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### *Undertaken WITH Love* *A Home Funeral Guide for Congregations and Communities*

February 27, 2009

#### NEWS FEATURE

### Anti-porn groups target evangelical Christians

By Nicole Neroulias

FRESNO, Calif.—Every February, SouthPoint Foursquare Church reminds its younger members here that “True Love Waits,” part of a global evangelical Christian campaign that stresses abstinence until marriage.

A few days after Valentine’s Day this year, 80 teenagers and some parents attended the church’s weekly youth night to hear a related message: Jesus loves porn stars, but looking at pornography makes it much harder to find Him.

“We feel that church should be the first ones to talk to you guys about this,” said Brandon Piety, the guest speaker from XXXChurch, an organization aimed at helping Christians overcome pornography addictions. “If you have a problem with porn, you’ve got to talk to God, and you’ve got to go to someone you can trust.”

Previous generations had to seek out magazines or movies, but now hardcore content is available anytime, free of charge, to anyone with Internet access. Responding to this increased accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, faith-based organizations now offer their own strategies for overcoming pornography addictions, targeting evangelicals and others who consider the images sinful.

According to statistics compiled by Baylor University, about half of observant Christians consider pornography a major problem in their households. The problem is not limited to lay members; a 2002 survey of pastors by Rick Warren of California’s Saddleback Church found that in one month, 30 percent had viewed pornography.

Some Christians consider just having lustful thoughts shameful, let alone spending hours viewing X-rated images. This makes them especially vulnerable, both as potential addicts and as people too embarrassed to seek help, said Dr. Roderick Hetzel, a psychologist at Baylor, which launched a pornography resource at its counseling center three years ago.



(RNS1-FEB27) Brandon Piety of XXXChurch, a Christian group that tries to help people overcome pornography addictions, spoke about his mission at SouthPoint Foursquare Church in Fresno, Calif. For use with RNS-PORN-CHURCH, transmitted Feb. 27, 2009. Religion News Service photo by Nicole Neroulias. | [Download/Purchase this photo](#)

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"Whatever you're keeping secret, tends to control you," he said. "In the past, churches either just condemned the behavior and therefore the people, or ignored the issue."

It's hard to say whether more Christians are addicted to pornography now, or just more comfortable admitting their problems due to the growing outreach efforts, he added.

While Internet companies have offered filtering programs for years, Christian anti-pornography groups such as XXXChurch and Covenant Eyes have pioneered software that creates "accountability partners"—such as a pastor or spouse—who receive an e-mail report when the user visits an adult-oriented Web site.

Mark Larson, 29, a youth leader at SouthPoint, endorses this method, and he and his wife have offered to serve as accountability partners for the church's teens. As pornography becomes more prevalent in society, he said, teenagers and pre-teens must be taught to avoid it, through prayer and counseling.

"Just because a bird flies over your head doesn't mean you have to catch it and let it build a nest in your hair," he said.

Business has boomed for Freedom Begins Here, the 3-year-old organization that sells toolkits with video testimonials, Covenant Eyes software and other anti-porn information to churches and Christians across the country. About 400 hundred groups and more than 1,000 individuals across the country have purchased the kits; they expect to sell 20,000 more this year, said Pastor Ted Cunningham, a spokesman for the Arkansas-based organization.

"People believe that the church protects us from sexual addiction, but it doesn't," he said. "The church is finally getting to a point where we realize we've got to start talking about this."

Demand for accountability and filtering software has also begun growing among Jews and Muslims, said Luke Gilkerson, Covenant Eyes spokesman.

The advanced software programs, video testimonials and dedicated church events are long overdue, agree recovering porn addicts like Pastor Bernie Anderson and Omar Miranda, both Seventh-day Adventists who struggled in silence during the 1990s. Both ended up getting help through "Every Man's Battle," a book and workshop, but say the options available today make it easier to seek out help.

Anderson, 38, a minister at the Wasatch Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church in Salt Lake City, Utah, chronicled his seven-year addiction in his book, "Breaking the Silence: A Pastor Goes Public about His Battle with Pornography." In his sermons, he stresses the need to talk about sexual addictions openly, as a preventive measure.

"Christian communities in general have avoided the topic of sex and sexuality, and it's made us more susceptible to some of these issues," he said.

A lay counselor, Miranda, 38, of Cartersville, Ga., now helps others through their own addictions, which impact about 70 percent of his clients, he said. Churches should get involved in this problem because it directly impacts a person's relationship with God, he said.

"When I was into this, I had a lot of trouble reading my Bible, and I hear that from other people, too," he said. "I used to



(RNS2-FEB27) An example of one of the controversial T-shirts sold by XXXChurch. For use with RNS-PORN-CHURCH, transmitted Feb. 27, 2009. Religion News Service photo by Nicole Neroulis. | [Download/Purchase this photo](#)

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[January 2009](#)

[December 2008](#)

[November 2008](#)

[October 2008](#)

[September 2008](#)

[August 2008](#)

[July 2008](#)

take it and throw it across the room. Now, I can look God in the eye and open my Bible and know that I'm not a hypocrite anymore."

In addition to the faith-based resources available, Hetzel recommends that porn-addicted Christians seek professional counseling to get to the root of their problems.

"Sexually addictive behaviors usually aren't just about sex," he said. "A lot of people have underlying fears about intimacy and vulnerability that they need to work through. That person would need more than a filtering system or an accountability partner."

(OPTIONAL TRIM FOLLOWS)

Of the growing array of Christian anti-porn organizations, the Las Vegas-based XXXChurch stands out for its work ministering to the sex industry and its publicity-seeking events, including handing out Bibles at porn conventions and hosting debates on campuses across the country between Pastor Craig Gross and porn star Ron Jeremy.

About half of the site's traffic comes from people who are searching for a different kind of XXX experience, which Gross considers a good outreach strategy, though the name has also prompted angry responses from Christians who assume the organization is mocking religion.

"We're still fighting that clueless Christian mindset—just because you're a Christian and you believe in God, people think they're not affected by this," Gross said. "But you have a porn star running for Senate, you've got kids in school wearing shirts that say Porn Star on them, you've got the glamorized gals living with Hugh Hefner. You have to work hard to avoid it."

At SouthPoint, the teenagers paid rapt attention to the XXXChurch presentation, then crowded around Piety's table, laughing and buying T-shirts bearing slogans like "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" for themselves and their friends.

None said they are addicted to pornography, but many acknowledged that they knew of other youths who visited adult-oriented Web sites at least once a week.

One of the church band's guitarists, Patrick Brown, 20, said he was glad that pornography has started to become an issue the congregation can talk openly about.

"We usually only focus on purity, but our society is really struggling with porn, so to be able to talk about it is important," he said. "This is a really cool version of our usual youth night."

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