

Finding a match made in Heaven — because Christians go speed-dating too

TOMMY CAFFREY

By Tara Holmes

THE so-called Bridget Jones generation is turning its back on smoke-filled pubs and tacky nightclubs in the quest for true love. With less than a week to go to Valentine's Day, young professionals are dispelling the myth that computer-dating agencies are a last resort for no-hopers desperate to find a mate. From bankers to bikers, people from every walk of life are now turning to professional matchmakers to help them beat the Valentine's blues. Single Christians are no exception, with many putting their faith in church-run agencies to find the person of their dreams.

Father Michael Keane, a 78-year-old Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Marriage Introductions Bureau in Ireland, has helped 802 couples to tie the knot over the past 30 years. The agency, also known as the Knock Marriage Bureau, started in the West of Ireland in 1968 with a few discreet cards on parish noticeboards. Many made jokes about fat 40-something Farmer Browns on isolated homesteads trying to ensnare young beauties from the towns. But Father Keane and his team rose above the sneers, blazing a trail for the hundreds of dating agencies in the UK and the Irish Republic today.

With Valentine's Day fast approaching, the priest, nicknamed "Cupid Curate" enthuses: "This is harvest time when people are looking for romance. Most people need a partner in life and there is a yearning in most of us for the opposite sex. There is a lot of loneliness out there. The theory is that there is someone for everyone but that often doesn't work out in practice. How do people meet and how does this develop into friendship and a loving marriage?"

The Knock Marriage Bureau has widows, widowers and single people up to the age of 50 among its clientele. It is one of the cheapest dating agencies, charging a one-off contribution of £50. Other agencies cost between £250 and £1,000. Most clients are from the 25-40 age group and have rejected the traditional venues of pubs and clubs as a means of finding a mate.

"Those that go to the discos feel like the grandmas and granddads on a night out with young people just wanting to have a good time," explains Father Keane. "People who come to us want to make a serious commit-



Christian connections: a compere holds up the stop clock against a potential couple

ment to marriage. It's down to us to introduce them to someone suitable."

He says that half of all marriages have come from first introductions and just under another quarter followed second introductions. "It is a very personal matter," says Father Keane. "On paper you may have two people who look like a perfect match but it doesn't work out. In another case the geography might look wrong but you decide to introduce them anyway. We once introduced a girl from Dublin to a Donegal man living in San Francisco and they went on to get married." The bureau has 200 introductions in process, involving lonely hearts from Ireland, England and the United States. With a target of one marriage a fortnight, letters from happy clients regularly talk of a "match made in Heaven".

In the UK, there are an estimated 300,000 single Christians. Research indicates that 39 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women will be single by 2010. For Christians hoping to meet a like-minded person with whom to share an emotional and intellectual affinity, the choices are narrower.

Christian Connection, an inter-denominational online dating agency for UK and Irish Christians, has achieved 50 weddings

and engagements since its launch two years ago. The agency organised the first Christian "speed-dating" event last month. Thirty Christians paid £21 each to take part in 20 one-on-one mini-dates, each lasting four minutes. Although speed-dating itself is a relatively new phenomenon in this country, there are now dozens of speed-dating agencies in London.

Jackie Elton, the founder and director of Christian Connection, explains: "Speed-dating normally takes place in a bar. The women sit round tables and the men go round talking to each one. When it's time to move on, a bell rings." For those who prefer a less pressured environment, Christian Connection offers a gentler online approach, albeit a slower process, for £17.50 a month. Members who have benefited from this service have even included clergymen.

"Christians living in urban areas aren't likely to meet the love of their life in church," says Ms Elton. "The Church generally says Christians should marry someone who shares their faith. Our ultimate aim is to help people to help themselves."

Tim and Victoria, a professional couple from Edinburgh, got married before Christmas, ten months after meeting via the internet. Love blossomed online as

they exchanged messages about their faith, church and favourite passages from Scripture. "It felt very natural," reveals Tim, 36. "I wanted to find someone who was a Christian. I'd had a couple of relationships with non-Christian women, which hadn't worked out. That was the main reason why I decided to sign up."

Victoria, 32, adds: "I was certainly hoping to find a husband but I hadn't reckoned on meeting someone so quickly. Although I was a bit afraid of telling people we had met through a dating agency, the response from family and friends was overwhelmingly positive."

Evelyn, 43, from London, married Barry, 40, last month. She had not imagined she could fall in love again after the breakdown of her first marriage, let alone find the man of her dreams on the internet.

"Barry and I found we had a lot in common," she says. "It was still a big step, a big commitment for us, having both been through a breakdown. For me the most important thing was to meet someone who shared the same values as me. Christianity is such an integral part of my life."

www.christianconnection.co.uk

The Marriage Introductions Bureau: 00 353 9488 100