

A poignant Sunday in quake-ravaged Christchurch, New Zealand

by [David Crampton](#)

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Christchurch, New Zealand, February 28 (ENInews)--On the Sunday after an earthquake ravaged New Zealand's second-largest city, worshippers gathered outdoors, in unfamiliar churches and next to damaged buildings to reflect, pray, mourn and give thanks.

The death toll reached 147 on 27 February in Christchurch from the 6.3-magnitude quake, which hit on 22 February, and is expected to double as dozens were trapped in wreckage. The entire central city was cordoned off as hundreds of rescuers continue to find bodies in the rubble.

"We will grieve together. Then we have a city to fix. Not just fix, but reshape in a way that few generations have had the opportunity to do. Much of the CBD (central business district) is gone, and sadly more will need to be cleared to make the city safe," Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker wrote in the New Zealand Herald.

"It's going to be a very poignant day for a lot of our people today, as they reflect as Sundays encourage one to do, on our values. It's a day of everybody reaching out. We need to keep our spirits up," Parker said. He told a news conference that although it was Sunday, the recovery operation is "just as intense, just as committed."

During the week, church leaders scrambled to contact members to advise them of Sunday service locations, as church buildings that were not already destroyed, or were in the cordoned-off area, could not be accessed until inspected by authorities. Many services were held outdoors because of the large number of churches damaged.

"Some of our churches were run in the open air outside the damaged buildings," said the Rev. Dugald Wilson of St. Mark's Presbyterian. His church at Avonhead, on the

outskirts of the city, suffered minor damage, and had people visiting from other churches during the weekend.

"We played Bruce Springsteen's song Rise Up, and one of my colleagues got a PowerPoint together. It was a very powerful moment. We also got our choir to sing a beautiful blessing at the end, to remind us of God's presence," Wilson said. The congregation sang Psalm 46, God Is Our Refuge.

Anglican clergy throughout the country read out a statement from Christchurch Bishop Victoria Matthews, Bishop John Gray, head of the Maori Anglican Church, and Archbishop David Moxon: "The people of God are responding with courage and resolve to the present state of emergency caused by the recent earthquake and aftershocks. Although debris and wreckage are in evidence on every street and both the army and emergency services are a constant presence, courtesy and consideration prevail. A very significant number of people have lost their home, business and/or church building, yet there is a sense of aroha (love), community care and outreach."

On the lawn of Christchurch South Library, hundreds arrived on bicycles and on foot to reflect on the tragic event. Parishioners set up rows of chairs in the sunlight and under the trees on the lawn of St. Barnabas, an 86-year-old Anglican church where the quake cracked stone walls, shattered some stained glass windows and left the tower sinking. Wails of passing police cars and the roar of a military helicopter overhead occasionally interrupted the sermon, the Herald reported.

Rev. Philip Robinson tried to rally the congregation. "This is not called Christchurch for nothing. We will rise again," he said, drawing a few smiles.

The almost-destroyed Knox Presbyterian Church, led by the Rev. Geoff King, is in a cordoned-off area of the city. Parishioners attended various services. "Our congregation was all over the place," King said. A former army worker in East Timor, King attended nearby St. Luke's Presbyterian Church, where the service contained a theme of lament from Psalm 137. "We sang a couple of contemporary hymns focusing on hope in the midst of despair. We placed a candle in a tray in front of the church. Everyone had a candle. It was quite moving - and it was interesting the number of people there from the neighbourhood," King said.

At Sacred Heart Catholic Church, many shared stories of their earthquake experiences. The Rev. John Fitzmaurice gave a homily of hope and spoke of the goodness of God. The congregation then sang Make Me a Channel of Your Peace and gathered to talk afterwards – minus coffee or tea as there was no water or toilet facilities due to earthquake damage.

Many churches that did have water made time for people to get together over morning tea to share their experiences of the earthquake. "People didn't want to go home – they wanted to stay," said Mike Stopforth, who attended a Catholic Mass after leading a team that shovelled loads of liquefaction (watery sludge caused by ground-shaking) from a Catholic convent the previous day.

On the afternoon of 27 February, giant construction cranes paused from the task of removing rubble from the Anglican ChristChurch Cathedral as Bishop John Gray led a Maori prayer beside the cathedral for the 22 that are presumed dead under the rubble of the toppled steeple, reported Anglican Taonga, a publication of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. The prayer asked for God's guidance and protection of the rescue workers, and also for a cleansing of the site after the tragedy.