



Jesus' teaching as understood & interpreted from a 21st Century rural perspective

This represents series three of material that can be used for devotional studies, discussions, or sermon background. It brings a 21st Century perspective that helps to make relevant Jesus' original teaching. It gives an understanding of the rural material from the perspective of the rural people of our time in Australia. There are a lot of spiritual parallels in farming, gardening and nature that any rural person would understand, see and appreciate.

Ross Neville has been farming in NSW for 45 years and gardening with his wife Margaret in versions of permaculture in their very first garden in 1978. They have gardened at 5 locations across NSW. The aim in all of their gardening has been complementarity, naturalness, selfsufficiency and sustainability. They have aimed to provide fresh vegetables and fruit in each of the 5 gardens they have expanded and created He sees and believes God still teaches through the normal life situation as we understand them today just as Jesus used everyday life illustrations for his teaching.

This series is the third after the 'Cropping'/ Discipleship and the 'Weeds/Harvest'/ Christian competition series It is called Garden/Productive Christians

There are 8 short story explanations listed below under the heading: 'Garden'/Productive Christians. Jesus likened us to trees, vines, fruit producing trees and fig trees. You are invited to understand and think through what this understanding of the bible passages means in term of today's gardening practices, and the implication for church and Christian life.

Garden Teaching/ Productive Christians

'The trees of the Lord are well watered.' Psalm 104:15 and the Lord expects results.

#17 Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. *Luke 6:43-44ff Jude1*
Jesus is obviously trying to emphasise that the whole point of having fruit trees is not just to produce fruit but quality fruit.

#G18 No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. *Luke 6:43-44ff.* ‘The good man produces good from the treasure of his heart.’

Jesus is really saying the most important and principle purpose in your life is to produce good fruit

#G19 I am the vine you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit *John 15 :5*

A person who makes a commitment to be a disciple of Christ is grafting themselves onto Jesus and some type of Christian fellowship to be their source of energy, love and grace. The deeds and priorities of what you do and say with your life is a reflection of what your root stock is like.

#G 20 I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.... He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit. *John 15:1-9*

Jesus is warning about making sure you are part of the correct root stock, not a denomination or a theological group but part of someone who does provide a direct daily link to God.

G21 I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.... while every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will bear even more fruit.... *John 15:1-9*

Christians can expect to be corrected or blocked during their life.

#22 Look at the fig tree and all the trees, when they sprout leaves you can see and know that summer is near *Luke 21:29*

All trees don't burst out into blossom at the same time!

#23 Jesus went to a fig tree to find if it had any fruit.. he found it had nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs... ‘May none ever eat fruit from you again’ *Mark 11:12-14 20-21Matt 21:18-20 Luke 13:6-9*

Jesus indicates there is accountability for every person and object. We all have to fulfil our purpose.

#24 ‘It has borne no fruit now for three years.’ ‘Cut it down’ ‘Sir, leave it alone for one more year.’ *Luke 13:6-9*

How long do you give a plant time to produce? Jesus again emphasises the importance of accountability.

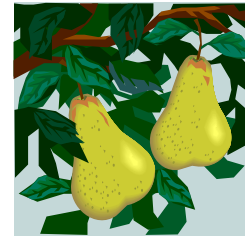
#25 ‘Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year fine! If not, then cut it down *Luke 13:8,9*

How do we make something fruitful that hasn't been fruitful?

#G17 Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. *Luke 6:43-44ff*



Jesus is obviously trying to emphasise that the whole point of having fruit trees is not just to produce fruit but quality fruit.



Fruit production today is very labour intensive, very expensive and very competitive and no orchardist can afford to allow non-productive or poor producing trees to survive. The whole point in fruit growing is to produce fruit. The whole point of the church is to grow disciples.

One of the common ways to improve fruit production is **grafting**. A graft onto a fruit tree is aimed at improving the fruit or making the plant stronger and more disease resistant. See # 19 for more about spiritual parallels about grafting.

