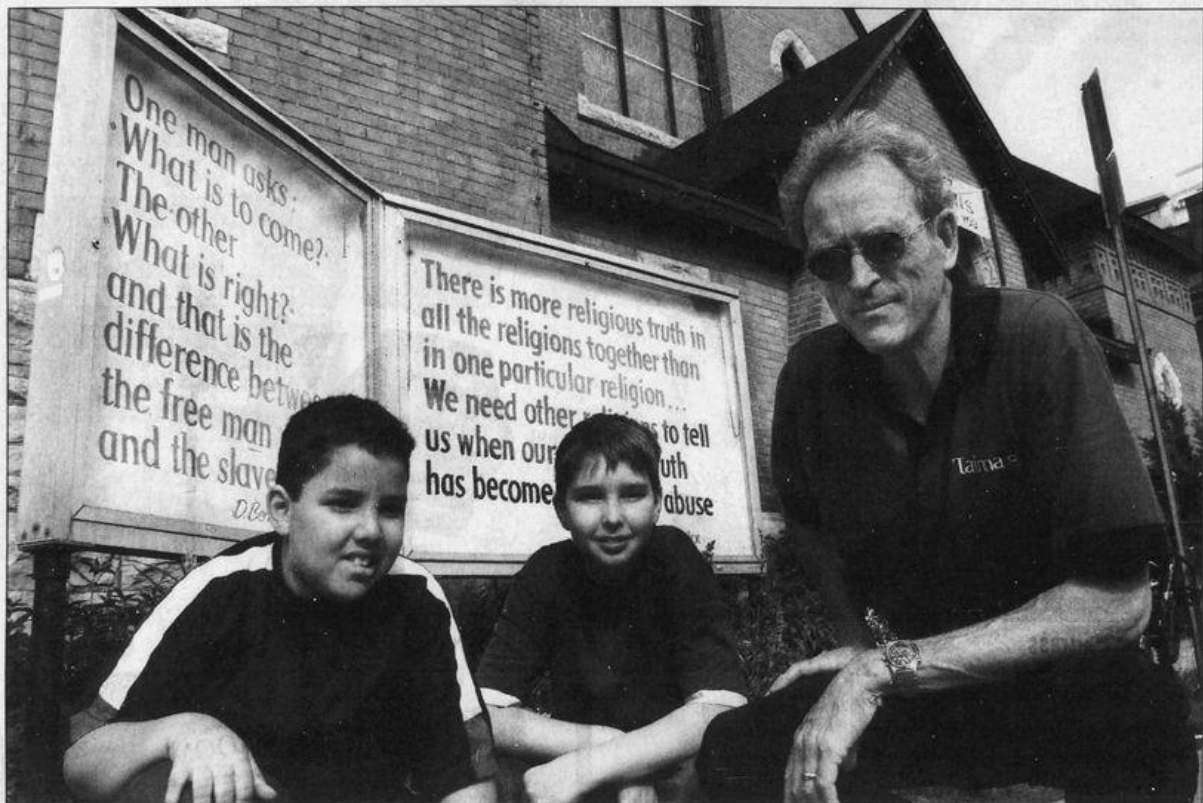


20 years ago, in Ottawa, St John the Evangelist Church was often referred to as the Downtown Church "with the sign." Many remember the impact of "Our Church Has AIDS." That was only one of many.

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WAYNE HIEBERT, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

St. John's rector Garth Bulmer and parishioners Nathan Dillabough 10, left, and Jesse Desbarats, 12, pose outside what has become known as the church with the sign.

'Wayside Pulpit' reaches the masses

St. John Evangelist Anglican Church's message board has enraged, enlightened and entertained passersby for years. **Elaine O'Connor reports.**

Diana Hart's most vivid memory of her wedding day is not of the ceremony or the reception, but of a sign outside Ottawa's St. John Evangelist Anglican Church, captured forever in her wedding photographs.

"It said, 'Love and fidelity have come together,'" Mrs. Hart reminisced recently. "It was a good omen."

Good omen indeed. Thirty years later, almost to the day (June 3, 1972), that she and her husband Colin were married, they made a pilgrimage from Scotland to visit the city and the church that spoke volumes to them without saying a word.

Theirs is not an unusual attachment. For the past 35 years, the "church with the sign" has been enraging, enlightening and endearing to pedestrians who pass by the parish on Somerset Avenue at Elgin Street — all without even getting them inside for the sermon.

And it's mostly thanks to the

"Wayside Pulpit" as it's called by area residents — a big set of poster boards outside the church that have been blazoned with the *bon mots* of everyone from Baez to Dylan, Camus to Charlie Brown, Kennedy to Kierkegaard, and Mandela to Margaret Mead since the tradition started in the 1960s.

These mini-epiphanies — thoughts on everything from life and death to poverty and slavery — have become a neighbourhood institution with a loyal following.

So much so that strangers often call up the church secretaries and ask where the quotes come from or offer suggestions. Volunteer secretary Isobel Cameron says some people tell her they keep a record of the quotes and others say the brightest part of their day is reading the sayings as they pass by on their way to work.

St. John's Rev. Garth Bulmer says the sign that has set his parish apart provides more than

a talking point: it's an interactive interface with the community.

"A good quote needs to stop people in their tracks and make them think," says Rev. Bulmer, leafing through a sheaf of suggestions dating back 35 years. "Because one of the problems churches have is we're shut up in our building. How do you represent yourself outside of your building and give some indication of the culture?"

'A good quote needs to stop people in their tracks and make them think.'

Rev. Garth Bulmer

St. John's seems to have found a way, with a tradition that's so ingrained no one can remember exactly how it started. No matter what the signs actually say on any given day, the message is clear: this is not your typical church.

In fact, St. John's has a long history of social activism and religious reform. The 1,000-member church is gay, lesbian

and feminist-friendly, (they refer to God as "She" during mass), and active in controversial social issues. Church groups lobby for affordable housing, sponsor Sudanese refugees, and help pedophiles and rapists reintegrate into the community.

The Wayside Pulpit sayings — printed on \$120 paper posters and stashed in a church closet — often underline the church's social stance.

The most controversial posts, like the "Our Church Has AIDS" slogan, displayed each year before the city's fall AIDS walk, sometimes get a frosty reception. Most quotes are unquestionably challenging: "There are only three countries in the world with worse prison conditions than Canada," reads one, culled from a UN study. And sometimes they're humorous: "To you, I'm an atheist, to God, I'm loyal opposition."

A more recent posting: "Blessed are the fundamentalists, for they shall inhibit the Earth" got few laughs.

"I got phone calls about that one, I got people dropping in," Rev. Bulmer says, indicating few of the visits were pleasant.

"One of the difficulties, of

course, is when only have a line or a line or two, it's difficult to nuance," says Rev. Bulmer, who has been the rector at the "small 'liberal' church since 1991.

And although he's lost some members over the years due to the church's progressive stance, Rev. Bulmer refuses to shy away from offending people.

St. John's is all about grabbing people. In an age of "church shopping," Rev. Bulmer says some parishioners come to the church after visiting their Web site: www.cyberus.ca/~stjohns. A few have even joined specifically because they were drawn by a message on the sign.

Tamara Mann, for example, saw the sign the other week as she was visiting a friend in the neighbourhood. She was so impressed with the message — that all different religions are important — that she drove in from Hull for Sunday mass.

"I was so shocked to see a church say that," she said. "To me it was just so open-minded."

"People think it's really groovy," agrees Adele Findlayson, who joined the church seven years ago. "The Wayside Pulpit is a very, very effective form of outreach."

