

Kidney-donor Christians make 'ultimate gift'

TESS WOOLCOCK talks to members of a religious sect who donate kidneys as part of their beliefs.
Cartoon by **SPIKE MOUNTJOY**.

Paul Henry only has one kidney. He gave his other one away. But not to his dying mother or dialysis-dependent best friend.

He gave it to a total stranger in Israel. A woman he met on matchingdonor.com.

Henry is a Jesus Christian.

Known by some as the "kidney cult", the Jesus Christians are a religious sect whose members are encouraged to donate their kidneys.

Founders David McKay and his wife Cherry moved to Sydney from the US in the late 1970s, feeling dissatisfied with Christianity.

In a decade shaped by free thinking, feminism and the sexual revolution, the pair saw a need to develop their own approach to life.

So the Jesus Christians were born. New members were required to give up their previous lives of materialism and profit.

The aim was to live selflessly, all in the name of Christ.

This unassuming way of life is what attracted Wellington-born Henry to the Jesus Christians.

And it eventually led to his kidney donation earlier this year.

After meeting Ventura, a 59-year-old woman on the website in 2005, Henry flew to Israel to make the donation in November last year.

What ensued was a five-month struggle through red tape before the operation finally took place in May.

"I was interviewed by an independent psychologist, doctors, lawyers, social workers and even a rabbi in order to donate altruistically," says Henry, from London, where he has been living since donating his kidney three months ago.

"They basically didn't believe that I wanted to donate without any payment. But I was lucky. I passed all their tests and could thankfully save Ventura's life.

"I gave her the ultimate gift of life and that is something I am very thankful I was able to do."

Of the 28 Jesus Christians actively practising in the world today, 18 have donated kidneys successfully.

These were all donated in countries where altruistic donations are allowed, such as America, Israel and Canada. Laws in New Zealand and Australia have only just changed to permit such goodwill acts.

A full psychiatric report on the donor is mandatory before surgery can take place.

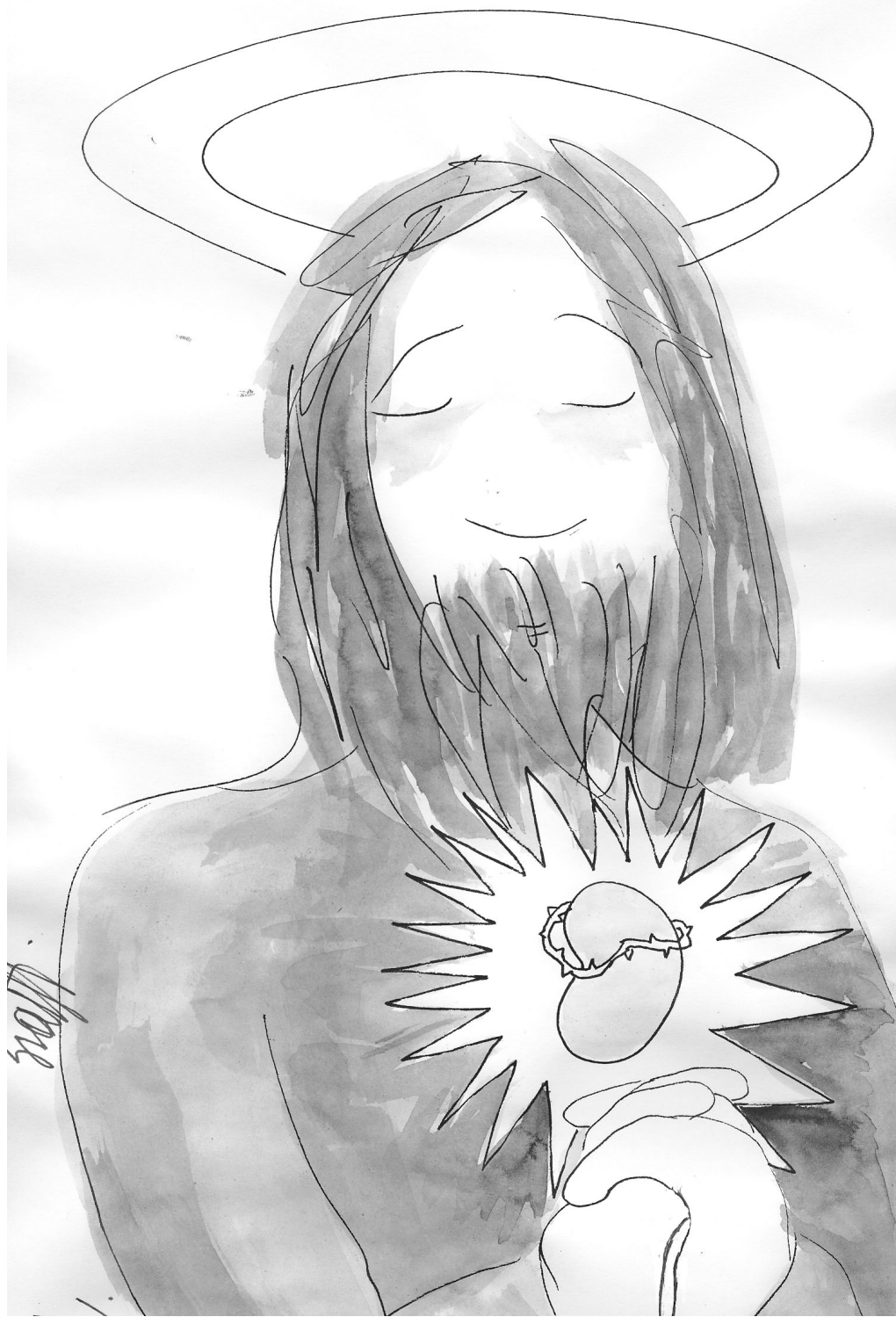
This is something Ash Falkingham knows all too well.