The other way to improve production is by **cross breeding**. Cross breeding happens between families of the same species. **Genetic modification**, breeding and grafting of different species all mean that some trees today produce a combination of fruits. Grafting of different species of apple on the one stock can mean that a variety of species are produced from the one plant. Today there are multi-graft varieties of apples, citrus and stone fruit. (Peacharine, Peachcot) There is a 'fruit salad tree' which has 8 different fruits of the same family on the one plant. *Gal 3:26-29* You are not able then to recognise what fruit will come from a tree by its size, trunk, leaf structure or location.

You cannot always recognise what type of Christians will come from a church based on its size, the preacher or their theology. *Acts 2:5-12 Romans 3:28-30 14:1-8 1 Cor 12:12-14, 27-31, 1 Cor 3:4-9*

Some people are nice people, but the nature of that niceness and the genesis of that loving, friendly caring personality can only be recognised when we see the fruit they produce. Some non-Christian people actually produce more human kindness and grace than many 'Christians'. Jesus must mean fruit as being more than just common social justice activity and personality. Often the true nature of the fruit will only be seen when extreme pressure, stress or challenges create a choice for self preservation. This is often evident when serving our fellow men or acknowledging there is more to life than the now. Many people in our society are troubled because they see as many non-believers as Christians caring for their fellow men. *1 Cor 13:1-10 2 Cor 4:7,5:16-21*

Some people only make a nominal commitment and when things get tough or uncomfortable the true fruit of their hearts are revealed. *Ephesians 2:1-10*

⇒ What other fruit may Jesus mean should be seen in our lives?

One that I believe the bible repeats time and again is **worship and acknowledgement of God's role in the activity.**

⇒ Can you suggest other fruits? *Colossians 3:12-17*

#G18 No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.

Luke 6:43-44ff. 'The good man produces good from the treasure of his heart.'



Jesus is really saying the most important and principle purpose in your life is to produce good fruit.



The quantity and nature or type of fruit is important and there must be expected to be a range of levels of quality.

- ⇒ What is good fruit?
- ⇒ What is bad fruit or a bad tree?

Good fruit is fruit that has the right amount of sugar, acid, water and is picked at the right stage of maturity. All of these properties determine the use of the fruit and it's ability to survive in cold storage, to be eaten directly, dried or crushed for juice. It must look good, taste good and feel good as well as lasting for a reasonable time as good fruit. Notice there is a use for less than perfect fruit and the time of picking is critical.

You don't have to a perfect or complete Christian to be of use. The optimum ministry effectiveness depends on timing within any pilgrim walk. *1 Peter 5:1-5*
1 Tim 2:12-14

What makes a tree bad? A genetic deficiency, an inherent weakness! The outside environment! Over fertilisation or bad pruning can reduce a trees capacity to produce fruit. The tree will aim to produce as much branch and foliage s it can rather than fruit. This can be rectified but it will take a few seasons. *Luke 13:8,9* If the tree is in the wrong situation for moisture availability, soil nutrition or climactically it may never produce much fruit or fruit of any quality. Temperature or moisture are critical. A frosty prone location may reduce all fruit blossoms time after time. Unless there is availability to bees or wind to allow cross-pollination of complementary trees some fruit trees may be useless.

The outside environment of every Christian in their walk is critical in their effectiveness. *Eph 4:17-5:2* **The inherent weakness in all Christians is their sinful nature that, if not handed over to Christ to control or manage daily, will damage all potential.** *Gal 5:16-26*

What makes bad fruit?

Any thing that interferes with the tree feeding the correct **balance of nutrients and moisture** to the fruit it produces will result in the production of bad fruit.

Such interference may come from soil nutrient deficiency, the season or critical soil moisture fluctuation, tree diseases, bacteria, fungal, or insect damage. The fruit is extremely vulnerable to **attack by pests** that may affect the fruit quality: fruit fly, aphids, moths, bugs, borers, scale, animals and birds to name a few The fruit are extremely vulnerable to **diseases**: Mould, rust, root rot, leaf spot, powder mildew, leaf curl, gall. **Viruses** can infect the rootstock and they can only be controlled by replacement: Stony pit, chlorotic and necrotic spot conditions. A good tree, if unattended, can produce bad fruit.

