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From the Los Angeles Times

A Setback for Anti-Porn Pastors

Their Corona-based ministry wanted to put 'Jesus Loves Porn Stars' on Bible covers. No way, said a publisher.

By William Lobdell
Times Staff Writer

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Handing out free Bibles to porn stars and their fans at adult film conventions isn't as hard as it would seem. Pastors Mike Foster and Craig Gross say they typically give away 1,000 copies of the New Testament at the multiday conferences.

Even so, the founders of XXXchurch.com — a Corona-based anti-pornography Internet ministry — thought a hip cover could easily triple their distribution.

But the pastors' brainstorm to put their "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" brand on covers of the New Testament was rejected by the American Bible Society, the publishing company that XXXchurch.com paid to print 10,000 copies of the Scriptures.

The publisher said that while it applauded the outreach to those who make a living off pornography, "the wording is misleading and inappropriate for a New Testament," according to a letter the pastors received from Barbara Bernstengel, the executive in charge of standards at the nonprofit Bible publishing company.

Bernstengel offered several alternatives, but the pastors rejected them.

"In this case, we think this is a fight worth having because it goes to the core of the Gospel," Foster said.

Gross said their slogan isn't misleading; Jesus does love porn stars and the message doesn't insinuate that he loves pornography.

"But that's why we're putting the Bible in [the porn stars'] hands — Jesus is not OK with it," said Gross, a former youth pastor who works on the XXXchurch.com website from his Lake Elsinore garage. "The publisher is hindering the Gospel going forth."

The number of companies that publish the Bible is limited. Modern versions of the Scriptures are licensed to publishers by the organizations that did the translations.

The XXXchurch.com pastors say the rejection of the cover is typical of the clash between old-school Christianity — with its rigid structure and traditions — and an emerging brand practiced

mostly by younger Christians who focus on relationships, spiritual experiences and converting nonbelievers through bold, sometimes edgy marketing.

"This whole religious rule book just needs to be burned, and we need to reinvent the rules," Gross said. "Otherwise, Christianity is going to fade away."

Roy Lloyd, a spokesman for the American Bible Society, said his 190-year-old organization publishes custom Bibles for a variety of youth-oriented ministries, including skateboarders and hip-hop devotees. "It's not that we're opposed to what [XXXchurch.com] is doing," he said. "But there needs to be a sense of propriety."

Richard Flory, a sociologist at Biola University who studies new Christian movements, said it's not surprising or outrageous that the American Bible Society would decline to publish the provocative cover.

"I actually see this as a marketing dispute," he said. "The XXXchurch.com pastors are trying to market the Bible to a niche market, and the American Bible Society, while not opposed to their efforts, is wary of the marketing strategy."

The society shouldn't jeopardize its larger mission by publishing a Bible cover that it believes will be divisive, Flory added.

Gross, 30, and Foster, 35, founded XXXchurch.com in 2002 to fight addiction to Internet pornography, especially among Christians.

Their intentionally confrontational website — billed as the "No. 1 Christian Porn Site" — includes free "accountability software" to flag questionable sites visited by users, podcasts featuring ex-porn star interviews, and hate mail from both conservative Christians and porn lovers.

"We refuse to have this be your typical Christian crap website with crosses and Bibles all over the place and communicating things that most in the world can't relate to," the pair state on XXXchurch.com.

The pastors say the "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" Bible would help get the word of God into the hands of those normally shunned by Christians.

"This is about the message of love and grace and compassion to the people we don't like in the Christian world," said Foster, adding that he is in talks with other publishers to get their Bible printed. "Maybe we need to think outside the box to maybe help these people."

Flory, the Biola professor, said if the "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" Bible were published, it would soon become a cultural icon.

"And doesn't this work at cross purposes with the XXXchurch.com goals by making it cool for people, who otherwise wouldn't have anything to do with this, to appropriate the porn star symbolism?" Flory said.

Foster said it's time for Christians to take risks.

"Yeah, the cover's out there; it's controversial, it's provocative, it's wacky," he said. "But it's to draw attention to the content. If people have that book in their hands, it's a good thing."

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