

# Anglican church's Christmas billboard vandalized in New Zealand

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Wellington, New Zealand, December 20 (ENInews)--An Anglican church's Christmas billboard, depicting Jesus' mother Mary dressed in traditional garb and holding a pregnancy test strip while covering her mouth with the other hand, was vandalized over the weekend.

The billboard, erected on 15 December by St. Matthews-in-the-City in central Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city, has been greeted with controversy.

Arthur Skinner of the Catholic Action Group, a conservative lay association, claims he removed the image of the pregnancy strip, according to a story in the New Zealand Herald.

"This is Satanic, this is the ultimate Satanic attack, when Lucifer attacks his worst enemy, the Blessed Virgin," Skinner is quoted as saying in the paper.

Clay Nelson, the vicar at St. Matthews, says the billboard sought to avoid a sentimental take on Christmas. He expected it to spark thought and conversation about the Christmas story.

"Christmas is real. It's about a real pregnancy, a real mother and a real child. It's about real anxiety, courage, and hope."

St. Matthews has controversial history. In 2009, its Christmas billboard showed Mary and Joseph in bed, with a tag line, "Poor Joseph, God was a hard act to follow." That billboard was also vandalized, and its replacement defaced with a knife. Auckland bishop John Paterson called the billboard "insensitive and disrespectful," and was disappointed when the church decided to replace it.

Mainstream Catholics say the provocative billboard fails to provide constructive debate, as it ignores the real account of the Gospel. "Mary is not a shocked solo

mother, but a young woman who has given her assent and trust to God," said Auckland Catholic Communications director Lyndsay Freer.

Jim White, Auckland's assistant Anglican bishop disagrees. "It gets people talking; it's provocative but thought-provoking," he said. "It is certainly a fine line; lots of people think it has stepped over that line. I don't. They are trying to make Christmas relevant."

Nelson says the billboard is intended to hold different strands of a real Christmas together: anxiety and joy, suffering and compassion, Santa and Jesus.

"In this season we encourage one another to be generous to those who suffer, to give to strangers, and to care for all, especially those who have the least. Like the first Santa, St. Nicholas did."

Nelson says he is undecided about whether to replace the billboard. Skinner said he would destroy any replacement.