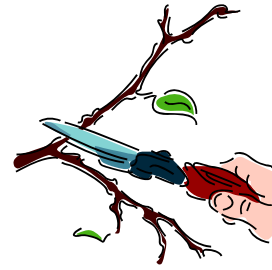
⇒ Can a good Christian sometimes produce bad fruit? *Romans 16:17,18*
Matt7:21-23

⇒ Can a non-Christian sometimes produce good fruit? *Luke 10:29-37*

All fruit trees need a degree of nurturing and care to produce the best fruit. How is the home fellowship, group or church you belong to providing you with protection and nurture from life passage struggles, false teaching or para-Christian activity?

⇒ How could that protection be improved?

#G19 I am the vine you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit *John 15 :5*



Grafting is a way to improve the quality of fruit produced. A graft is usually made onto stronger root stock. In the same way a person who makes a commitment to be a disciple of Christ is grafting themselves onto Jesus and some type of Christian fellowship to be their source of energy, love and grace.

A graft works best when it is done in late winter or early spring. An essential feature of all grafts is to match the cambian layers of the stock and scion over as large an area as possible and to then seal the graft to prevent drying out. Grafts are commonly made onto a stronger root developing stock or stock that is well established in a particular environment. The genetic modifications are trying to improve frost resistance, disease resistance, water requirements, storage or sugar quality of the fruit. With the cost of fruit production today any tree that does not produce good volume or quality of fruit is removed destroyed or regrafted. The inferior quality fruit has implications for the future of the tree itself.

The deeds and priorities of what you do and say with your life is a reflection of what your root stock is like. *Luke 6:44*

When we become a Christian we have a choice:

- We can be grafted onto a church or a denomination and become a Christian reflecting the values fruit and actions of that particular church or denomination.
- We can be grafted onto the preaching and personality of a preacher and become a Christian reflecting the values fruit and actions of that preacher or the theological perspective of that preacher.
- We can become grafted onto the teaching and example of Jesus with the Holy Spirit supplying the nutrients and guidance reflecting the values, fruit and actions that we learn God wants from us.

A Christian cannot hide the impact of the source of the changed heart or sap that drives our actions and attitude. It is unbalanced if it is only the first or second of these choices, *1 Cor 3:1-9*

We have to have a personal relationship with Jesus. It is not enough to be grafted through an intermediary.

- ⇒ Can you see, as the consequence of these grafts, the difference in the nature of the fruit?
- ⇒ How is the Christian church today like a fruit salad tree? (8 types of fruit on the one stock). *1 Cor 12:12-31*

For a graft or a Christian commitment to work you have to be continually in contact with God and you must not allow yourself to dry out.

- ⇒ What are some things that have made you lose contact or dry up as a Christian?
- ⇒ Are there parts of your life you have not let the Spirit change or transform?

See *Romans 11;16-24* some are cut off so others can be grafted in.

#G 20 I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.... He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit. *John 15:1-9*



Jesus says he is the **true vine** of God. Israel considered themselves to be a vine of God but the prophets repeatedly claimed they were degenerate vines *Is 5:1-7 Jer 2:21 Ez 19:1 Hosea 10:1*

Jesus is warning about making sure you are part of the correct root stock, not a denomination or a theological group but part of someone who does provide a direct daily link to God.

Grape vines are prolific growers and require drastic pruning each year. Vines can survive for up to thirty years or more but a young vine is generally not allowed to fruit properly or effectively for the first two or three years. Each successive stage of development of a vine builds on the previous stage. Buds developed in year N were formed in the spring and summer of the previous year N-1. Storm, fire or disease in Year N will affect year N+1. The stock scion and roots store starch carbohydrates that gives a supply over winter until the spring leaves take over as the energy providers. This is an important principle we need to take notice of God may not be continuously revealing himself to us in special ways. **Every Christian tells you of times of winter where their past experiences of God carry them through because God doesn't seem to be near. I went through my winter when I had to make a decision to sell the family farm. God didn't want me to be a Christian farmer but a Christian teacher but I had a young family! *2 Cor 1:15-22* The Christian life is a build up life learning's that provide the potential for fruit.**

