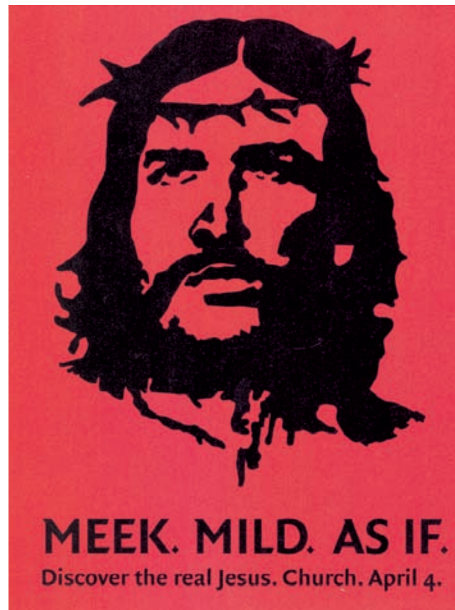


CHRIST'S AD AGENCY

The nativity scene recreated in a bus shelter; the Christmas story told in the style of a football commentary. With nearly half of Britons saying they do not believe in God, the Church is increasingly relying on the ad men to get its message across. Paul Kendall reports on the rebranding of Jesus

Mike Elms specialises in resurrections. Throughout a long career as an advertising executive, he has routinely breathed new life into well-known brands, from Guinness and Ford to the Woolwich and American Express. But of all his achievements, the most remarkable was his transformation of the energy drink, Lucozade.

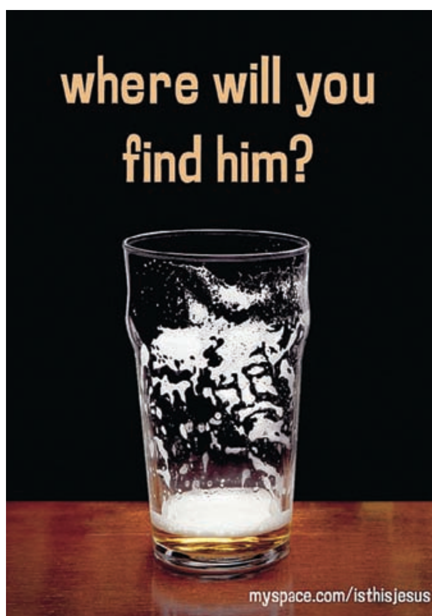
In 1982, the future for the product looked bleak. It was regarded as a pick-me-up for the sick (its original purpose, when the drink was invented in 1927) and had become less and less popular as the number of over-the-counter cold and flu remedies multiplied.

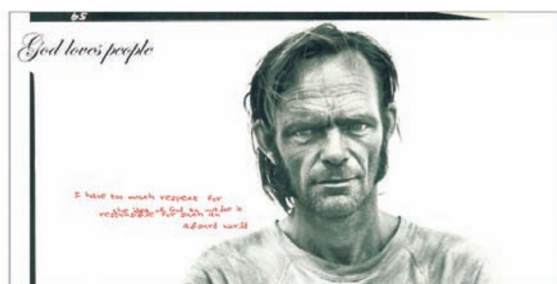
In desperation, the chief executive of Beecham approached Elms's agency, Ogilvy & Mather, and asked whether the brand could be saved. 'They'd tried to re-do it several times,' recalls Elms, 'and they said: "We're going to give it one last go. If it doesn't work we're just going to cut it off the product list." '

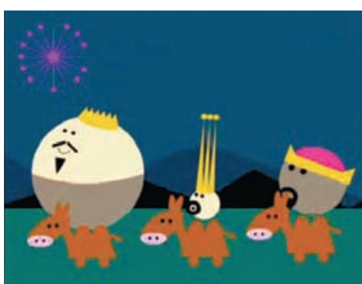
So, Elms and his team started thinking. What, in advertising speak, was the 'essential truth' of Lucozade? And the answer, they decided, was 'energy'. The drink contained glucose syrup, a rich source of carbohydrate. And it was not just the sick that needed an energy boost, they realised: it was anyone who played sport.

