

Promising a miracle

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BELIEVE ME: Australian "healer" John Mellor in action, as recorded in a Channel 9 current affairs report for Australian TV.

When the healer came to Nelson, thousands of believers turned out looking for miracles.

So did **NAOMI ARNOLD**.

In the Trafalgar Centre on a damp Sunday night in Nelson, I witnessed a dozen miracles.

Or so I'm told. Perhaps I did. Certainly most of the thousand people around me believed they had.

"Need a miracle?" the ad in the health shop window asked in bold red and white. Don't we all?

Three meetings, teachings seminars, one weekend only, one New Zealand visit. John Mellor, the Australian travelling evangelist, is possibly the answer to your prayers.

I was born and remain agnostic. I went along because I was curious.

"We're going to see miracles here tonight!"

I feel like an imposter as I take my seat in the stands. A rock band strums out some uplifting chords and everyone starts to sing and clap. I mumble along with the rest, reading off the Powerpoint. But everyone is full-voiced and effusive and I can't help but get into it.

We sing Nothing is Impossible and segue straight into Happy Day. Then Glorify. A short introduction from Freedom Church pastor Richard Lander and John Mellor strides on stage.

"There's people here whose lives will never be the same after tonight. That's a fact," he says. He's in a suit jacket, vest and jeans, a shortish man with dyed dark hair. An everyman.

"I thank God for doctors, but Jesus is the best doctor you can get. His name is above every disease, every condition."

He asks for a man and a woman who were healed at the previous meeting to come up on stage. The man suffered industrial deafness for about 20 years, long-term damage from not wearing earmuffs.

"Sir, share how God touched you," Mellor says. The man is tall and enthusiastic.

"I was just in the meeting and the anointing must have been there, because all of a sudden – I had hearing aids in and I had to take them out. It was just too loud. I had to take them out and put 'em in my pocket and away I go. I don't need hearing aids any more."

"Sometimes it can be an advantage," jokes Mellor, and affects a falsetto. "Take the garbage out, dear!" Laughs.

What is this man's name? Where does he live? What do his family and workmates say? Was he hired? Does anyone in the audience know him? Maybe I can check his number plate.

Mellor turns to the woman.

"Where are your glasses?"

"Um, at home."

"Why's that?"

"Because you prayed for me and now I don't need them," she giggles.

"You can see the people clearly?"

"Normally I wouldn't be able to see your faces after the first row but I can see you all very clearly now."

Cheers.

"Give the Lord a hand, everybody, come on."

The impossible happens, Mellor says. God specialises in healing incurable diseases. Tumours disappear. Kidneys form in bodies.

He cures cancer, deafness, blindness, club feet. Ninety-five per cent of fibromyalgia is healed, and doctors say there's no cure.

He gives arches to people who have none. Cures hepatitis A, B, C, inflammation, arthritis, osteoporosis, lupus, fear, and torment, schizophrenia, bipolar, depression, brain tumours. Cysts and growths dissolve and disappear.

He fixes teeth, gums, necks, thyroids, cataracts, glaucoma, ringing ears, blocked sinuses, allergies, asthma, emphysema, heart conditions, heart disease, stomachs, prostates, intestines, livers, kidneys, reflux, ulcers, skin problems, rashes, acne, blood problems, viruses, leukaemia, bone spurs, numbness, prolapses, STDs, diabetes and paralysis. All healed in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mellor lopes across the front of the audience, down on their level now.

"Tonight you're going to see miracles. You're going to see amazing things happen. But it comes through the reality of Jesus Christ.

"You've come because you're pleading for a miracle.

"Put your hand up if you're in great physical pain and you need a miracle. Put your hand up right now."

A tentative stubble of arms, waving, crooked and unsure.

"The lady in the pink, come out here right now. What's up with you?"

Her voice is so faint, so shaky, I can't make out her reply. Whatever it is, it's bad.

"How does that make you feel?"

"Like dying every day."

She has a lot of "frozen head", she says. She feels pain all through her body, yes, right now.

Mellor grabs her head, the back of her neck, and her head slumps.

"Her whole body, Jesus, deliver her right now. Let all pain leave her body. Let living power flow through her now. Let all pain leave her body now in Jesus' name. Free. Free."

"How's that feeling?" he asks.

She doesn't feel much different.

Mellor winds up.

"Shuum!" He clasps her forehead, the back of her neck, prays again.

"Take a walk, how does that feel?"

"Freer," she gasps.

"Shuum!" He does it again.

"How's that feeling?"

"Warmer." She's crying. "I feel warmer."

"Feeling warmer, is that strange to you?"

"Yes."

"How did you feel before?"

"Frozen!" She's rubbing her face. The audience starts to clap.

"Has the frozen sensation gone?"

"Yes!"

"Give her a hand, everybody!"

The teenage boys behind me clap, whistle and call.

"Wow!" say the boys. "It's a miracle!" I have never heard teenage boys serious about anything, and I turn around to check for latent sarcasm. But it seems as if they're for real.

"So how long did you have that frozen sensation for?" Mellor is asking.

"Thirteen years." Her breathing is still laboured, but the cold is going now. More laying on of hands, and, rubbing her liver, she falls backwards into the arms of a volunteer wearing a "Love Nelson" T-shirt.

"Something's happening to this lady!" calls out Mellor, and the audience cheers. "Something very strange!" She spends most of the rest of the evening on the floor, under God's anointing.

Nelson City Church senior pastor Wesley Smith has been sick with a cold since Mellor visited.

"Ironically," he says, smiling. "I've been in bed for two days."

Eight local churches partnered together to bring over Mellor, which cost about \$10,000 – hiring the hall, the PA system, advertising, a lot to organise.

