

PARISH DECLINE

Keep the faith or pull the plug?

Known as the hit man, Simon Bell determines which troubled churches can survive and which should be put out of their misery

BY MICHAEL VALPY

He's been called the diocesan hit man. As a joke, of course. Not a great joke. People with the skills of Simon Bell have become necessary in Canada's major Christian churches.

He determines which congregations can survive, and why, and which ones have slid so far into the abyss of decline that they need to be put out of their misery. His title is congregational development consultant with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, the largest Anglican jurisdiction in Canada. Churches call him in when they realize they're in trouble.

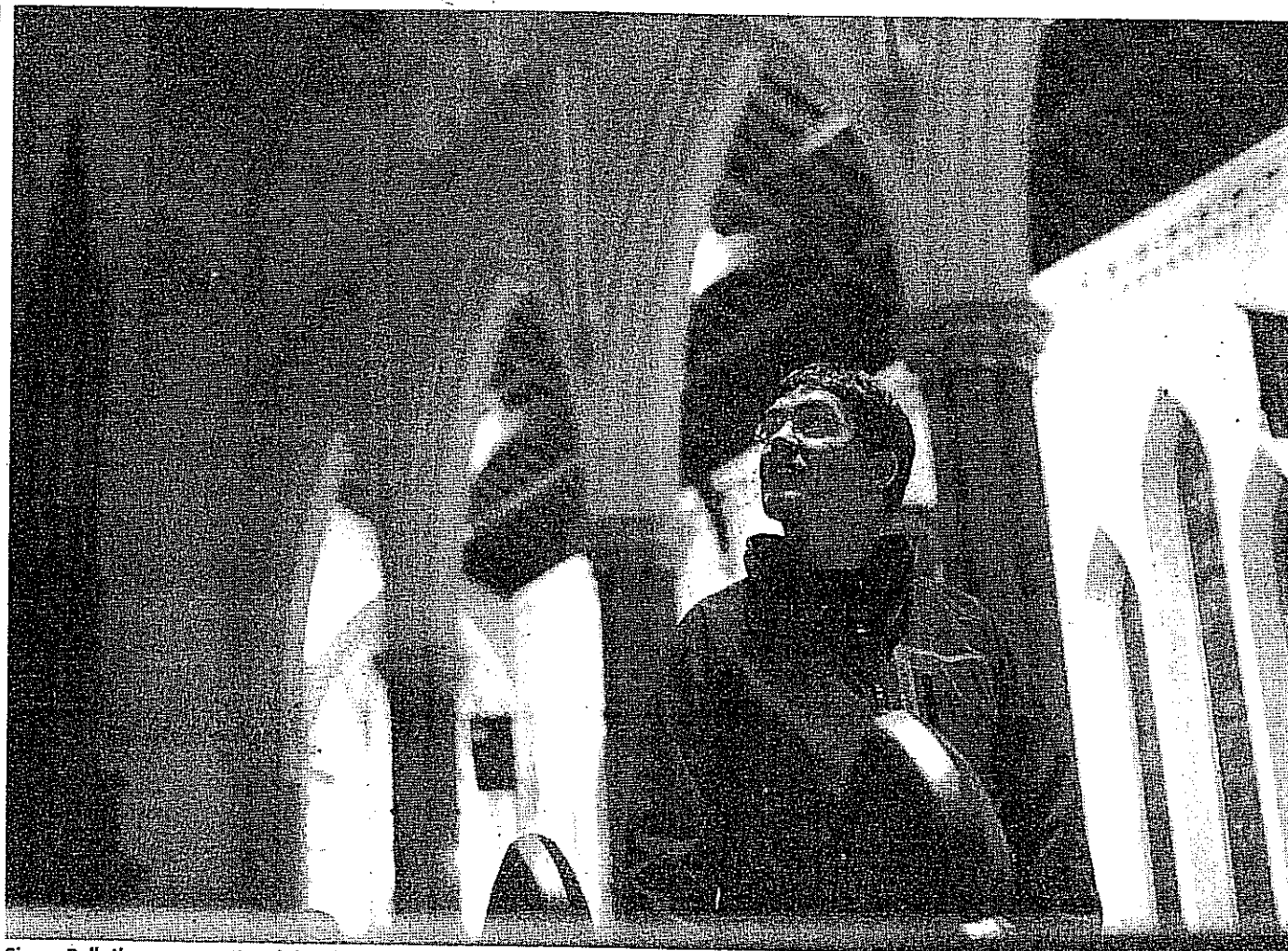
He acquired the hit-man sobriquet after his involvement in the protracted – it's still going on – and unpopular closing of one of Toronto's most historic and architecturally significant Anglican churches, St. Stephen-in-the-Field at College Street and Bellevue Avenue.

