

LIGHTHOUSES are built to show the way ahead and save the unwary from disaster. Torrey Hilton tells HOWARD SMITH what drove him to establish The Lighthouse in Masterton.

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A planter of churches

TORREY HILTON calls himself a church planter. He came to Masterton with a dream firmly etched in his mind. Today that dream, The Lighthouse, has a life of its own.

Now, though a chapter has ended, another dream beckons. Torrey has been called to plant a comparable church beyond the mountains. For this reason he will leave and begin work in the Hutt Valley.

So who is this dreamer ... the tall, determined man who strode in from the north; and what has he created ?

The story begins in Rotorua, where Torrey, a four-wheel drive enthusiast, fly-fisherman, and sometime farmer started out.

"My dad, Ces Hilton, fathered two successful churches, one in Matamata, the other in Tokoroa," he recalls. "Today, praise God, they're both rock solid."

Hilton senior also founded four Kiwi Ranches; Christian retreats in Rotorua, Wellington, Picton and Australian.

"My brother-in-law planted three churches in the Pacific," Torrey adds. The urge to work for God was clearly a contagion throughout this family.

Young Torrey Hilton left school seemingly destined to work as a boiler-maker-engineer. Yet clearly he was cut out to continue work his father had begun. As things panned out he then spent 15-years managing and teaching at Kiwi Ranch; Rotorua.

"It was all go," he recalls. "You couldn't afford to have a day with nobody in camp."

Torrey also worked as a youth pastor while furthering his theological studies at Fenton Park Bible Church in the geothermal capital. In between he took a crash course at a Church Planting School in Colorado Springs, South of Denver, USA.

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In 1996, while the old Bible Church on Queen Street struggled to survive, Torrey and Susan Hilton were invited to Masterton to form a new, innovative church. Torrey was to be the pastor.

The whole family - dad, mum and four daughters arrived in December and by March 1997 The Lighthouse was up and running; to start with, meeting in Harley Street School Hall.

In an interview with the Times-Age, Torrey said; "We are not aligned with any other church. Our mission is going to be

contemporary, with modern music for ordinary people of Masterton. It will be a place where they can go for friendships and practical help."

Today the church has a leadership team of five. Membership is 35 and attendance fluctuates between 150 and 200.

To begin with The Lighthouse has never sought to woo the faithful from their existing home churches. On the contrary it would encourage them to remain there.

But for those who seek answers and have given up on traditional churches Torrey and his team offer a fresh, lively, relevant, wholly welcoming alternative.

In short, there's no organ, no stained glass, no fixed pews, no religious statuary or incense, no hymnals, no liturgy, no feeble folk singers, no inhibiting formality. The archaic trappings and failed 1970s experiments are gone. Just one thing remains; unchanged and irreplaceable - The Bible.

For The Lighthouse faithful, the world's consistent No.1 top seller is God's word and (they say) for those who seek and pray, within its pages lie all the answers.

As Torrey puts it: "We are not head bangers, cultists or rafter-swingers. Nor are we a church of the 1960s or 1800s. We simply present a Bible-based message that's relevant ... indeed, I would say 'essential' for new millennium."

The pivotal team is a hands-on group. It acts as a think-tank, a focus for support and guidance, and an operational staff with the HQ at upstairs rooms in Queen Street.

Torrey is senior pastor; Bevan Smith, associate pastor and teacher, while steadfast Steve Adams leads the vigorous Lighthouse youth. Two remaining team members handle a bewildering range of vital advisory and technical duties.

In short, the team is one of striking integrity and inspiring knowhow.

Indeed nothing at this church is left to chance. Each week there are reviews, assessments of earlier services, planning sessions, regular studies, topic evaluations, empowering times of prayer and precise, highly detailed organisation ... yet somehow, miraculously, The Lighthouse spontaneity remains untouched.

Step into Makoura School hall on a Sunday and you find a user-friendly church; rock solid at its biblical epicentre yet free of the unvarying ritual that could, so easily, drive you or I from regular attendance.

The message is enhanced with brisk, uncomplicated songs led by a near-professional-quality Lighthouse vocal team ... sing along if you will. Points are further reinforced with carefully selected clips from recent commercial movies or by striking news footage. In every respect the audio-visual input is second to none.

Coffee and tea are kept at the boil, to drink as you will.

When songs, presentations, an ever-practical 'address' and brief concluding prayer are over and done, members of the lively, closely-knit youth group circulate with cake, sausage rolls, pikelets, ginger loaf; whatever is at hand.

A word that recurs with some regularity when Torrey addresses a group is 'foundational'. It seems to typify Masterton's departing church planter.

Anyone with a misty or rudimentary knowledge of the scriptures will recall a memorable parable - 'a sower went forth to sow, and some seed fell by the wayside' - but even more fell on fallow ground. And the crops grew.

The overriding impression is that Torrey Hilton lets none of his efforts - fall by the wayside.

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