

# Twist of faith

The United Church of Canada turns to an advertising agency to fill its pews

BY LAURA BOGOMOLNY

To help spruce up its image and attract Canadians aged 30 to 45 to Sunday services, the United Church of Canada's General Council is not just counting on the power of prayer. Rather, as part of an initiative called Emerging Spirit, the UCC, pending board approval, is planning to devote millions 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, rebranding the UCC "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 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." McCarroll Gallegos estimates attendance has dropped an average 2% annually over the past 30 to 40 years.

So, taking inspiration from the U.S.-based United Methodists Church and United Church of Christ, both of which have launched major advertising campaigns, the UCC 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," he says. "There is a deep belief in the church that it shouldn't be guided by the same principles as a business would."

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 redesigning book covers, and then promoting a link between a Harlequin series and NASCAR, Smith Roberts updated the publisher's image and attracted new market share. "The church recognizes the parallels," says Roberts.

The plan is for a mostly print campaign, with some online initiatives. Television commercials have largely been ruled out.

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"We don't want to do a hard-core recruitment message that will turn people off," says Smith. According to Environics, 73% of people between 30 and 45 who don't attend church or

belong to a religion think that "organized religion tells you what you have to believe." Still, 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 [UCC] to distinguish itself from other faith communities."

If all goes according to plan, you can expect to see ads start running this fall. Success will be measured by the number of new churchgoers; Smith Roberts has until 2010 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 wonders, "will the church be ready? In marketing terms, is our product ready to be put on the shelf?" God only knows. ☐

**4**  
YEARS  
LENGTH  
OF AD  
CAMPAIGN

**2%**  
ESTIMATED  
AVERAGE  
ANNUAL  
DROP IN  
CHURCH  
ATTENDANCE

Brian Smith, Liz Atkins and Malcolm Roberts of Smith Roberts & Co. at Rosedale United Church in Toronto

