

God is still speaking with television ads during Advent

Northern California Nevada Conference churches are rolling out the welcome mat for the many guests expected to visit United Church of Christ churches after seeing the new "God is Still Speaking" television ad which will air nationally during Advent.

Tony Lewis, Gayle Madison, Suzanne Bernhard and Louis Knox from the NCNC Conference, along with hundreds of other UCC leaders nationwide, took part in training sessions this summer with Ron Buford and others in the Still Speaking Initiative in Cleveland.

"The training was fantastic," said Madison, Associate Conference Minister for Golden Gate Association North. "I spent the whole weekend in tears. I am so grateful we are finally doing this. Thanks be to God. Our church is so awesome. I walked into Amistad Chapel at our national Church House and just wept."

Tony Lewis echoed the power of the ads and the campaign. "The commercial is a powerful affirmation of welcome and inclusion. Every time I see it, it moves me. All the trainers were invited to make a contribution to the campaign, and I was able to make a substantial gift. I told Ron Buford, as long as the commercial keeps



Parkside, Sacramento has the "God is Still Speaking" spirit, not only with the official banner, but with its own "Burma-shave" style road signs, the brain child of Parkside's Trina Chalmers, chair of their "Good News Team." Like the punch line of the UCC TV ad which will air nationally in Advent, the signs read: "The UCC. No matter who you are; Or where you are on life's journey; You're welcome here."

getting to me, I will keep giving."

The four are leading six different training sessions this fall. October sessions were held at Petaluma, Modesto, Sacramento and Hayward. There's still room in the last two sessions: Nov. 13 at First, San Jose, and Nov. 20, at

City of Refuge, San Francisco. Contact the Conference office at <joy@nncucc.org> or 510-247-8990 for registration and information.

"We're doing this because there are people who desperately need us, not because we need more

members or money," said Madison. "The ads are a 21st Century way to do evangelism. Jesus himself was a walking, talking, living, breathing commercial for the advent of God's reign."

The same ad ran last spring in test markets in the Midwest and South and attendance at UCC churches and new member classes in those markets rose in a range from 18 percent to 40 percent.

A typical comment from viewers was: "I just saw your commercial in Tampa. . . I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your message and courage. I am a spiritual person who identifies with the Christian religion even though I have felt for a long time that it doesn't identify with me. I will be finding the nearest UCC in my area and will be there Sunday morning, like the prodigal son returning home. . . Bless you!"

"Now the whole nation will be a test market," said Lewis. "And we are being put to the test. The ad promises that 'whoever you are, wherever you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here.' Our churches need to be ready to meet this test challenge, that we really are welcoming of all people."

Each church attending a training session receives a detailed

training manual with printed material and two CDs including the commercial, PowerPoint presentations and further resources. Churches are also encouraged to buy the Stillspeaking starter kit which includes outreach materials, graphics for doorhangers, etc.

The four trainers are available for followup. Contact them through the Conference office.

Churches have also received an invitation to "opt-in" as a Still Speaking church, which means that when television viewers follow the <www.ucc.org> link, they will be two clicks away from a church that has had the welcoming training. To opt in, visit <www.ucc.org/stillspeaking/optin.php> So far about 50 of our NCNC churches have done so.

The Bay Association's "Comma Committee" has created beautiful, inexpensive "God is Still Speaking" banners in two sizes that they are selling to any church in the conference. Contact Rev. Lois Mueller at <belt@pacbell.net> or Rev. Alexandra Childs at <artsheart@earthlink.net> for more information.

Other "GISS" merchandise is available from the "comma-sery" at UCC resources, 800-325-7061, or at <www.stillspeaking.org>

Puente bridge ministry with agricultural workers is honored

The San Francisco Foundation honored the NCNC Ministry, Puente de la Costa Sur, at a ceremony at Herbst Theater in San Francisco Sept. 28, naming it the Bay Area Community Leadership Organization of 2004 and presenting its director, Rev. Wendy Taylor, a check for \$20,000.

The ministry, whose name means "Bridges of the South Coast" was recognized for "its creative, grassroots efforts to provide education, social justice, advo-

cacy, direct services and community connections enabling immigrant men in rural San Mateo County to improve their living and working conditions."

The John R. May award is made for an organization's creative grassroots initiatives in response to a significant contemporary problem.

Puente was the only agency selected from the 237 applicants. Three individuals were also honored.

"It was a tremendous honor," said Taylor. "Our Puente board, church and community supporters and our conference minister surrounded us. The Puente video dawned on the 'big screen' while the agricultural workers in the 15th row of the theater cheered. My call to be a bridge minister was incarnate, seeing these invisible strang-

ers who have become our friends.

"At the reception our brothers ate, shook hands and were the focus of photos that kept them truly and rightfully in the 'light' of love and acceptance. Even a member of the SF Foundation's Board of Trustees who hails from Oaxaca, Mexico, personally greeted each one of the dozen workers who attended. It was a night filled with blessed assurance which will sustain Puente in the years to come."

Puente de la Costa Sur is based in Pescadero and was initially sponsored by Pescadero Community where Taylor is co-pastor. Recently it has grown to be an independent, faith-based non-profit serving agricultural workers living on the South Coast of San Mateo



Photo by Ellen McCarty

Some of the "Men alone" of the Puente de la Costa Sur's ministry joined Rev. Wendy Taylor (back row, right) and her partner Ellen Sweetin (also Vice Chair of the NCNC Board of Directors) (back row, fourth from left) at the Herbst Theater ceremony Sept. 28 where the ministry was honored by the San Francisco Foundation.

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