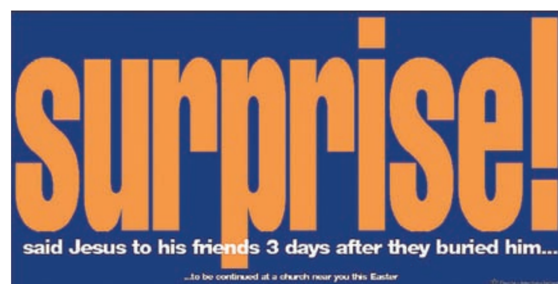
With this revelation in mind, the old slogan 'Lucozade aids recovery' was substituted for 'Lucozade replaces lost energy' and the Olympic champion decathlete, Daley Thompson, was recruited as the face of the brand. Television adverts showed Thompson sprinting down an athletics track, to the invigorating sound of Iron Maiden's *Phantom of the Opera*. The message was clear: drinking Lucozade will make you a winner.

And the results were startling. Between 1984 and 1989, the value of UK sales of the drink tripled to almost £75 million. In five years, an outdated brand, which had been of interest only to the sick and the elderly, had been reborn.









Now Mike Elms believes he can do the same for Jesus.

A tall, trim man, who himself brims with energy, Elms is a member of the Churches Advertising Network (CAN), an affiliation of advertising executives, church ministers and theologians who want to attract new people to Christianity. Their next campaign launches on 8 December to coincide with Christmas: two adverts, one telling the nativity story in the style of a football commentary and another narrated by a horse-racing commentator, will be broadcast on commercial radio stations across the country.

A poster, which transfers the nativity scene to the urban setting of a bus shelter, will also be unveiled. Both the radio ads and the poster will feature the slogan: 'Be Part of the Action'. The message, CAN says, is twofold. First, that Christianity is still relevant today; and, second, that it is something with which people can get involved; it is not something that simply 'gets done to you', as the chairman of CAN, Francis Goodwin, puts it.

CAN has no illusions; the adverts are not going to win Christianity thousands of new recruits. Instead, it sees the ads as part of a long-term strategy to encourage people to start thinking about the Christian message.

'Individuals make their decision [about faith] one way or another and you respect that, whichever it is,' Elms tells me when we meet over a cup of coffee in Piccadilly. 'But a lot of people have not taken that decision yet, and I think it's an important debate to have with yourself spiritually – is there a God or isn't there? It's difficult to sit on the fence for that one.'

Research suggests he has an uphill task. A recent survey showed that the number of people in Britain who positively do not believe in God has leapt from 11 per cent in 1968 to 44 per cent

CHURCHES ADVERTISING NETWORK; THE ADVERTISING ARCHIVES

People are asking, 'Who am I?' 'What's my place in the universe?' and 'What else is there apart from working, shopping and watching Strictly Come Dancing?'

'A 30-second ad or a poster is not going to change someone's point of view ... [We're] just sparking an interest'

Opposite: Jesus as Che Guevara. This page: new takes on the Christian message

today. And while another 44 per cent say they *do* believe in God, the vast majority of them do not go to church or live a Christian life in a scriptural sense.

The huge success of Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* – a spirited defence of atheism by one of the world's leading evolutionary biologists – is further proof that the British public has fallen out of love with organised religion. Britons are suspicious of anyone who is overtly religious and regard those that preach Christianity outside of church as eccentric. Alastair Campbell could have been speaking for millions when he famously intervened during an interview with Tony Blair and informed the journalist: 'We don't do God.'

But Elms and his colleagues think they have spied a gap in the market: people are crying out for meaning in their lives. 'Sociological research is saying we are more unhappy now than we have been at any time in the past 50 to 100 years,' says Elms grimly. 'We are the most unhappy nation in Europe.' People are asking, 'Who am I?' 'What's my place in the universe?' and 'What else is there apart from working, shopping and watching *Strictly Come Dancing*?'

The current economic crisis, which places our material possessions in jeopardy, makes those questions even more pertinent. Instead of religion, millions are turning to New Age therapies such as crystals, pyramids and alternative medicine for comfort, or consulting healers and psychics or going to séances. Those that are sceptical of such things are throwing their hard-earned cash at psychotherapists. But all these therapies, says CAN, are a poor substitute for the original self-help book – the Bible.

When I met Francis Goodwin in the bar of a London hotel, a week before my meeting with

Mike Elms, he said CAN's mission was to 'spark an interest' in a less materialistic way of life. 'Nobody is saying you have to look like a 1AD monk,' he said. 'But if your life is totally focused on those personal belongings, things that you own, it can be a pretty empty life and it's quite easy to lose those things. If you have a faith, that is something that can sustain you and give you a root to lead your life by.'

