

In church, sort of

Why non-believers still come on Sunday

BY ANNE BOKMA

Angela is a 24-year-old United Church Sunday school teacher who doesn't believe in God and struggles with some of the material she's expected to teach her young charges. "Sometimes I tweak the suggestions that are given to me. If I'm expected to teach on love or community or compassion, I'll find a story that isn't riddled with Bible readings," says Angela, who doesn't want her real name used because she fears it could cost her the part-time job that's helping pay her way through university. "Part of me wants to be open so that I can be accepted for who I am, but there could be a serious backlash that might put my job in jeopardy if people found out."

It's easy to find people like Angela, who identifies as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), in the United Church. Robin Galey, 47, is agnostic and a mother of three who started attending Calgary's Hillhurst United two years ago. "I was looking for a bit of extra depth in my life and thought I'd give it a try," says Galey, who was brought up by a New Age mom and says her first spiritual experience was receiving a pack of tarot cards on her 12th birthday. Now she goes to church every Sunday.

"There's this idea that we [agnostics] shouldn't go to church unless we already have faith. But we go to church because we have questions."

There are also former believers who have given up God but haven't given up church. Seventy-eight-year-old Sheila Fairburn is both a 40-year United Church member and now an atheist. She regularly travels 90 minutes each way from her home in Beaverton, Ont., to hear atheist minister Rev. Gretta Vosper preach at West Hill United in Toronto. "I go there because I like being with people who are thankful and joyous," she says.

Lots of people are drawn to church even if they don't believe in much of what it represents. They want all the benefits of church membership — a sense of belonging, the ritual of the sacraments, moral teachings for their children, engagement in justice issues, uplifting music and inspiring sermons — without paying the traditional price of

admission: belief in the Almighty. They lean toward the humanistic rather than the holy, and praise the glory of good instead of the glory of God.

Jane Armstrong, whose Toronto-based firm, Jane Armstrong Research Associates, has conducted surveys for the United Church and *The Observer*, figures at least two in 10 faithful United Church adherents are SBNR and the number is higher among those who don't attend regularly. "They aren't there because they care about the church as a religious institution, but because they see it as a place of community building and justice seeking," she says.

Is church just a social club for these folks? So what if it is, says Rev. John Pentland of Hillhurst United, where many of the 450 congregants are SBNR and a full third are agnostic or atheist. Hillhurst has attracted the SBNR by "paying attention to the things they are talking about in coffee shops — their relationships and jobs and kids." Lots of churches, he says, talk about "stupid stuff." Instead, he preaches on decidedly non-religious topics ranging from the sexually graphic bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* to his "Reel Theology" series on popular films such as *Room* and *Spotlight*.

The United Church should embrace the SBNR with open arms, says Pentland. "We have to be welcoming to these folks. There are lots for whom the whole idea of God may not make sense, but having a sense of community does. People want to belong."

He says it's sad that someone like Angela feels she can't be true to her (non) belief within the United Church. "Why should she hide?" he asks.

As for Angela, who grew up in the United Church, she says she is firmly committed to it. "I'm here because of the community. That's what's most important to me. And that's the reason I don't leave."

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.