The root system of a vine draws water and minerals from the soil and these are converted into hormones that circulates around the plant as sap. **This passage alludes to this as 'abiding in Christ'. Christ's presence has to flow through us and we have to maintain the flow to grow.** This sap begins to transform the plant and when it begins bleeding from the prune cuts and this is the first sign of the start of the growth cycle. At times the Holy Spirit's presence can ooze out of people as a sign that a great awakening or revival is about to happen. This happened to me when I went into full time ministry as a rural support worker. I found the Holy Spirit to be with me in some really powerful ways. *John 16:12-16 Acts 10:44-48* A vine produces two kinds of branches, one fruit bearing and one non fruit bearing. The non fruit bearing is removed annually to preserve the life and energy of the vine. I had to have many habits of mine pruned: my pride, my introversion, my intellectualism. The fruit bearing branches are trained and pruned annually so that the fruit grows in a convenient place for harvesting. eg along T trellises or overhead trellises.

The pruning timbers of the grape are of no use. It does not even burn well and vineyards have a burning of the canes ceremony as a way of marking the change in season. *1Cor 12:7* indicates that the gifts of the Spirit are to be used for the common good or they will be a useless cane. *Gal 5:16-26*

Who do you think are the canes that are not fruit producing?.

- Those who refuse to accept Jesus as Lord, those who live lives without deeds?
- Those who fall away and abandon their faith?
 - ⇒ Are there useless canes in your life?
 - ⇒ How well do you abide in Christ?
 - ⇒ How does abiding in Christ daily manifest in your life?

**G21 I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener....
while every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will bear even
more fruit.... *John 15:1-9***

**Christians can expect to be
corrected or
blocked during their life.**



Pruning affects the quality and quantity of grapes produced. The aim of pruning is to reduce the number of buds on each vine. Each bud produces a shoot which in turn can produce up to three bunches of grapes. If there are too many buds the plant may not be able to ripen properly or the vine itself may be weakened. If there are too few there is not enough outlets for the vines growth capabilities and the fruit crop yield will be reduced as the growth energy goes into shoots. Cane pruning usually involves leaving at least 5 buds. Spur pruning aims at 2 or 3 buds.

The timing of pruning influences the timing of budding and the axiom is to wait until all the leaves have fallen and the sap stopped flowing before pruning. Pruning is one of the most labour intensive aspects in a vineyard. *1 Cor 5:9-11* Mechanical pruning is an economic alternative but is not as precise and leads to the uneven distribution of bunches of grapes.

**Are you able to see how God has pruned certain congregations or groups to produce the best quality growth? Have some breakaway groups been a way of pruning? Old hymns, charismatics, women in ministry...
*Colossians 2:6-8***

It is hard to get the balance right. It is hard to prune correctly with love and grace but it has to be done *Gal 6:1-10* Most mission planners suggest a congregation work on no more than two or three special projects in a year. Many activities and mission groups do not necessarily produce the most and best Christian disciples. Too few activities and mission groups means the energy goes into growing the church infrastructure. *1 Thes 5:12-24*

In your life cycle how regularly do you prune your activities? Do you do it annually?

- ⇒ Are you a cane or a spur?
- ⇒ Can you see value in yearly evaluating your activities and how you will be channelling your energy during the next year?

You may find it necessary to cut back to only 2 or 3 buds.

#22 Look at the fig tree and all the trees, when they sprout leaves you can see and know that summer is near *Luke 21:29*



Jesus said everyone will be able to see for themselves the signs when the kingdom of God is near just as every person can tell the signs of the change in the season.



Every gardener knows that the temperature affects their trees, especially fruit trees. A fig tree, like many deciduous fruit trees, can survive some winter chilling (down to -7 degrees for a fig). They need the cool period of 120 days to lose their leaves and have a dormant period of rest (chilling hours) to mature leaf and fruit buds before the onset of warm weather. They also need 90 growing days of above 30 degrees for the fruit to ripen. The warning of the approach of summer is very important for every orchardist or gardener. In Australia it is not possible to rely on the date or the month to prepare for a change in season or temperature and the trees or plants themselves start to come into bud as the daily temperature rises, the soil warms and the sap moves faster. Within the tree all of these trigger the threshold for the +-buds to begin to break through to form leaf and fruit.