"That's an example of the unity, the immense amount of togetherness we have here."

Mr Smith estimates about 2500 people visited Mellor's healing and teaching seminars over the weekend. He thinks it was probably the biggest healing event that's happened here for a long time – apart from the old tent revival meetings back in the '60s.

Mr Smith is young, relaxed and earnest. City Church is recording every healing and will follow up with those who were healed to see what their doctors say.

"We are interested in seeing the long-term benefits," Mr Smith says. "We don't want someone just saying 'My head doesn't hurt any more'. Is there still pain there? We want the real thing. We took all their details [and] it will all be collated.

"We want to hear about how God has changed people's lives. It's one thing to hear stories on the night, but I want to know about real stuff that's happened."

My wife was a sceptic, Mellor tells the audience.

"She used to be an atheist. I know," he adds, at their collective eye-roll.

"She did a masters at Cambridge and she didn't believe in God. Intellectualism was an ideal. Her husband was a PhD." The audience titters.

"But that's okay because I also have a PhD," Mellor says. "Preaching, healing and deliverance!"

Cheers.

More people come up, and a pattern is established. A person explains their pain. No names given, no location. No history. Just prayer and result. Mellor places his hands over their brow, their foot, their shoulder. There is quite a bit of falling backwards.

"Shuum!" As he holds them the audience reaches out their hands. I almost don't notice the whispering that softly builds around me until I realise what it is – praying.

"What's the problem?"

"Fibromyalgia."

"Pain here."

"I had a car accident."

"Kidney cancer."

"I've got Huntington's disease." The last voice is fractured and faltering. She is hunched over in a wheelchair, small, dressed in fleece and wool.

"Sometimes it takes a while," says Mellor. "What we often see is sometimes I stop praying and the healing process continues. For some people it manifests the next day, the next hour, the next week. There are different ways that God heals."

Two hours have passed. Mellor takes a break, and Richard Lander returns.

"We're going to receive a great offering now for John and Julie Mellor. Why should we give a great offering? To see them on their way in a manner worthy of God."

If you could just pass those buckets out, he says. It is these Love Offerings, donations, and book and DVD sales that support Mellor's non-denominational ministries.

As Julie Mellor takes over the microphone, the small white plastic buckets are passed along the rows, and at first I wonder why no-one is donating anything. There's not much clinking of change. Then I look closer. The people use a practised gesture. Before the bucket comes they ready the money in one palm. They take the bucket with one curled hand, drop the money from their fingers and pass it along, in seconds. There is no clinking because it is all notes.

I look in the bucket when it reaches me. It is full of \$5, \$10 and \$20 bills.

The volunteers collect them up and empty them into a bigger bucket lined with a plastic bag.

There are healing materials up the back, Mrs Mellor is saying, but most have sold out. Luckily, they're available online.

Mellor is on Twitter. Mellor is on Facebook. Four hundred and thirty clips from his healings, including Nelson, are on YouTube – username JohnMellorMinistries.

But are the videos real? Does it work long-term? Nelson GP Graham Loveridge's short answer is – well, short.

"No."

On the other hand, he has seen people living with illness and injury deal with it better because of their faith.

"Because it involves issues such as confidence and sense of wellbeing and focus, we know mental and spiritual and social things can significantly affect disease processes," he says. "So it's hardly surprising that some people would benefit for some conditions, such as fibromyalgia."

Dr Loveridge says conditions such as those are "a complex of symptoms", rather than a tumour or fracture or infection, and people's attitude, sense of wellbeing and beliefs "probably do have a really important factor to play in how they manage things like [that]".

"I don't find things like that particularly surprising. If someone had melanoma with brain secondaries and then they go and get cured by faith healing then I would be really interested and surprised."

But he – and Mellor – say spiritual healing should never be relied on alone. Mellor's website urges people not to stop taking their medicines until a doctor has said so.

Mellor comes back and the tired, the weak, the injured line up. He asks for those with a terminal illness, and children. Several come forward with their mothers.

A young man has had severe back pain for years. He is stiff and thin, in a black shirt, and in tears. Mellor spends minutes touching his back, concentrating. Then the man's upper back twitches and jerks and suddenly seems to release.

"It's not just in his back, it's in his mind," Mellor says. "There's something else in there, like a trauma – something else is happening to him. Free. Move your back now. How does that feel?"

The young man can't speak, only gasp and grin. Mellor turns him to face the audience.

"How's that? What's happening?"

The audience is laughing in delight, clapping as the man pants in astonishment and joy.

"He's free! Isn't that amazing?" Eight years of pain, after he fell on the corner of a couch, have suddenly dissolved.

"Isn't that strange?" asks Mellor.

"It's a miracle," the man chokes out. "It's pretty amazing," Mellor says. "It's Jesus." He's grinning hugely.

"There's no doubt about it," says the man.

"Maybe someone out there's a sceptic," says Mellor. "What would you like to say to them?"

Though he can barely get the words out, his reply is instant.

"Have faith. Just honestly stand up and go for it. You'll never find anything better than this."

"Give the Lord a hand everybody!"

And the crowd goes wild.

I've been there three hours, and it's time to go home and make my lunch for work tomorrow.

A teenage girl who was screaming and writhing on the ground an hour before is now walking back from the front. She walks up to a man and hugs him. Her face is glowing with a smile.

As I go to leave I lean against the stands, still watching the line of people to be healed. Mellor walks from person to person, laying on hands. The audience prays under its breath for them, outstretched hands swaying in benevolence.

An older man standing in the aisle walks up and stands next to me as I watch.

"I take it you're a believer," he says gruffly.

He has a white beard and heavy eyebrows. It is not a question.

I don't know what to say.

- The Nelson Mail