The Christian Faith and Meaning in Life at the Council of Nicaea and Now

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Abstract

The Nicene Creed has provided a standard statement of Christian beliefs that is used in many Christian communities. It could be seen as a basis for the ‘sacred cosmos’ in which Christian believers may locate themselves and find meaning in life. Interviews with 44 Australian church attenders during 2024 and 2025, revealed that the general tone by which faith is presented is more important to them than its detail. The majority of

attenders spoke of small groups, either within or outside of their churches, being most significant in providing them with meaning in life. Meaning arose primarily in social contexts where individuals felt that they were valued and where they in turn could contribute value. Perhaps Constantine's initial assessment of the Arian controversy as being 'too abstruse' for most people is correct. St. Paul reminds us that our knowledge 'will pass', but love remains, and it is in loving and supportive relationships that most people find meaning.

Key words: Nicene Creed, meaning in life, Australia, retirees, small groups

Introduction

In 325 AD, Emperor Constantine called together Christian bishops from all over the Roman Empire and beyond to resolve some issues of Christian doctrine and practice. A significant outcome from this Council was the Nicene Creed which has been used in mainstream Catholic, Orthodox and some Protestant churches for the past 1700 years. As religious beliefs are questioned by many people in Australian society today, its value for Australian Christians needs to be evaluated. The paper will not focus on the details of the Creed, but rather on whether a creed, such as the Nicene Creed, contributes to the ways in which the Christian faith contributes to Australian church attenders' sense of meaning today.y.

It is acknowledged that just 10 per cent of the Australian adult population attend a Christian community monthly or more often (Hughes, 2025). For the vast majority of Australians, the significance of religion in general, and the Christian faith more specifically, has faded (Hughes, 2025:, p. 20). This paper will focus on the significance of creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, for those Australian adults who are involved in a church community today. Do creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, contribute significantly to meaning in life for Australian church attenders? The source of information on how church attenders make meaning today is a qualitative study of 44 attenders (who were retired, semi-retired or about to retire) conducted between November 2023 and March 2025.

Creeds as a Basis for the Sacred Cosmos

In 1967, sociologist, Peter Berger, wrote *The Sacred Canopy*. It was re-published as the *Social Reality of Religion* in 1969. In that book, Berger described religion as being an integral part of the 'world-construction' which is undertaken through the process of socialisation. He argued:

> Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. … The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man (sic). The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order (Berger, 1969,: p.34-35).

Creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, could be considered as outlining the nature of the sacred cosmos. They define its parameters. Hence, it is possible that creeds could be significant in providing the basis of the meaning people might find in religion.

As Quinn (2000) alerted us in 'How Christianity secures life's meanings', the Christian faith does not simply give people a sense of meaning. One's meaning in life in terms of having coherent direction and a sense of belonging and significance may be good or bad, depending on the nature of those directions and the belonging and their alignment with Christian teaching. The Christian faith calls us to specific directions, following Christ or finding our place in God's story of salvation.

What is expected of us by God has been challenging from the beginning. One very early issue was whether non-Jewish followers of Jesus needed to keep all Jewish laws. A Council of church leaders was held to resolve the issue in Acts 15.

In terms of understanding the sacred cosmos, a particular conundrum was how Jesus could be both divine and human. In the early 4th century, this issue came to a head in arguments between a popular Christian teacher, Arius, and Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria. So heated was this division that it came to the ears of Constantine, the Roman Emperor, who had just decided to make Christianity a unifying force through the Roman Empire.

In 324, Constantine wrote letters to Alexander and Arius, urging the two men to reconcile. In the letter he suggested these men should behave as philosophers of the same school, united on essentials, but differing on small points (Stevenson 1957:, p. 354). In relation to an earlier church dispute, Constantine had intervened saying 'I do not wish you to leave schism or division in any place' (Schaff and Wace:1890Edwards 1997). Constantine regarded such divisions a threat to civil order as such public divisions could lead to disturbance. He viewed the Church as a moral and stabilizing force in the way that previous Emperors had regarded the recognition of the Roman gods and such a force would be undermined by division.

The importance given to finding unity in Christian doctrine was demonstrated by the fact that Imperial funds were used to bring bishops together from all over the Roman Empire to discuss the matter. In a letter following the Council of Nicaea, Constantine referred to assembling more than 300 bishops at Nicaea to find common ground on the Arian controversy plus other issues (Stevenson, 1957,: p. 371). One output from the Council was the Nicene Creed which was agreed on by all but two bishops. The two bishops who failed to agree to the statement were excommunicated and exiled. The works of Arius were confiscated and burnt (Lietzmann, 1961: , p.120ff).