This is what is going on as Canada completes its emergence from Christendom, the cultural hegemony of Christianity that had defined the country since the onset of European settlement.

On New Year's Day, the 42,000 inhabitants of Rimouski, Que., almost entirely old-stock French, learned that three of their nine Roman Catholic churches would close and others would be amalgamated into a single parish. Later this month in Prince Edward Island, Roman Catholic officials will begin public hearings on a plan to reduce the number of parishes from 55 to 17.

Nationwide, in the past decade, the Catholics have closed nearly 10 per cent of their 5,800 churches and missions. The United Church – the largest Protestant denomination – has had a net loss of 12 per cent of its 3,900 churches. Anglican and Presbyterian figures are similar.

Half a century ago, the four main branches of Canadian Christianity likely attracted 90



Simon Bell, the congregational development consultant with the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, glances around St. James Cathedral in the city's downtown this week. Mr. Bell is part of a group of administrators that measure the health of churches. ASHLEY HUTCHESON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Simon Bell

per cent of Canadians to their worship services every Sunday. Today it's more like 15 per cent.

What Simon Bell sees as he takes pulses under the steeples of Toronto Anglicanism is a rapidly changing urban demography that he calls profoundly postmodern and post-Christian. And the churches, he says, that try to continue as if they still exist in a culture of 1950s Christendom aren't likely to survive.

Churches without a precise mission and the resources to achieve their mission are not likely to make it, he says. Neither are congregations who find all their energy and re-

sources are going toward keeping their building from falling down.

He says the institutional church – especially a historically liturgical church like Anglicanism – can't tell people what to believe any more. In a post-modern environment, people bring their own faith and spirituality to the door.

"Therefore the journey now has become the key. In the 1950s and 1960s, faith was a collection of statements that you held to or didn't hold to. Now faith is an exploration of relationships.

"And the clergy who get that, and reinforce that, are the ones

who I think engage with the culture they're finding. The clergy who say you have to believe this and that, otherwise you don't belong, are the clergy who are saying simply, "Don't come here."

"The healthy relationship [that clergy] form with people as they explore faith is what's really important, and we need to give them the space to do that. And that might bring us to question our own theological point of view. But that's good, that's a healthy thing."

Mr. Bell, one of four congregation development consultants for the Diocese of Toronto, can quickly tick off the city

churches that are healthy, the ones that aren't and the ones that are hanging on only because they have money from legacies and endowments but are doing nothing as their members age.

St. Mary Magdalene and St. Thomas's on Huron Street will survive as "destination churches" – people from all over Toronto come to them for their Anglo-Catholic liturgy and music.

The Church of the Epiphany and St. Mark in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood will make it as a "strategic church." It has a precise mission to provide a faith community for the mentally ill who populate the area's rooming houses.

St. Margaret's New Toronto has adapted to its changing neighbourhood – forming partnerships with local social agencies and successfully attracting the well-to-do as well as the poor, the single elderly and immigrants.

The Church of the Redeemer at the corner of Avenue Road and Bloor Street – sitting on one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in Toronto – bit by bit is leaving Anglican liturgy behind to become a community where priest and congregation explore the meaning of faith and spirituality together.

And there's cute little St. Matthias, Bellwoods, on the west edge of downtown, 134 years old and looking like a turn-of-the-century Swiss ski lodge. It shouldn't continue to exist but does – because of the grit and imagination of its congregation and rector.

They march together in the annual gay-pride festival, hand out leaflets inviting visitors to a nearby huge public park, and hold an annual blessing-of-the-animals service.

"I will bless anything presented to me at the liturgy," says Rev. Jeffrey Kennedy.

Annual church expenditure: \$165,000. Annual revenue: \$165,000. St. Matthias hangs in.