

Dear Friends,

**I came across this cartoon last week while looking for images related to the Sunday School nursery rhyme and finger game, *"Here is the church, here is the steeple..."***

It made me laugh, but it also made me really sad thinking about the ways (some of the terrible ways) negative experiences of church (the topic of last Sunday's sermon) have impacted many people.

According to the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey released at the beginning of March (a survey that has interviewed the same 17,000 people across more than 9,000 households every year since 2001) Australians are becoming less and less interested in affiliating with a faith group.

The most dramatic figures are among those in the 25-34-year-old age group, followed by those in the 15-24 age group. Young Australians are increasingly seeing church (or other religious involvement) as irrelevant.

Many years ago, I went to a Scripture Union event where the speaker spoke very genuinely about his concerns for young Australians and how his understanding of his role as a Christian has shifted over the years. *"I used to talk about winning the next generation for Christ,"* he said, *"And now I would just like every young person to have one genuine follower of Christ in their life, one genuine follower of Christ who cares for them. That is the only thing that will make a difference."*

At the Open Baptists Gathering two weekends ago, Steve Frost also spoke about the years he had spent in ministry trying to make church attractive to non-believers. Eventually, he said, he had come to the jarring realisation that many people were not resistant to the gospel; they were just uninterested.

He shared a wonderful quote from Jon Owen's book, *Muddy Spirituality*, *"The world that we live in no longer craves what it believes to be the Christian story, having either suffered by it, rejected it or both. We need to re-live and re-narrate these stories in fresh, healing ways to revive a parched and hurting world. We need to find innovative and creative ways of forming them around the counter-narrative of the gospel, in particular the life of Jesus, to ensure long-term commitment. We hope and pray that they will continue to be a part of ushering in God's dream for how the world should be..."*

This is how, Steve reflected, the gospel gets handed on to a generation who are not like we were when we were their age... by re-living and re-telling the stories of Jesus in fresh, healing ways; by living out these stories in our own lives.

It sounds huge, and I think we need to be honest, it is huge and we're not going to work it out immediately or all the time. But it is also as straightforward as what we do next! And it says to me that reading these stories, immersing ourselves in these stories, spending time in prayer, and taking the time to listen to others (empathising with their experiences and demonstrating real love and care) are all ways, big and ordinary, that we re-live and re-narrate the stories of Jesus. (I think being part of a church can help with this!)

The incredible thing about the story of Jesus is that Jesus entrusted God's great work of love to the 'rabble of pilgrims' that I mentioned on Sunday; i.e us! God works with us and through us and in us. Ephesians 3:21, *"To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."*

**Amen!**

**Belinda**