With the production of the Nicene Creed, it was envisaged that the nature of the Christian doctrines was clarified and a yardstick of orthodoxy had been created. However, over the centuries, questions have arisen as to whether this clarification was important to how people have found meaning in their faith. Was the division one of great importance to the nature of the sacred cosmos, or was it, as Constantine suggested in his letter to Arius and Alexander a small and obscure point which has had little impact ~~on~~ the Christian faith? A historican might ask whether the division was about something which affected the daily lives of people, or was it really a struggle for power among leaders?

Throughout the last two thousand years of European history, there have been times when people have accepted different understanding of aspects of Christian faith. There have been other times when major conflicts have arisen about the nature of faith. The Protestant Reformation caused huge eruptions in the Church as the Reformers sought to establish different ways of understanding the Christian faith. It led to some people being put on trial

as heretics and executed because of their opposition to church leaders. One prominent example is the Czech reformer, Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415 (Latourette, 1953:, p. 669). Protestant Reformers had strong disagreements among themselves which led to people being executed, such as Michael Servetus in 1553, supported by the Reformer Jean Calvin. This event sent shock waves throughout Europe (Latourette, 1953:, p. 758). Correct doctrine has, at times, been a matter of life or death, but the problem has always been what makes a doctrine 'correct'?

The Role of Religion in Meaning in Life

For much of human history, religion has been a major source of meaning in life. By drawing a picture of the universe in which we live, and locating the individual within it, it has given people a sense of identity and, very often, a sense of purpose. The British philosopher and theologian, Keith Ward, argued that, ~~fundamentally,~~ 'religions are belief-systems which articulate, with different degrees of systemization, competing theories about the meaning of human life' (Ward, 2000:, p.11). He went on to argue that:

> A religious community, then, may be seen as a group that defines itself in terms of a set of canonical beliefs about the ultimate powers and values that bound human existence, traced back to a founding authority, with a set of practices sustaining appropriate relations to those powers and values. For such groups, the main and most important purpose of human life is to establish such a relation. Its highest value lies in the experience of that relation. The meaning of human life lies in the way events, actions and experiences in that life aid or impede the final goal, for oneself or for others (Ward, 2000,: p. 18).

Ward acknowledged that people can find meaning without religion. People can find meaning in enjoyable and worthwhile ways, doing things which have intrinsic worth or which are satisfying and life-giving. However, he argued that religions give meaning by envisaging 'the highest possible value of human life' (Ward, 2000:, p. 19).

The Nicene Creed, then, can be seen as setting out a set of canonical beliefs. It asserts that God is the maker of heaven and earth. Jesus Christ is of one Being with the Father. He came down from heaven for our salvation and, after death, rose again and is seated at the

right hand of the Father. It asserts belief in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father. There are references to the resurrection of the dead, the life of the world to come, and Jesus as judge of the living and the dead whose kingdom will have no end. People will be judged, but through baptism, people can receive the forgiveness of sins offered through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and people can be raised from death to eternal life.

At the level of lived religion, however, the scholar of religions, Ninian Smart, has suggested there are two fundamental Christian narratives. There is the narrative of salvation history: of God coming in Jesus to save human beings, as described in the Nicene Creed, and the narrative of being an imitator of Jesus Christ. This first narrative emphasises what God has done for human beings. Human beings accept what God has done through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion otherwise referred to as the Eucharist or the Mass, Smart suggested (Smart, 2000,: p. 65). The second narrative revolves around Jesus' teaching about how his followers should live. As an expression of the other narrative, Smart (2000:, p. 62) turned to Kierkegaard, who through his pseudonym, Anti-Climacus argues, "Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm: I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it" (Kierkegaard, 2015,: p. 107).

These two narratives have some similarity to two different approaches to religion and meaning identified in a large survey of Australian church attenders conducted by the Christian Research Association in 1987 (Blombery and& Hughes, 1987). The first approach which was called devotionalism focussed on connection with God often expressed in acts of devotion. It emphasised what God has done and is doing for human beings. The other approach, the researchers called 'principlism', focussed on the values exemplified in the life of Jesus and his teaching about how we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated (Hughes and & Blombery, 1990).