Goodwin, like Elms, is not himself short of material goods. A father-of-four in his mid-fifties, he ran the Maiden Group, one of Britain's four largest billboard advertising companies, before selling up two-and-a-half years ago. He only does 'bits and pieces' now, but still seems most comfortable dressed in a suit, a crisp white shirt and tie.

He set up CAN in1991, following legislation that cleared the way for more religious broadcasts on television. At the time, Goodwin and his fellow founding members thought this was going to open the gates to a flood of American-style televangelist programmes and they were keen to combat these with an alternative Christian message.

The group's track record, however, is patchy. Many of their poster campaigns, over the years, have been cheesy, exhibiting a tone you might expect to find on a jokey greetings card rather than a cutting-edge advert. In 1996, a zany line drawing of three cartoon kings was accompanied by the slogan, 'Bad Hair Day?' and a caption that read: 'You're a virgin, you've just given birth and now three kings have shown up. Find out the happy ending at a church near you.' (An alternative poster, featuring a photograph of Cliff Richard with the slogan, 'Hard luck Cliff, Jesus is Number One this Christmas' was banned by Cliff's management.)

Then in 2002, a detail from The Adoration of the Magi by Massys was adapted so that it looked as if one of the kings had left a price tag on his gift. The caption said, 'Losing the plot? Give yourself a break at church this Christmas.'

Both campaigns caused a stir in the media, which was the point, of course, but they sounded rather like a trendy vicar trying to ape 'cool' jargon in an effort to ingratiate himself with the young.

'I have never heard of the Churches Advertising Network,' wrote the newspaper columnist Richard Littlejohn one year. 'But I have a vision of a group of men in designer dog-collars, ponytails and Armani surplices, sitting around in a minimalist Chapel conversion, drinking Premier Cru communion wine and saying things like: "Let's run this up the steeple and see who kneels down and prays to it".'

The adverts were patronising, many critics said, and preachy. On the other hand, CAN's adverts have attracted opprobrium from within the Church and the group has been accused of both trivialising the Christian message and seeking relevance at the expense of resonance.

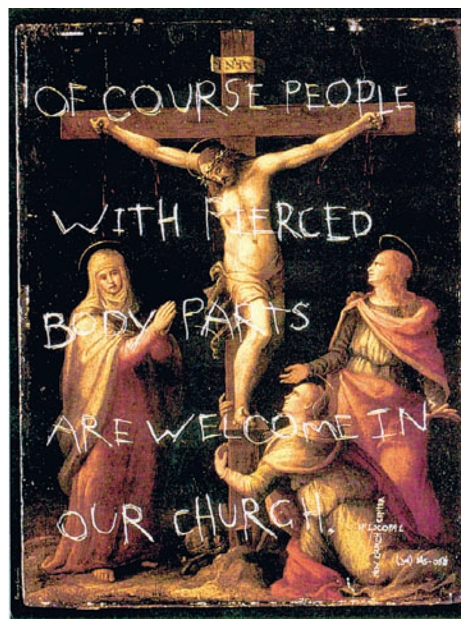
CAN takes little notice of this. 'Our adverts are not aimed at people in the Church,' Goodwin told me bluntly. 'Why do we want to talk to people in the Church? We tend to work with the "far reaches" – people who have got no contact with the Church at all.'

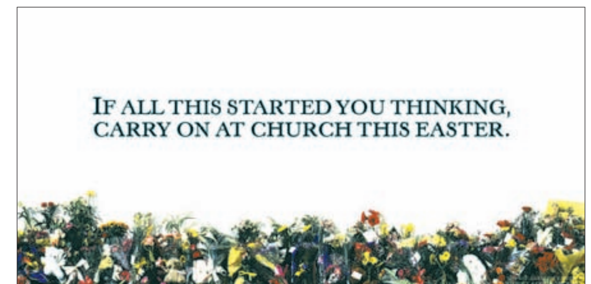
But do their campaigns work? 'I think we have been very modestly successful,' he replies, leaning back in his seat. 'We don't want to make any grand claims for what we're doing. We don't have the money to do sophisticated research programmes to understand how the advertising works.'

If they did have the money, he said, they would conduct a tracking study – measuring once a year people's attitudes to faith – and they would carry out some qualitative work, using focus groups to

The sacred and the profane This page and opposite: 're-positioning' the product for a younger audience. The Bad Hair Day and Adoration of the Magi ads (above and below) both caused a stir in the media

'I'm not a beautiful, pure Christian,' Bayfield admits. 'I'm quite a bad Christian. You have to live in the world, because Christ lived in the world'





assess the impact of their campaigns. 'A 30-second ad or a poster is not going to change someone's point of view, is it?' Goodwin says. 'But it's a gradual step. If there are seven steps to faith and you can help people go from step one to step two then you've sort of done as much as you can do. Just sparking an interest.'

