

Research examines the intersection of faith and crises

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Social research that, by chance, was underway in New Zealand at the time of the devastating 2011 Christchurch earthquake is providing insight into age-old questions about the role of religious faith in a crisis.

The research provides the first nation-wide evidence that people are drawn to religion at a time of natural crisis.

The results come from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), led by Dr Chris Sibley from The University of Auckland. The study aims to track changes in New Zealand society for up to twenty years.

The latest findings were published in [PLOS ONE](#) by Dr Sibley and Dr Joseph Bulbulia from Victoria University of Wellington.

The researchers surveyed around 4,000 people in 2009 and again in 2011, after the [earthquake](#). Participants were asked if they identified with a religion or spiritual group, and of those who did, most were Christian but a wide range of faiths was represented.

"Across New Zealand, levels of [religious](#) affiliation have been declining for fifty years, but after the Christchurch earthquake we found a marked shift in the opposite direction," says Dr Bulbulia.

"People were more likely to convert to a [religious group](#) if they lived in Canterbury than elsewhere in the country," says Dr Sibley. There was a

3.4 per cent increase in [religious faith](#) in the region, compared with an annual decline of around 0.9 per cent in the rest of the country.

Participants were also asked to rate their satisfaction with their overall level of health. "This meant we could look at changes in people's [perception](#) of their health over time, and whether that coincided with any change in [religious affiliation](#)," says Dr Sibley.

Levels of wellbeing were comparable in participants who were religious or nonreligious throughout the two year period or who converted to religion during this time. And, surprisingly, the level did not change significantly in any of these groups even if they were personally affected by the earthquake.

"A lot of scholars have argued that religion provides a supportive buffer that helps people to cope better in time of difficulty," says Dr Sibley.

"But we see a more interesting pattern: the consistent levels of wellbeing we observed in religious and nonreligious groups, and converts, suggest that people are finding support both within and outside of churches."

"We do see a dramatic drop in health ratings for one group of New Zealanders affected by the earthquake, and these are the people who lost their [faith](#) between 2009 and 2011."

"This is very important," says Dr Bulbulia. "The size of our sample, and its unique ability to track faith and wellbeing before and after the earthquakes, gives us confidence that those who lost their faith in Christchurch after the earthquakes experienced markedly lower [wellbeing](#)."

Dr Bulbulia says people are getting help from organisations outside of churches, such as the Red Cross, from schools, and from government agencies.

"These organisations are collaborating with each other, and with churches, in ways that no one could have anticipated before the tragedy. We still have much to learn about the communities of support that have grown, and continue to grow, in Christchurch."

The researchers say that the results demonstrate the value of longitudinal studies, which can capture major events and answer questions that cannot be tested in any other way.

"The study is getting into its fourth year of data collection, and it's really starting to get exciting," says Dr Sibley. "We are very grateful to everyone who has taken part in the study and we hope that they will continue to do so. This is really important if we want to be able to track change in our society, and how people are doing, over time."

More information: [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0049648](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0049648)

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