Hinton's recent book, *Mass Observers Making Meaning*, examined the ways in which people in Britain made meaning in late 20th century Britain. In 1937, the 'Mass Observation Project' was launched, asking everyday people throughout Britain to write responses to questions about their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Open-ended questions were sent out every few months on a wide range of subjects from politics to details of personal life. In 1981, the project was refined with people being asked to respond

to these open-ended questions three times a year. Around 2,600 people volunteered, but half of them quickly lapsed. However, around 1,100 remained for between two and ten years and a smaller group kept going for up to 20 years. In 1996, the open-ended question was: "The supernatural: what do you believe?" James Hinton analysed the writing of 279 British volunteers who responded to that question. What is of relevance here is that he saw those responses as people making meaning.

Hinton noted that a number of the respondents simply accepted the teaching of the church and simply stated, "I am a Christian and therefore the Creed expresses my beliefs" (Hinton, 2022, p. 15). On the other hand, many other respondents expressed some doubts and many wondered about how it related to other religions. He quoted one person, for example, who said she 'always had difficulty … in knowing why my religious beliefs were the right ones and everyone else was misguided' (Hinton, 2022,: p. 16). Indeed, in his book, Hinton noted the flourishing of non-religious spirituality. Others saw belief in the supernatural as irrational. One person wrote 'I am living my life REALISTICALLY and need no invented spookies … no god/gods/priests' (Hinton, 2022,: p. 26).

Hinton proceeded to look at the various ways in which people answer the questions about death and what happens afterwards, about religion and science, the paranormal and various forms of spirituality. He found a great variety of opinions and attitudes, beliefs and doubts. This variety raises the question as to whether people are really finding a sense of meaning through a sacred cosmos taught by their religion. Are their beliefs actually giving them a sense of meaning in a world where there is so much doubt and where so many people are aware that whatever they choose to believe is just an option?

Australian Data

Recent results from surveys have suggested that religion is only important to meaning for some members of the Australian population. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, a national survey of Australian adults commissioned by the ACSPRI, and used widely by government and social scientists asked a series of questions in the 2018 edition about where people find their sense of meaning in life. Of the total sample of adult Australians, just 16 per cent affirmed the statement 'Life is meaningful only because God exists'. As

might be expected, of those who attended a church monthly or more often, 72 per cent agreed or strong agreed to the statement, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Responses to Questions on Meaning in Life among Respondents who Attended a Church Monthly or More Often (percentage responding to each statement) (n=151)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither / Can't choose	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
To me life is meaningful only because God exists	41	31	13	12	3	100
Life does not serve any purpose	3	0	3	30	64	100
Life is only meaningful if you provide meaning yourself	9	24	14	27	26	100
I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services	10	28	18	24	20	100

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2018.

As Table 1 shows, while 72 per cent of Australian church attenders affirmed that life is meaningful only because God exists, 33 per cent of church attenders affirmed that life is only meaningful if you provide meaning yourself. In fact, there was an overlap with a total of 28 per cent of church attenders who said both that life was meaningful because of God *and* that life is meaningful because we provide our own meaning.

It is noteworthy that 38 per cent of Australian attenders said they had their own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services. This is the group who indicated that they did, in fact, attend, but felt that attendance was not necessary for connecting with God. Overall, even among church attenders, there seemed to be a range of opinions about the importance of church attendance for connecting with God, and how important connecting with God is for their sense of meaning in life.

Some contemporary psychologists have argued that meaning is largely found in relationships. The psychologists of 'mattering' in the USA such as Gordon Flett (2018) and Isaac Prilleltensky and Ora Prilleltensky (2021) have argued that much meaning is found through those relationships in which people feel that they matter to other people and where they can make a contribution to others. People find meaning in being valued and in giving value to others. Social connection is an important path to a sense of meaning. It may be, then, in contemporary Australia, meaning is not found so much in a 'sacred cosmos' as Berger has described, but in people's connections with each other, in relationships where they are valued and where they can contribute value to the lives of others.

The question for our research then is how does Christianity provide a sense of meaning to Australian church attenders today? Does the Nicene Creed (or other statement of faith), or the narrative of imitating Jesus, provide meaning? Or, on the other hand, is meaning developed primarily through social relationships? Or is there a sense that all of the above provide a sense of meaning for Christians?

Methodology

In this research the data was gathered through interviews with retired or semi-retired people. The research team focussed on retired people partly because it was expected that their sense of meaning would not be as dominated either by work or by immediate family

concerns as may be true of younger people. A second reason for this focus was that there are practical policy implications for organisations and for government with this older cohort. There is good evidence that people with strong social connections and with a strong sense of meaning remain physically and mentally healthier for a longer period of time (Schnell, 2021; Flett, 2018; Pilleltensky and& Prilleltensky, 2022; Handley et al., 2021). Thus, it is in the interests of society to develop ways which promote social connections and a sense of meaning among older people to keep them out of the health-care system and give them a better quality of life for as long as possible.

