

Make God accessible: evangelist

People searching for a place to belong, he says

BY NANCY DEVINE

ANGLICANS are intensely uncomfortable with the notion of marketing their churches, says Andrew Weeks, who was in Toronto Jan. 26-27 to present his often humorous and engaging Magnetic Church Conference.

"We are not trying to market a product," he told the participants at St. John, York Mills. "We are not trying to satisfy a consumer demand. We are trying to make God more accessible. We are a niche, not a mainstream market."

A cradle Anglican who was born and raised in Montreal, and who has since moved to the United States, Mr. Weeks stumbled across Christ Church (Episcopal) in Rhode Island.

He was not looking for God, but for community, he says. There are significant portions of the population in both the U.S. and Canada who are looking for the same thing, despite what pundits say about the 21st century being a post-religion era.

"In both countries, about 17 per cent of the population claim no religious affiliation, and there are about seven per cent who have declared themselves Anglican. These are loyal. They might not attend St. Andrew's every Sunday, but they know they will be buried

from there one day. Both those segments of the populations are available to us."

Mr. Weeks said it is a lot to expect congregations to convert that many people. However, if everyone in a congregation offered a personal invitation to one other person, it would eventually make a dent in the number of people who have no faith community.

"We have what they want," he says. "We can offer a sense of community, a sense of belonging."

He adds churches can offer personal connections in a world where many people don't have a lot of opportunity to interact with others. They are online more than they are out meeting people.

"In the U.S., it is estimated that 64 per cent of people go online at least once a day, and about 20 per cent of them say they go online to find out about churches," says Mr. Weeks. "It makes sense then to make sure your church is there, offering a welcome to them. It doesn't cost a ton of money, and it is money well spent. People will tell me they don't have the computer smarts to do it. Well, just ask one of the kids in the youth group. They know exactly what to do, and they are eager to help."

Advertising and marketing a church need not be costly, or even complicated, he says. One church



Andrew Weeks talks to 140 people from 36 parishes at the Magnetic Church conference at St. John, York Mills.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL HUDSON

he visited gives members four or five business cards each. Members are encouraged to pass them along to others - "even as scrap paper. People can jot down notes on the blank side and give them to others. Chances are they will turn the card over at some point."

Mr. Weeks also advocates "littering for the Lord." He encourages church members to "accidentally forget" copies of church publications, like *The Anglican*, *The Journal* and Sunday bulletins in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, beauty salons and other public areas. He says it is free advertising, and all the waiting may as well have a higher purpose.

"Those things hardly ever get thrown out, but even if they do, some people likely read them before the end of the day," he says.

He urged participants to look at the liturgy with fresh eyes, and

understand that a person who has never seen an Anglican service might be overwhelmed.

"Picture it: you're in a building you've never seen before, there is someone playing music you've never heard before, and suddenly, everyone stands up and people wearing medieval outfits parade in. Yes, the service is meant to be set apart, but it is not meant to be inaccessible. So let's take a minute or two to explain ourselves."

Whether they have attended service every Sunday since birth, or they are in church for the first time, humans all want the things that a giving and welcoming congregation can provide, no matter how large or small it is.

"People want to believe that life has a meaning, that they are a part of a community, that they are appreciated, that they are being listened to and heard, that they can grow spiritually, and that they will get spiritual help," he says. "They show up to be engaged and challenged. Youth want essentially the same things and, most impor-

tantly, they want to be trusted and supported, not tolerated."

Churches that can understand and respond to those needs will be successful, he adds - and good theatre never hurts.

"A good service provides an experience of God and connects us to each other. How many of the 5,000 came to see Jesus and how many were there for the fish and chips? Liturgy will not take the place of rock-solid theology, but it is important," says Mr. Weeks. "A service conducted with passion and energy is vastly different from one where everyone is aware you are just walking through it. Lay reading, for example, is a responsibility. Give Bible readings to someone who is prepared to read it properly."

Two more Magnetic Church Conferences are planned this year: Feb. 23-24 at St. Bride's, Clarkson in Mississauga; and April 27-28 at St. John the Evangelist in Peterborough.

For more information, visit www.toronto.anglican.ca.

Director moving on

THE Rev. Canon Betty Jordan will complete her appointment as director of Flemingdon Park Ministry in May. During the past 10 years under her leadership, the storefront ministry in Don Mills has grown from serving 240 individuals to 2,000. The ministry, which is funded by FaithWorks, offers worship, Christian counselling, programs for women and children, employment assistance, settlement assistance, and a foodbank. "We thank her for her dedication and tremendous work with this important ministry," said Bishop Colin Johnson.

Priest to speak about church growth

TWO parishes will host the Rev. Alice Mann, author, lecturer and Episcopal pastor, in March. Ms. Mann will speak about "Growing the Community of Faith," at Grace Church, Markham, on March 2, from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 per person and can be purchased by mailing a cheque to Grace Church Tickets, 19 Parkway Ave., Markham, ON, L3P 2E9. For more information, call (905)

294-3184. She will also speak at St. James, Orillia, on "Barriers to Church Growth and Transition Struggles," on March 3 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Lunch will be provided and participation is limited to 200 people. The cost is \$40 per person; groups are welcome to request special rates. Call the office at (705) 325-2742 or mail to St. James Church, Box 272, 58 Peter St. N., Orillia, ON, L3V 6J6.



The Rev. Canon Betty Jordan, second from right, enjoys a moment with staff and visitors at Flemingdon Park Ministry. PHOTO BY MICHAEL HUDSON