

BELIEF: Revival Fellowship Pastor Mark Hall lays a healing hand on a member of his congregation. — Pictures by Peter Stoop

# More than words

Speaking in tongues speaks volumes about a Glendale church group's commitment to their faith, observes **Damon Cronshaw**.

**E**VERY Sunday in a community hall at the Glendale crossroads, a group of about 150 Christians attend a ceremony that features the ancient religious ritual of speaking in tongues.

They are among millions of Christians across the world who consider the ritual a cornerstone of their faith. It is a tradition that they believe has the power to fill a void in their lives.

The Glendale group are members of the Revival Fellowship and fall under the Pentecostal church – the fastest-growing Christian denomination in the Hunter.

Revival Fellowship Pastor Mark Hall said the phenomenon of speaking in tongues was first practised almost 2000 years ago, in biblical times.

It involves an unusual mental state in which people speak an unknown language, which can appear to outsiders as gibberish. But to those who believe, it is the voice of God, the purest form of prayer, even the language spoken in Heaven.

Hall, who leads the Glendale parish, said it was "a way we communicate with our heavenly father, a language to pray and talk to God". Some parishioners see it as proof of the existence of God.

Hall said the mysterious language sounded like Hebrew or Arabic.

I attended a service at Glendale last Sunday to witness the phenomenon,

curious at its contrast with the modern, materialistic world. I sat through 1½ hours of joyful gospel singing, obscure preaching and quiet communion, before the ritual began.

When I observed people speaking in tongues during the service, a sacred and solemn aura fell over the congregation as mysterious sounds resonated through the hall. Ceiling fans moved in unison, projecting a timeless feeling over the parishioners. If it weren't for a siren wailing outside, modern clothing and electricity, we could have been in Jerusalem in the days of Christ or back in the Dark Ages during one of the church's many revivals.

To an outsider, speaking in tongues is a baffling activity, yet one that discernibly holds power over the initiated. Parishioners bowed their heads and closed their eyes while the ritual occurred. Only three people spoke in tongues during the service, in line with the scriptures, Hall said.

Each person spoke separately, for about a minute each. The mysterious language sounded clear and unforced, without a hint of doubt or hesitation. It flowed out quickly with a fervent rhythm, a soul-baring expression of pure devotion. The elaborate nature of the speech would not be easy to imitate without a lot of practice.

Some within the church possess the "gift" to interpret the language in English. They, too, spoke clearly and confidently. They told me later their interpretations were not rehearsed.

"You only know a word or a sentence that you're going to say and from there the Lord reveals it; it's like a step of faith," interpreter Neil Slingo said.

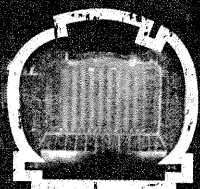
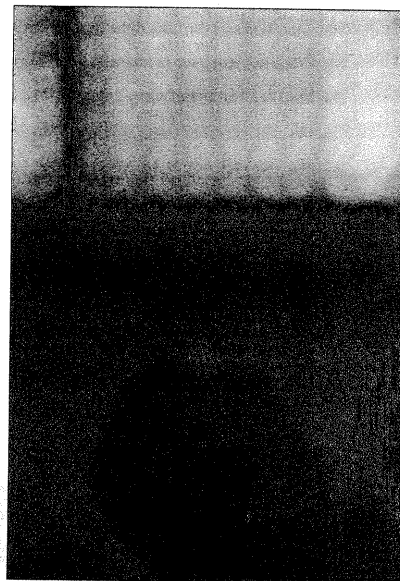
One interpretation had God saying through the speaker: "I will be your protector, the world is going into chaos".

Hall, a pastor for 20 years, said speaking in tongues was "almost like you've found that missing link in life". Others told a similar story. Something was lacking in their lives and they felt an emptiness, until they spoke in tongues.

Parishioners first speak in tongues after being baptised by "full immersion", which is to be completely covered in water. Several said the tongues emerged while they were saying "hallelujah" (praise God) aloud.