Between November 2023 and March 2025, a team of seven researchers interviewed 71 people. The research team drew up a range of demographic variables which may have some impact on people's meaning and social connection. These included where people lived: in a city, a regional town or rural area, their birthplace, and their religious connections. The team also ensured there were large samples of both males and females and people from a variety of social-economic backgrounds.

To ensure we had this variety of people, the researchers invited people to participate in different ways. Thus, an invitation to be involved was publicly given in four churches and in some groups which were connected with churches. This led to 44 people in the sample who attended a church frequently at the time of the interview. Of these interviewees:

- 14 were Anglicans
- 9 Uniting Church
- 8 Catholics
- 5 Pentecostals
- 5 Baptists, and
- 3 Other Protestants.

To ensure a broader sample, invitations were also made in a walking group, a U3A group, a movie-makers group, a golf group and through other personal networks such as Facebook.

As with most qualitative research, no conclusions can be drawn from a sample of 71 people about overall patterns among Australians. However, the interviews reveal a variety of patterns which exist among Australian retirees. Of particular interest was whether people

associated with different Christian denominations would approach religious faith and meaning differently, or whether we would find common patterns across the denominations.

Results

The Role of Beliefs in the Sense of Meaning

While the interviews focused on people's social connections, people were asked why certain connections gave them meaning. Interviewees were specifically invited to talk about whether the church provided them with a sense of meaning and how this occurred. There was then a general opportunity for interviewees to talk about other sources of their sense of meaning in life.

Several interviewees did talk about beliefs. One person who had moved from a church of one denomination to a church of another denomination described it this way:

> [In my previous church] I used to get so tired of the same message every week that we are miserable, depraved sinners, but God loves us anyway, kind of thing. And I feel like it's quite hard to explain the difference to my son and my daughter, where they would be coming from. I think that at [my present church], it's more, we are all made in the image of God, and yet because we live in a fallen world, we do sin and God understands us as well. I'm not explaining it very well, but I think the difference is just, it's a positive focus. It's an uplifting focus that the work of Christ on the cross has been done. And I am a new creation now. So I don't have to grovel, wallow in my sin or my awareness of my sin. I do sin, I know that, but it's like I'm a new person. (Helen, Baptist, 71 to 75)

A man from the same church said:

> And there are some quite radical things in the Baptist church that you don't get at an Anglican church, and it's a bit of a mind shift that's going to go on. And I embrace some of the key principles of Baptist churches. We did get a bit of it last year, or might've been the year before when there was all that stuff going on about basically excluding some people who didn't come up to speed in relation to certain theological positions. And we did explore it, but I still remember at the time thinking, wow, this is great. The priesthood of all believers and the understanding that as a church we are to discern things and to make decisions. Whereas that doesn't happen at some levels in an Anglican church. It's basically

> it's the big brother up there with the bishops meeting. They determine whether we have women. (Sean, Baptist, 65 to 70).

For these two people, the nature of beliefs was important. Yet, it was the tone of belief rather than the detail doctrines which was most significant. It was the positive and uplifting tone, rather than judgement and condemnation. It was the democratic ecclesiology in which all people had a chance to contribute to decision making, and the theology which was inclusive of women.

A number of other people specifically mentioned that they believed in God and that led to particular values. For example, one man said:

> Well, really my whole worldview flows out of being a Christian. ... And so you have the opportunity to build up relationships by serving and by being kind and helping. And so modelling a lot of those sorts of things that Jesus modelled really. And so a lot of the actions or the ways that I think do flow out of being Christian, that kind of underpins the way that I think. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

There were also a couple of people who talked about the importance of attending Mass or the Eucharist. For one Catholic woman, Jemma, the importance of the Mass had become very real to her through a long period of sickness when she was unable to attend. One might speculate that through the Mass she felt connected with her faith and her church. As Smart described it, through the Mass she was engaging in the narrative of salvation history.

Meaning through Community

Of the 44 people who were involved in a church, 24 people spoke of a small group or position or special relationships through which they found their sense of meaning. For these people, meaning arose not so much within the church, but through the small group or position they held within the church. It was the social connections made within the church which provided the immediate sense of meaning rather than the teaching of the church.

