

Local pastor to debate porn star

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By Charles Honey

Press Religion Editor

GRAND RAPIDS -- Craig Gross never intended to be the porn pastor. But it seemed that's what God wanted him to be.

No matter where he went with his national youth ministry, Gross found teens talking about porn as a normal part of their lives. He decided to do something about it.

"It wasn't, 'let's save the world from porn,'" said Gross, 31. "It was, 'let's create a safe place online where people could get help with this issue.'"

Thus was born XXXchurch.com, a Web site Gross co-founded in 2002 to combat what he sees as a growing problem in church and society.

"It's what God's given me to do," Gross said by phone on his way to a Lutheran youth convention in Florida. "There's a lot of other great causes. This is the one that we're to be about."

His evidence: an e-mail inbox filled with messages from people "devastated" by pornography.

He plans to cite that evidence in a debate Tuesday with Ron Jeremy, the star of 1,900 porn films who's touted as the "porn king" on XXXchurch.com.

The event at The Intersection is the third in a seven-city tour. Grand Rapids was included because Gross' ministry is based here -- and he might have better odds in conservative West Michigan.

"If we have a chance for me not to be the underdog anywhere, it would be here," he quipped. "But I'm not convinced of it."

"I don't think he's ever beaten me in a debate, and he never will," Jeremy boasted from his Los Angeles

home.

Indeed, Jeremy often gets standing ovations and long autograph lines from the college crowds for whom the two have debated since 2006. Gross gets short lines and people who confide, "I didn't hate you as much as I thought I would."

But the two don't hate each other. They call each other friends and hang out at restaurants after their debates.

"He's a great guy," Jeremy said of Gross. "I like what he does for a living. He sincerely cares about people."

Gross said their friendship invites spiritual discussions and defies the cultural trend to divide into camps.

"We (Americans) let our disagreements on stances determine who we're friends with. That's not Jesus at all."

But they part ways on porn. Jeremy contends it does no harm to adults and can help couples sexually.

"I don't think even the man upstairs may have a problem with it, unless you take the Bible in literal terms and you can't even masturbate," Jeremy said.

Gross argues porn creates false expectations about what real sex is like and often ends up substituting for it. Porn hurts women in relationships and those who act in the films, he contends.

"I hope someone leaves the debate with the thought, 'Is this a product I want to be looking at by myself, let alone bringing into my relationships?'" he said.

Gross last year moved to Grand Rapids because the ministry had gotten strong support from Mars Hill Bible Church. He employs three full-time employees and two interns here.

The ministry hands out Bibles at porn shows, proclaims "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" on its Web site and offers help for those wanting to escape porn addiction. It also financially supports porn actresses who want to leave the industry.

By coming to porn shows and talking to Ron Jeremy fans, Gross figures he is showing a different face of Christianity than many expect.

"Because of this thing on porn, we've been able to have relationships and bring a greater message that there's a God who loves you despite all this junk," Gross said.

"At the end of the day, everybody just wants to be loved. In porn, there's no love there."

If you go

Porn star vs.

the pastor

What: "The Great Porn Debate"

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: The Intersection, 133 Grandville Ave. SW

Cost: Tickets are \$10 and available online at www.porndebate.com or at the door.

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