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# Wantagh church's political street signs turn heads

February 7, 2017 By Rachel Uda [rachel.uda@newsday.com](mailto:rachel.uda@newsday.com)



The Rev. Ron Garner of the Wantagh Memorial Congregational Church, on Monday, Feb. 6, 2017: Garner's signs outside his church have attracted attention from passersby and from online viewers. (Credit: Barry Sloan)

If you've ever driven down Wantagh Avenue, you've probably seen the Rev. Ron Garner's signs.

"They're hard to miss," Garner said.

The sometimes comical, sometimes controversial signs posted outside the Wantagh Memorial Congregational Church have been viewed by thousands online and have been turning heads on Wantagh Avenue for years.

The church first gained media attention after a photo of one of its signs was featured on CNN in 2010.

Not long after he became pastor, Garner posted a message in response to a comment made by then-Fox News pundit Glenn Beck, urging Christians to leave churches that preach activism. It read: "Sorry Mr. Beck, Jesus preached social justice."

After the sign made TV, Garner said the church was flooded with calls from all over the country — some praising the sign, some deriding it.

"A lot of people liked the sign and called just to say so. Some were unhappy about it," Garner said. "They thought a church sign shouldn't be that political, but overall, I think most of the calls were positive."

Garner's pithy and political bulletins have since found a larger audience online.

In October, one of the church's signs was displayed on Twitter's Moments feature, which curates a list of trending tweets. The sign read: "Live so fully that the Westboro Baptist Church will picket your funeral." Garner was referring to an extremist church in Kansas known for its hate speech against gays, Jews, Muslims and other groups.



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That post was liked 2,800 times and retweeted 1,350 times.

In May, another one of Garner's "politically progressive" signs went viral after the United Church of Christ posted a photo of the message on its Facebook page. This one read: "A gay Christian is not an oxymoron. A hateful Christian most certainly is." The post has since been liked 10,000 times and shared more than 8,300 times.

"I'm just glad that the message is getting out and reaching people who may not have grown up going to church, like millennials," Garner said. "They have this idea that the church is dated and judgmental, and I see my signs, for the most part, as trying to get past that stereotypical view of the church."

Garner, originally from Indiana, came to Wantagh seven years ago after spending a decade as a minister in the United Kingdom. When he arrived, he decided to change the "tone" of the church sign.

His first sign read: "New sign, old message: God loves you."

Garner presides over a congregation of about 150 members from "all over the political spectrum," he said. For the most part, he says his congregants enjoy the messages and they lead to constructive discussion about Christianity's place in modern society. But some have been upset with the political tone of the messages.

Garner said he can think of two members who have left because of the bulletins.

In the days before election night, Garner posted a sign that said: "Pray for our country in the next few days." It was meant to be a "reflection on how divided we were as a country," Garner said. But some church members weren't happy with it and assumed it was meant to demean a Trump presidency. Louise Radzicki, 47, a deacon of the church, said she "heard rumblings" of dissatisfaction among the congregation about it.

Though Garner's message has repelled some, it has attracted others. After seeing his signs online, three couples have come to Garner to be married and several more have joined the parish, he said.

Sharon Cozzoli, 55, of Westbury, had been looking for a parish interested in activism and social justice. She joined Wantagh Memorial a few years ago and now serves as a deacon.

"They're great," Cozzoli said of the signs. "I think they shake things up a bit."

Garner said the signs simply reflect his faith and though not all the parishioners may agree with them, he's thankful that they have kept an open mind.

"We now live in a culture where things have to be 140 characters or less to get people's attention," Garner said. "I just see this as another way of getting the message out there."

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