What are some of the signs Jesus indicates will be a forewarning of the end of the age? *Luke 21:5-28*

In the Luke passage Jesus mentions the complete destruction of the Jerusalem temple, false messiahs, wars and rumours of wars, great earthquakes, famines and pestilences, fearful events, persecution of Christians, Jerusalem surrounded by armies, and upheavals in the sea. These types of events have been happening for centuries now. What does that mean? Did Jesus mean all of them to happen at once? All trees don't burst out into blossom at the same time!

In Australia there are often many false summer starts and if the blossoms or leaf come out too early they can be frozen by a return to frosty conditions. If the leaves or blossoms come out and the season becomes abnormally hot very quickly the fruit buds can be damaged by storm, hail or burning. *Romans 1:18-23* We cannot give the excuse that the signs were not obvious.

Any gardener knows the first signs are only the warning signs of the new season and it is an indication to prepare for harvest, for watering, for the warm pests that are dormant over winter, for pruning of certain trees, for fertilising some trees. The warning signs Jesus talked about are warning signs to become more urgent, deliberate and intentional about preparing yourselves and your church. *Romans 13:11-14*

The harvest, or responsibility of bringing the kingdom of God message to all peoples, is getting close. Time is running out. *1 Peter 4:7-11*

- ⇒ Do you feel that you can see some of the signs, that time is running out and the season changing?
- ⇒ What are some preparations you or your church could undertake to be ready?
- ⇒ Do you feel any sense of urgency?

#23 Jesus went to a fig tree to find if it had any fruit. He found it had nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs... ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again’ *Mark 11:12-14 20-21* *Matt 21:18-20*



Jesus indicates there is accountability for every person and object. We all have to fulfil our purpose.

Figs can be climbers, creepers, large shrubs or very large trees and they occur all over the world. The fig mentioned in these passages would almost surely be the *Ficus carica*, the edible fig. These figs were used for eating and for their medicinal value.

A fig tree is a pretty tough tree as it can grow in almost any soil type especially inhospitable soils such as stony soils or soils with a high alkalinity. It develops a very extensive shallow root system. It does not have many natural pests or diseases except birds who love the fruit. It can survive and needs extensive hot conditions, 90 days above 30 degrees. In drought conditions or real stress situations the fruit and leaves will sometimes drop but it will still survive. The fruiting capacity is damaged by very cold condition or very wet summers but it will still survive. A fig can, in temperate climates, grow two crops in a year and that would have been the type of tree in Judea at this time. It is quite likely, seasonally, if this event happened around Passover time, the fig tree Jesus approaches was out of step with the normal growth pattern. It was in leaf months too early and for it to be actually producing figs was an impossibility although there should have been some signs of fig buds (paggim) forming. Some commentators suggest Jesus was actually saying this tree is genetically abnormal or diseased because it came out in leaf so early and will most likely die and never produce again. Trees sometimes do that, put out a burst of energy to produce fresh leaves flowers or fruit then suddenly die.

For such a tree to, suddenly (Mark 11) or overnight (Matthew 21) die was very significant.

Another possibility is:

The fig tree was revered by the Jews as a sign of blessing and peace.

Many people believe the church is a blessing to our culture and society.

⇒ **Can you describe ways that your church or you are shaping your community?**

Jesus could actually be saying because this tree is all show, just as the people of Israel or the church today appears showy, with influence, buildings, ceremonies and organisations. They are not actually producing any fruit or look like producing fruit. Jesus would have recognised the early paggim (buds) These form on the tips of last season's wood before winter and if present they indicated the tree would produce figs in a few months time. The main crop appears at the base of the new season's growth which would be happening as Jesus examined this tree. Churches without any signs of fruit will be condemned and destroyed. Ghandi visited Christian churches in the 1940's and said *'They appear to be worldly minded people going to church for recreation and conformity to custom.'*

Jesus could actually be saying, like every gardener says when a plant doesn't produce fruit, 'If it is useless and we might as well get rid of it.' He was pretty strong on the teachers and Pharisees of his time. *Matt 23:1-39*

⇒ **Are we making the same mistakes?**

Jesus would be well versed in understanding the stages of fig development and been able to recognise a useless tree. This could be Jesus saying '*If the church isn't doing anything it is useless, get rid of it.*'

Every gardener knows there is a time of accountability *Acts5:1-11*

⇒ **Does your life or your church life produce fruit or is it just show?**

#24 ‘It has borne no fruit now for three years.’ ‘Cut it down’ ‘Sir, leave it alone for one more year.’ *Luke 13:6-9*



How long do you give a plant time to produce?

