



The interior of St John's Anglican Church in Otakeho and the organ, which is included in the sale. Massey University Professor of History Peter Lineham, bottom right, says "Religion plays a less prominent part in everyday New Zealanders' lives; New Zealand never had a very religious age."



Living in God's house

There is a growing trend in New Zealand of converting churches into houses, stores, and wedding venues as rural populations dwindle, writes Stephanie Mitchell.

Forget about overpriced properties and coffin-sized houses, because there's something bigger and better for sale out there – a church.

It's got a white picket fence, ample gardening space, high ceilings, enough room to seat a congregation and it comes with its very own organ.

And it's not the only one. St John's Anglican Church in Otakeho, coastal Taranaki, is among almost a dozen other churches that are currently listed as for sale in New Zealand. It appears dwindling rural populations are to blame for this church, which was built in 1893, and a slew of other churches that have gone under the hammer in recent years.

In the last 50 years, the rural population has dropped by a third, the number of parishes has halved, and the number of churches has fallen to 4000.

"Religion plays a less prominent part in everyday New Zealanders' lives; New Zealand never had a very religious age," Massey University Professor of History Peter Lineham said.

Lineham explains the cost of a full-time minister is also unaffordable, which is another reason why churches are being sold off.

"The cost of having a minister today is \$80,000 to



St John's Anglican Church in Otakeho, South Taranaki. The church is up for sale.

\$70,000. They have a housing allowance, three-year training, and living costs.

"The money paid for the building belongs to the residual owner of the land which is usually the denomination (assuming that the local congregation no longer exists)."

St John's is the third church Viv Scott from McDonald's Real Estate has been asked to sell – one became a second-hand store and the other a wedding venue.

"I sold one in Eltham, one in Kaponga, and now the one in Otakeho. It's a lack of people going to church," she said.

The aptly-named Karen Christian, regional administrator for the central Taranaki dean's office, which owns St John's, couldn't give exact figures on how many churches it had sold but believed St John's would be the fifth in about five years.

"Demand for the services the

church offers are still high but times have changed.

"The congregation has really gone from the Otakeho community which is typical of a small rural community."

Christian said there had been a lot of interest every time a church went up for sale because of the uniqueness of the building.

"People appreciate the architecture."

A quick search on TradeMe

"The congregation

has really gone from the Otakeho

community which is

typical of a small, rural community."

Karen Christian

shows there are 10 churches for sale across the country, ranging from \$115,000 to \$310,000, and a number of former churches that are now homes.

Joseph Bulbulia, a professor in theological and religious studies at the University of Auckland, bought a decommissioned church for himself last October.

The Koheko Church, an icon of the Awhitu Peninsula that overlooks Lake Pokorua and the Tasman Sea, was built in 1886 for use as a Presbyterian church before being decommissioned in 1976.

"My original intention was to develop it to live in. Now my intention is to protect it, and to re-imagine its use in some way that contributes to the spiritual life of the region," said Bulbulia.

Media officer for the Anglican Church of New Zealand Lloyd Ashton said in a statement that Kiwis have become secularised in the last 50-odd years according to the

census figures.

In the 2013 census, 1,858,977 people identified with the Christian faith, which included Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist. This was down from 2,027,418 people in the 2006 census.

"There are other factors at work too, though – including, for example, the migration from rural areas to the cities," Ashton said.

He referred to Lawrence, in Central Otago, as an example. "I'm staggered by how many churches there are in that little town."

"They're cheek by jowl – and they were built at a time when denominational borders were utterly rigid, when Sunday observance was expected, and when most people didn't have cars."

"At the height of the gold fever, Lawrence's population was 11,500. It's now down to 450."