

Preaching to the advertised

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In an interesting twist of faith, the United Church of Canada's General Council has hired an advertising agency to help spruce up the church's image and attract Canadians aged 30 to 45 to Sunday services. As part of an initiative called Emerging Spirit, the UCC will devote about \$8 million to advertising over the next four years.

There's no doubt the campaign is a coup for Smith Roberts & Co., the small Toronto-based advertising firm hired by the church. As creative director Brian Smith says, re-branding the church "will get attention because, in the Canadian landscape, it is new. "

New, indeed. Challenging, too. No other Canadian religious group has ventured into the marketing world in quite the same way. But after decades of falling church attendance, the United Church was desperate. "For years and years," says Aaron McCarroll-Gallegos, producer of the Emerging Spirit campaign, "we've been trying to reach out using traditional church methods. Going door-to-door, telling neighbours, hosting events at the church. But it hasn't made a dent." Church attendance has dropped an average of 2% per year for the past 30 to 40 years.

So, taking inspiration from the U.S.-based United Methodists and United Church of Christ, both of which have launched major advertising campaigns, the United Church of Canada decided "to go into the marketplace of ideas, and raise awareness of what the United Church of Canada stands for," says McCarroll-Gallegos.

The choice to hire an ad agency is controversial. "We have a culture that is naturally suspicious of marketing, and surveys and polls," says McCarroll-Gallegos. "There is a deep belief in the church that it shouldn't be guided by the same principles as a business would be guided by." But many parishioners, especially younger ones, see advertising as a natural, and necessary, step for the church.

Malcolm Roberts, principal at Smith Roberts & Co., believes his agency is up to the challenge. "We have a track record of taking brands that are no longer relevant, and making them relevant," says Roberts, citing the agency's recent success with Harlequin, publisher of romance novels. By re-designing book covers, and then linking a Harlequin series with NASCAR (launched at a Daytona 500 Speed Week), Smith Roberts updated the publisher's image, and attracted new market share. "The church recognizes the parallels," says Roberts. (Neither Roberts nor anyone else working on the campaign, by the way, attends church regularly.)

The plan is for a mostly print campaign, with some online initiatives, too. Television commercials have largely been ruled out. "We don't want to do a hard-core recruitment message that will turn people off," says Smith. McCarroll-Gallegos adds: "We are aware of the tendency of the church to preach at people. We don't want our advertising to do that." In that regard, today's trend towards interactive advertising that strives to engage the consumer is a plus.

According to research by Environics, 73% of people between 30 and 45 who don't already attend church or belong to another religion think that "organized religion tells you what you have to believe." On the other hand, less than half of those people believe that they have nothing to gain by participating in church life. Environics suggests "the theme of questing and embracing represents the best opportunity for the United Church to distinguish itself from other faith communities." There's a marketing message.

Expect to see ads start running this fall. Success will be measured by the number of new churchgoers; Smith Roberts has until 2009 to fill the pews.

Launching a national ad campaign is a major step for a Canadian religious group. But McCarroll-Gallegos has another concern, too. "Once the advertising campaign launches," he says, "will the church be ready? In marketing terms, is our product ready to put on the shelf?"