Fourteen of our interviewees spoke about a devotional small group or Bible study in which they were involved. They talked about the opportunities the group provided for discussion, encouraging each other, sharing their lives, or caring about each other. For example, one woman spoke about her own and her husband's decision to join a Bible study group.

> So in that group we, I mean, we grow in our faith and knowledge of God and some groups are called care groups, so are our life groups. So we care for one another and sort of share life with each other. That's the meaningful thing. (Kaye, Pentecostal, under 65).

Another person was involved in a number of different communities, but when asked which contributed most to his wellbeing, he responded:

> My church community most definitely gives the most to me because I think that's the community where I can be most vulnerable and where I can meet with others who are prepared to be vulnerable themselves. So there's that sense of learning. I learn about myself and my capacities, and I learn about others and their desire to offer things to those around them. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

He went on to describe where this was happening: in a group for men who were widowers and another group which he had initiated which did cryptic crosswords together.

There were others who found their sense of meaning in a charitable activity run by the church. One example is Katharine who had found her calling in the Mainly Music group for young children and their mothers. She described the relationships she formed and how she kept in touch with some of the mothers after they were no longer attending the group.

Others described their sense of meaning as arising from the positions they had within the church. For example, both Richard and Margaret had been part of a 'bereavement ministry' in a Catholic church, visiting people who had been recently bereaved. Several said they had been on a church or parish council. While this could provide a sense of meaning in that they felt they were making a contribution and people appreciated that, it could also problematic. Andrea and Vicki spoke of the bullying they had experienced in such councils, one in a Uniting Church and another in an Anglican Church, leading them to resign.

Nineteen of the church attenders indicated that they found their primary social connections and meaning from groups which were not connected with a church. For example, Campbell spoke of how he had been raised in the Anglican Church but had drifted away from the church over the years. He was bored by almost all the sermons he heard. He felt that the churches he attended were more interested in money than people. He had found his involvement in Rotary much more fulfilling, both at local and even at international levels, and found that he could contribute more in that context. He still attended some church activities occasionally, but they were not his major source of meaning.

Sally was involved in an Anglican church and was treasurer. However, she described her church involvement was more about giving than receiving. She found her role frustrating. She found a greater social connection with her Tai Chi group, her neighbours and her family than with the church.

Gabrielle described herself as fairly peripheral to her Uniting Church. She had a history of work in aged care and described how she found meaning after retirement as a volunteer visitor. This had been brought to an end by COVID. However, she still loved to visit older people who were lonely, finding this invigorating.

A Catholic woman, Ann, described how she found her social connections and sense of meaning through political involvement, bee-keeping and a choir. Another Anglican, Greg, found it through his involvement in the world of chess. Greg put it this way:

> I really, really value a lot of friendships in the chess world that transcend politics and religion and ethnicities. It's quite amazing how it seems to, we all seem to be on the same playing field as it were.

When asked about the importance of being appreciated, he said:

> People do literally thank me sometimes, but I think it's just through just having that easy relationship where conversation can be fairly informal and you just kind of intuitively know that you're accepted. And also as I've got older, the need to be respected and accepted has diminished somewhat. And I'm more, if I think especially in the chess world, for instance, I

> suppose my status is quite secure. I actually am a chess master as such too. So there's a title that goes with being a master. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

Christian beliefs continued to be relevant to most of these people. They provided a backdrop for living, describing some dimensions of the universe and the basic values - a sacred cosmos as Berger described it. For some, the shared study of the Bible or prayer brought them together and gave the group a common purpose. Some placed the emphasis on the values which arose out of the Christian faith in terms of caring for one another or for the vulnerable in the society. Some placed the emphasis on connecting with God either through ritual or in a very personal way. However, it was the social connections through which they felt they were able to contribute and in which they were personally recognised and valued which contributed most to meaning in life. Frequently, such social connections were found outside a church.

Discussion

The Christian faith contributes to meaning in life among most Australian church attenders we interviewed. The basic doctrines of the Christian faith provide some elements of a framework of the universe in which people can locate themselves, in particular, belief in God. Some people interviewed had a personal sense of God's involvement in their daily lives and it is that sense which gave them meaning. Many people see their faith as the source of basic values, such as the values of love and care for others, which they then seek to put into practice through their families and communities, and broader humanity. To this extent, the Christian faith provides a 'sacred cosmos' as Berger has described it, or, at least, some elements of a framework. The cosmos which most Australians inhabit is also shaped by science which gives us more detail about the nature of the universe in which we live and how the universe works.

