (COGWA) in 2010. At the time around 70% of the UCG members left along with the 2 Elders to join the new COGWA group. During the 10 years under the supervision of Jeff Caudle UCGNZ had little growth, mainly from former WCG members joining from WCG as others departed from the faith.

Following the departure Daniel Porteous, a graduate from Ambassador College was ordained as the NZ Elder but had to retire because of health reasons a few years later. UCG America and Australia made available various Elders to help support the local congregation until Mike Fike was appointed the NZ Pastor in 2020, but unable to come to NZ until 2022 because of COVID. While Mr Fike remains the NZ Pastor, he was transferred back to the USA late 2025 to assume new responsibilities there and currently NZ does not have a resident Pastor.

Today the NZ brethren are scattered into various groups with PCG, LCOG, COGWA and UCG all have regular church services. There are some others who met independently rather than be a part of an organised church. Sadly, there are many former WCG members who will not join any church organisation due to a lack of trust in either the ministry or a church organisation but prefer to keep to themselves keeping the Sabbath at home.

The NZ Church faces a challenging future as do other areas around the world. Few are being called to replace the aging membership. Few in NZ today appear to be interested in learning the about the Bible or the wisdom and knowledge it contains. New Zealand, along with other countries is heading towards national bankruptcy which will bring about the prophesied tribulation. This will mean the end of this era of the Church of God.

It has been a life-long journey which I have been privileged to be a part of. The next chapter of the story will be the most challenging for the Church as our faith is tested in the trials ahead, but if we endure our reward will be great.

Bruce Porteous

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