CAN's simplest but most effective poster was published in 1999. To coincide with Easter, an image of Jesus was transposed onto Alberto Korda's famous portrait of Che Guevara. The caption read: 'Meek. Mild. As if. Discover the real Jesus. Church. April 4.' If you ignore both the fact that Che was an atheist who once promised to 'slit the throats of any enemy who falls into my hands', and the trendy-vicar language (again), the poster was a sophisticated attempt to challenge the rather wimpy image of a happy, smiling Jesus in a white dress, first promulgated by the Victorians. Jesus was, after all, a revolutionary in his time, waging a battle against materialism and greed. Of all CAN's posters, it is the one most people remember, and the one that made the best attempt to 're-position' Jesus for a young, modern audience.

This year's campaign - with its deliberate attempt to combine the sacred and the profane - is an effort to replicate that success and pursue a big idea rather than just make a cheap joke.

Chas Bayfield, a freelance creative director, who has devised many of CAN 's campaigns – including the Che Guevara poster – admits the group did get stuck in a 'comedy rut' for a few years. 'I like the Bad Hair Day poster because it was iconoclastic, youthful and energetic. But we were so desperate to get the churches on board that we stopped making big statements. I think we're getting back on track now,' he says.

Bayfield's talent – like many of those in CAN – is not in question. Ten years ago he devised a television commercial for the soft drink Tango, which won pretty much every award going and is still considered to be one of the best adverts ever to be broadcast on British television. (A 90-second drama about a Tango spokesman who receives a letter of complaint from a French exchange student, it was only shown 10 times, but was celebrated for its high production values and its witty script.)

That is now Bayfield's calling card – it means he can walk into a job at any agency he chooses, more or less – but recently he has scaled back his work to concentrate on his band, a rock group called The International Christian Playboys (he also writes songs for Hot Leg, a new band fronted by Justin Hawkins, the former lead singer of The Darkness).

Bayfield is married to Claire, an occupational therapist, and has recently become a father. He runs half-marathons and, last year, he travelled across America in a three-wheel 'Del Boy Trotter' Reliant Regal. One of the highlights of that trip was a visit to a gay rodeo bar in Phoenix where, he tells me, he 'got drunk and talked about Jesus with a guy called Chris'. Bayfield, in short, is a walking advertisement for the type of modern Christianity that CAN is promoting.

'I'm not a beautiful, pure Christian,' he admits. 'I'm quite a bad Christian. You have to live in the world, because Christ lived in the world.'

That's not to say he hasn't had to perform some mental gymnastics to achieve this balance. He refuses, for example, to see any conflict between his Christian principles and his job in an industry notorious for half-truths, manipulation and duplicity. Like many CAN members I spoke to, he insists advertising is basically honest and well regulated.

He has also spent nights – many of them – with work colleagues who were high on cocaine. 'I've been walking along Regent Street and we all stopped so people could chop out a line on top of a car,' he tells me. 'And they said, "Oh Chas, you can't have any of this because you're a Christian," which was really easy for me. Everyone was very protective of me, I wasn't allowed to do any of the bad stuff.'

Once at the bar, he says, he is invariably cornered. 'It's me and the lesbian, being asked to explain ourselves,' he laughs. 'People asking us, "So, what's it like? What do you do?" '

OF COURSE, CHRISTIANS are not the only ones with an advertising budget. The British Humanist Association has announced its own campaign: in January, posters on up to 60 London buses will carry the slogan: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'.

Richard Dawkins immediately donated £5,000 to the campaign. 'Even on the buses, nobody thinks twice when they see a religious slogan plastered across the side,' he said at the time. 'This campaign … will make people think – and thinking is anathema to religion.'

But CAN believes the very opposite. Thinking about the big questions in life, it says, is exactly what it wants to promote. 'I think the [atheist advertisements] are very good news, if they create more of a debate,' Mike Elms told me. 'The biggest thing we all face is apathy.'

In fact, CAN is planning to fuel the debate with posters of its own, to run at the same time as the humanist campaign: a theological version of the advertising wars that have been waged recently between Asda and Tesco, or Virgin and Sky.

'There's nothing like competition, is there?' says Elms with relish. 'After all, everybody has the right to advertise.'