

Markham churches defy newest stats

By PAUL PIVATO

It was not too long ago, recalls Rev. Alan Embree of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, when churches allowed dancing in the aisles and calisthenics in the pews in an effort to woo the faithful back to church.

But it didn't work, said Rev. Embree, who watched attendance sink to an all-time low.

And while churches may have abandoned dancing in the aisles, attendance figures continue to plummet. A recent Gallup poll, published last week, shows that only 31 per cent of Canadians now attend religious services on a weekly basis.

Although most local pastors bemoan the low statistics, they all say that church attendance in Markham is much higher than the national figure.

"I think the statistics are a real sad commentary on our society, but we haven't experienced such a decline in Markham," said Pastor Harvey Peters at Centennial Baptist Church. "Perhaps that's because we're a growing community."

Other clergymen agree. Rev. Embree says his church is "full every Sunday." Rev. Brian Pearson of St. Phillip's Anglican says his church has been averaging one new family per week for the last 2 years, and Rev. Benoit Jobin of St. Patrick's Catholic says "lots of people are involved" in the church, particularly young parishioners.

According to the Gallup poll the Catholic church suffered the largest drop in attendance figures. Only 40 per cent of Catholics said they attended church on a weekly basis - down from 51 per cent in 1981 and 87 per cent in 1957.

While most of the clergymen interviewed agree Markham has higher church attendance than the national figure, they were divided on whether attendance will continue to drop or rise.

"I wouldn't be surprised if attendance goes up," said Rev. Jobin. "There is a renewal - people are looking for more than comfort, money and popularity."

But Rev. Pearson is less optimistic. "I think we're seeing a privileged picture of high church attendance in Unionville," he said. "Overall, I don't think we've seen attendance bottom out."

Rev. Embree, who's been in the ministry for 34 years, paints a much darker picture: "We're following in the path of England, where the weekly attendance figure is around 16 per cent." In fact statistics place the English level of attendance closer to 5 per cent.

Some of the pastors, though, see a good side to the plummeting attendance. "I welcome the low figures," said Rev. Pearson. "It means the church has to be more relevant - it can't assume that people will come out of habit."

Dr. Frederick A. Styles, pastor of St. Andrew's United, thinks the low figures are "just fine" because the Church doesn't have to "carry the dead weight of people who are there only out of social pressures."

"We'd sooner have fewer people who are committed than many people who are sitting on their hands," said Dr. Styles, who points out that 50 years ago, school teachers and company executives had to go to church or risk losing their jobs.

"In the old days, many people liked to worship because there was nothing else to do," added Dr. Styles. "The church was a place of entertainment."

Dr. Styles argued that high attendance figures are a poor barometer of the number of religious people in a community. "Morality doesn't equate with going to church," he said. "There are many people outside the church who are moral and upright."

Rev. Pearson also warns against interpreting low attendance figures as a decline in morality.

"I don't think our present society is any less moral," said Rev. Pearson. "I believe people are still nurturing religious values, but it's no longer in the context of the church."

Markham agents discuss tour ban on South Africa

By PAUL PIVATO

A voluntary ban on the promotion and advertising of South African tourism will not hurt local travel agencies say most agents.

The ban, announced last Thursday by the federal government, was termed "wrist-slapping" and "ineffectual" by travel agents.

"I don't think it will make a hill of beans of difference," said Samantha Bates, manager of Samantha

Travel on Main Street. She added that regardless of the ban she would advise against travel to South Africa because of its "dangerous market conditions."

"The ban won't hurt South Africa or travel agencies," said Denise Hayes of Thomas Cook Travel. "A businessman is going to go there whether there's a ban on advertising or not."

Since South Africa is a very specialized and expensive tourist market, most travel agencies have very little business there, explained Bella Diffey of Marlin Travel in the Markville Shopping Centre.

Pointing out recent political unrest, Ms. Diffey said that South Africa is "not what you'd call a vacation place."

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