When they speak in tongues, they believe they are receiving the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, inside them. Many speak in tongues every day during prayer, which they believe reaffirms their initial experience.

Speaking to parishioners after the service, I observed a glimmer in their eyes, a contentedness. Conversely, the state of mind can appear like a form of sedation, almost a blind and self-involved belief that



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a deity is looking after them.

Tales abound of healing, miracles, lives changed for the better and challenges overcome among members of the Glendale congregation. To the most rational scientists with minds steeped in logic, the belief that speaking in tongues is evidence of the Almighty would border on delusional.

Lyal Ranger, a 60-year-old pensioner from Shortland, disagrees.

He first spoke in tongues almost three years ago.

"I'd lost confidence in myself, in life, in everything," he said. "I had a very bad back for 18 years, I was in terrible pain and I was an alcoholic, I drank each and every day of my life."

After meeting Revival Fellowship members through his mother-in-law, Ranger attended a church meeting and, later, was baptised.

"When I came out of the water, people were praying in tongues around me and the pastor said 'Lyal, say what's in your heart'.

"I opened my mouth to say 'thank you, God', but out came this marvellous, unbelievable, loud, coherent, rhythmic language, and it blew me away."

Ranger said the experience shocked him because he had doubts. He insisted he had not tried to speak in tongues, "it just burst forth out of me".

Afterwards, he said his back pain went away and he stopped drinking, which he believed were miracles.

When trying to quit drinking on two previous occasions, he suffered "terrible withdrawals", including uncontrollable tremors, sweats and craving. His third attempt at sobriety came after speaking in tongues.

On that occasion, he said, he had no withdrawals.

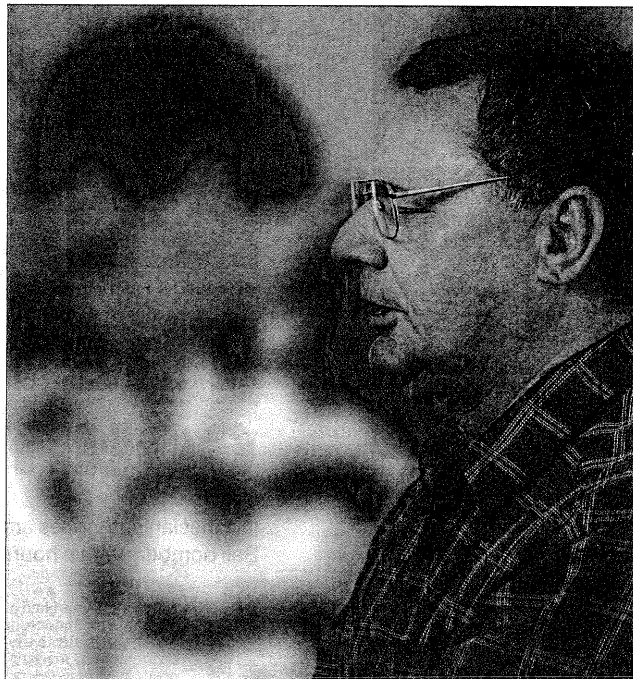
"I expected them, but they never came," he said.

Nowadays, he has no desire for alcohol.

"Alcoholism is a terrible, selfish disease. I didn't care about myself or anybody, but now I care about everybody and everything."

Susan de Sain, an administrative officer at Newcastle University, first experienced speaking in tongues at age 11. De Sain said it was a quiet experience that occurred while she was seeking to be healed for a sore back during a prayer session a few months after being baptised.

She continued to speak in tongues every day during prayer. The practice, she said,



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from serious illness and injury.

Some parishioners, such as Robert Denton, use their faith to do good in the community. Denton, who is the Northlakes Chamber of Commerce president, said Christian values had inspired him to tackle the city's graffiti problem.

He runs the fellowship's not-for-profit graffiti-removal program, which has expanded from Cardiff to Hamilton, Belmont, Wallsend and Mayfield. His "loathing of wrongdoing", was a key motivator in his campaign to make the city free from graffiti.