It is possible that Creeds may be markers of belonging to a particular framework of meaning for some people. While the interviews explored people's sense of meaning, they did not explicitly explore people's attitudes to creeds. On the other hand, it may be noted that a couple of people who spoke about the significance of their beliefs to their sense of meaning had moved from Anglican churches where creeds were used to Baptist churches where creeds were not used. In general, in the interviews conducted, the details of

doctrines were not as important in the sense of meaning as the general tone: a positive tone of acceptance and respect rather than a negative tone of judgement and exclusion.

Interestingly, the references to negative tones of judgement and exclusion in these interviews were all to leaders in church congregations. Perhaps the details of doctrine are, and always have been, an issue for some leaders as a basis for their authority and a criterion they could use to exclude those who might oppose them. The issues of doctrine which led to the formation of the Nicene Creed may have been important for the bishops who met at Nicaea. Finding consensus among the church leaders was important to Constantine as part of his agenda for using Christianity to build a peaceful and unified Roman Empire. But the interviews suggest the details of doctrine are not very important for the average Australian church attender. While there is little evidence about how church attenders thought in the time of the Council of Nicaea, the details of doctrine of the divinity of Christ may not have been very important even in those days, except that it defined the group with which they aligned themselves. In his original letter to Arius and Alexander, Constantine suggested that the issues were 'so sublime and abstruse in their nature' that very few people would have the mental calibre to adequately comprehend them (Stevenson, 1957:, p. 353).

Almost all of these 44 church attenders found meaning through relationships, particularly through small groups where they found and gave support to each other. Some of them found it through their churches in small groups gathered around prayer and Bible study. Other groups arose out of a sense of mission and some particular projects or programs in which they seek to contribute to the wellbeing of others. Some found that meaning in groups where they volunteered.

Many of the attenders also found meaning in educational, sporting, advocacy, or through interest groups beyond their churches. And many of our interviewees also spoke of other areas which gave their lives meaning such as playing chess or golf. For others it was participation in a choir or involvement in Rotary. Where people felt they were learning, developing their interests or exercising and honing their skills, this added to their sense of meaning.

For most of the Australian church attenders we interviewed, meaning was created as people felt they were contributing to the lives of other people. It occurred as they felt they were accepted and appreciated as people, where there was warmth and support. Where there was explicit feedback which showed appreciation of contributionss, that was good, but it did not need to be explicit. In those terms, our research generally confirms the theories which have been developed by the psychologists of meaning, while recognising that meaning is created in other ways too. In this regard, in general, the theories of 'mattering' have been supported by this study. People find meaning when they feel they matter to others and they can contribute to others.

Conclusion

There is evidence in this small and limited research project that church attenders generally find more meaning in relationships than in doctrines. Having some common values and some basic religious beliefs are helpful in people feeling that they have something in common and in giving some direction to life. But it is through relationships in which they experience support and in which they contribute support and encouragement to others that most church attenders we interviewed found meaning within the church.

If this finding can be generalised, it would have significant implications. It means that churches need to give much more attention to relationships among attenders and less attention to getting beliefs and doctrines aligned in a certain way. Looking back over history, church leaders have been the major users of the creeds to asset their own authority and expel those who were unwilling to conform. Detailed matters of orthodoxy have generally meant less to most attenders.

The Nicene Creed was used at the Council of Nicaea to define who should be excluded and who should be included in the 'orthodox' church. Today, there are still many churches which include or exclude people on the basis of doctrine. There are still power-blocks within churches which use their definitions of orthodoxy to exclude others from power.

The Gospels do not contain creeds and the statements of faith found in the Acts of the Apostles are very simple. Indeed, the various documents which make up the New

Testament provide a range of quite different statements about faith. There is certainly a plurality of descriptions and teachings about the Christian faith.

While Paul's letters provide detailed instructions to Christians, many of those instructions had to do with how people related to each other. In 1 Corinthians 13, he says 'If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal'. He goes on to note that our knowledge will pass away, and that we currently only see 'a reflection as in a mirror'. He concludes 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love'. It is noteworthy that the Nicene Creed says nothing about either the love of God nor the great principle that the followers of Jesus should love one another (John 15:12). Jesus had a twofold command for his followers: to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbours as themselves. (Matthew 22:37-39).

At the heart of faithfulness to the Christian tradition is love for one another. This is the very essence of meaningful social connection. Love involves respect and valuing the other person for who they are and what they contribute in relationship. Building communities in which such relationships thrive is fundamental to the continuity of the Christian tradition. It is also fundamental to people finding meaning within the Church.

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Data

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