The young Australian was recently in an ABC documentary which screened on *Sunday*.

It detailed his journey with Jesus Christian founder McKay to Canada to donate his kidney. The journey did not go as expected. A failed psychiatric report from the Canadian hospital expressed concerns Falkingham had been brainwashed by McKay and the Jesus Christian beliefs.

The operation never went ahead and Falkingham returned to Australia, with two kidneys.

"It really upsets me that people cannot



see what a philanthropic act this is. It is done out of goodwill – an act of being human," says McKay, who is now helping Falkingham donate his kidney in Australia.

"Although most hospitals here have said they fear bad publicity if they allow him to donate, there is one hospital that is moving forward with tests for him.

"The trouble is people have all these ideas about us being some sort of cult and that I am making them donate their kidneys. This is simply not the case."

McKay, himself a kidney donor, is very quick to clear up what he calls "the myth of the C word".

He agrees his group is highly disciplined, has small numbers and a different

outlook on life.

He admits many would say this constitutes a cult. But it is this honesty, he says, that is the difference.

"People are quick to label what they don't understand," he says. "Obviously, there are groups that have stockpiled weapons, taught free sex, committed suicide en masse, and taught that their leader was the Messiah.

"But such groups are rare, and people too often assume that any highly disciplined small new group can be lumped together with such other groups. I believe this is what has happened to us."

Professor John Duckitt, a social psychologist from the University of Auckland, says it is often hard to define a cult in

today's society.

Despite this, Duckitt says he has some concerns about the Jesus Christians.

"Whenever people are giving away all their monetary possessions to a group they lose some of their power and control. These are some of the characteristics that could define a cult."

Duckitt says the reasons for joining a cult are just as complex. "There is no simple answer to that. It is like asking what causes human suffering.

"The reasons are multiple and varied."

A search for meaning and self-fulfilment can often be a reason to join any extreme group, he says.

"A sense of belonging, being part of something is often a main part of it. The thing is people have the choice to join but they often feel like they lose the choice to leave."

So why did Paul Henry decide to join the Jesus Christians? He puts it down to a search for meaning in his life.

"I had been looking for something after attending Viard College in Porirua in the late 1970s.

"You could say I was a hippie but I was very perceptive to the world around me. I just remember being quite lost."

It was on the streets of Sydney in 1982 that Henry first met Roland Phillips. Phillips was a newly converted Jesus Christian.

His new faith meant he spent most days standing on a street corner near Darling Harbour handing out booklets to passers by.

"Roland invited me back to the house he was sharing with a few other Jesus Christians and that was the beginning of me seeing that there was a whole new way of life that I had not seen or thought of before."

Henry returned to New Zealand soon after but had an ever present feeling something was lacking from his life.

"I tried working in various jobs but wasn't happy with people wanting me to be money-motivated. At the time I knew there must be something more that would satisfy not only me, but would embrace people in general.

"I knew I had to go back to Sydney," he says.

"It was like I had heard my life calling."

In 1985 McKay became a Jesus Christian.

He waited 20 years before donating his kidney, when he felt the time was right.

"Being a Jesus Christian is my life path.

"It is not a phase or something that can be rushed. I always knew I was going to donate. I trusted in myself and Jesus to know when I would be ready."

And he knew it was time after stumbling upon Ventura's profile on matchingdonor.com.

"It was her eyes," he says.

"I knew from the look in her eyes that it was meant to be.

"It was Jesus' intention for me to save her life. And I did."