In the past we called such people pew warmers. They occupy a place in worship or on committees but never do any Christian discipling. Jesus again emphasises the importance of accountability.

Margaret and I have grown 7 gardens from scratch. In each garden we have planted fruit trees. Some fruit trees take a few years to come into maximum production, such as olives, but most can still produce a small amount of fruit after the first or at least the second year. As a management tool you take the fruit off very early when it is young to help it spend it's energy into growing in size or shape. For a fig tree it is advised to cut the branches down to 60cm high and reduce the number of lateral branches to four or five according to the fan shape you want. In the second year you cut spindly branches and focus on promoting the growth of the short and thicker branches. If a plant produces too much fruit when it is very small it can weaken, slow and stunt its growth, so thinning may be necessary. You also need to shape and train the tree to grow in the direction and form that suits your conditions in these first few years.

⇒ **Can you be too young as a Christian before you begin to bear fruit?**

There needs to be a time for Christian maturity to develop. *1 Tim 3:6-7 1 Peter 5:1-7* The early stages of a Christian life is a training and shaping period in everyone's Christian walk.

⇒ **Do we take seriously enough the training of young Christians?**

⇒ **Name some training and shaping events in your early Christian walk.
*See Paul's lists in 1 Tm3:1-13 5:1-25***

If a Christian life isn't producing fruit then someone needs to examine it – why? *Titus 3:9-11 2 Peter 1-3* It can involve pruning eliminating dead or diseased parts of the tree. It can involve working of the ground and environment for peoples lives and ministry. The Uniting church undertakes peer reviews and some Presbyteries undertake regular congregation reviews.

Notice Jesus emphasised a time frame for change! There is a cut off point. Do we take the drastic action Jesus indicates we should? ‘Cut it down!’ Why not?

⇒ **Do minister and councils undertake Christian member reviews**

⇒ **Should it be done and if so, how?**

⇒ **What is the drastic action we should be taking?**

⇒ **Can a person do it by themselves or do they need some one from outside?**

⇒ **What are some of the things we should be examining?**

#25 'Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then, cut it down
Luke 13:6-9



After 3 years every gardener has to make a choice. Are you happy with this tree being an ornamental or is it 'using up the soil' as Jesus indicates in this parable and you have to get rid of it? How do we make something fruitful that hasn't been fruitful?



The gardener indicates he will dig around the tree and then fertilise it. Digging around a fig tree is risky for the life of the fig tree because the fig tree roots are quite shallow and digging can expose the roots and/or cause suckering. Digging can also be used as a management tool to cut the roots, slow their spread and concentrate the tree energy into producing fruit. Digging can allow more water penetration if the soil has become compacted and actually repels water. It is an opportunity to add some soil wetting agents.

Digging can allow the penetration of the fertilizer (blood and bone or rotted manure) closer to the root system so that the nutrients are taken into the plant quickly. Under fig trees it is common to grow an annual ground cover or add mulch to shelter the root system and encourage moisture retention and bio organic activity. In sandier soils planting mustards around the base can reduce the possibility of nematode activity.

There are many things that can be done to correct unfruitfulness. Digging is hard work. It involves going below the surface of things and disrupting the equilibrium that has been established. It can be trial and error often to find the right corrections that have to be made. In my Christian walk I see corrections that I have made such as: unlearning church jargon, mixing and befriending people who do not believe, talking naturally about a daily struggle and walking in the grace and love of Jesus. *Romans 7:14-25 8:9-17* Can you name some other corrections your church or you might have to make?

The fertiliser is a stimulant to get nutrients that may have been missing or deficient into the system to correct the imbalance or provide the boost needed to move into a new stage of growth or development. Prayer, bible study and worship fellowship are the conventional stimuli and fertilisers the church has relied upon to get most Christians growing. But these obviously haven't been working very well by themselves if Christian church numbers are any sort of guide.

⇒ Can you name some more Christian fertilisers?

I have found Christian books or conferences help me.

⇒ What works for you and why does it work?