"We're not a cult, we're looking to connect to the community for opportunities to set an example," the 37-year-old said.

"I don't want to be over the top, zealous and idiotic, I just want to be righteous and have that desire to do the right thing."

Denton said he joined the church at age 17 after a work colleague preached the gospel to him.

"It was the exact piece of the jigsaw that was missing," Denton said.

His family were not involved with the church, but he was attracted to it.

"I had tried all the things society had to offer, a bit of alcohol, a bit of drugs, friendships, relationships, lifestyle and money, but they all fell short, nothing satisfied," he said.

Speaking in tongues for the first time changed his life. There were moments, early in his spiritual life, when he questioned whether it was the Holy Spirit that allowed him to speak in tongues, but continuing to pray gave him reassurance.

"You know it's having an effect in a spiritual sense because of the way you come out feeling," he said.

was "a comfort".

"There's no tingling or sensation, I just open my mouth and start praying in tongues; there's no thought process."

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania who studied the brains of people speaking in tongues found their frontal lobes, the thinking part and language centres of the brain, were relatively quiet, according to *The New York Times*. Parts of the brain used to maintain self-consciousness were active.

The 32-year-old de Sain, who lives at Warners Bay, grew up in a devout Christian family, ardently committed to church doctrine. She has never been inside a nightclub and does not drink alcohol.

"As a young person, I struggled with the rules and regulations that are in place to

protect us and to make sure we don't get hurt and in trouble with alcohol and drugs," she said.

"There were times I felt frustrated as a teen at school because I was different from other kids.

"I knew sleeping around or getting drunk wasn't what God would want. There were times when I'd be challenged about why I chose not to do those things, but I know that ultimately my life with the Lord is far more important than any kind of peer pressure."

De Sain said she was a virgin and would wait for marriage before having sex. Her boyfriend, also a member of the church, felt the same way.

Speaking in tongues helped give her the strength to maintain her chastity.

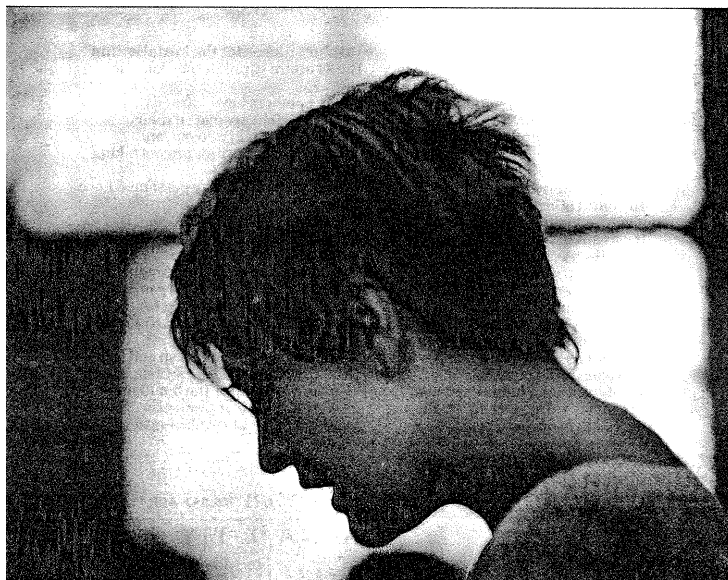
"The Bible says sex is for marriage. It was created for a husband and wife," she said.

Julie Dowse, of Marks Point, said she grew up in a loving family and has a loving husband.

Despite that, she felt "no one could love me enough, there was something missing". She tried new-age techniques such as meditation and yoga and studied Tibetan Buddhism, but they did not satisfy. When she first spoke in tongues 11 years ago, "it was the most overwhelming feeling".

"I felt a rising up in my chest, a warmth and then a joy," the 40-year-old said. "It was like when you fall in love and keep thinking about that person all the time."

The feeling returned, she said, whenever she prayed. She offered several examples of her belief that prayer and faith could heal people, including her children's quick recoveries



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**— Susan de Sain**

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