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3 churches bring porn issue to fore

By Carla Hinton
Religion Editor

Craig Gross, co-founder of XXXChurch.com, is used to all the attention his ministry attracts.

So, when a big blue elephant was suggested as a sort of mascot for this year's Porn Sunday awareness effort, Gross thought it was a great idea.

He said pornography seems to be everywhere: in books and magazines, on TV, in music and advertising, and online. One can hardly miss it, but churches often appear hesitant to confront porn directly, he said.

Gross wants that to change. So do three Oklahoma ministries: Life Church, Crossings Community Church and Mars Hill.

"I think it's an issue today that isn't just affecting a few people, it's affecting a lot of people. But we're really good at churches of smiling and saying everything's OK," Gross said.

"It's the dirty little secret. It's the elephant in the pew" because everybody knows about it but won't address it.

Leaders representing the three Oklahoma churches said participating in Porn Sunday on Oct. 7 is a way to start honest and open discussions about pornography and its negative effect on families and communities. Pornography and the way it effects people's lives will be part of the Sunday worship service messages, along with ways to get help for related problems. Gross, 31, will be guest speaker at the worship experiences at Life Church's Oklahoma City campus at NW 178 and Pennsylvania Avenue.

"It's a problem for so many, and yet so many churches are unwilling to talk about it or are uncomfortable with it," said Bobby Gruenewald with Life Church. He said Life Church helped developed video and other material that is being used by about 200 churches that are joining the emphasis nationwide.

Matt Anderson, associate preaching pastor at Crossings, said the relative anonymity of the Internet has allowed more people to secretly access porn, with negative repercussions. Thus, it's easy for people not to confront the issue.

"It's definitely easy to look the other way and pretend that people aren't dealing with it," he

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said.

No more hiding

As a reminder about the Oct. 7 effort, a 25-foot inflatable blue elephant will be outside Kamp's Cafe, 1310 NW 25, where Mars Hill meets Sunday nights. The inflatable eye-catcher will be at Life Church during the Porn Sunday weekend activities, Gross said.

"We don't take the message lightly, but our approach is sometimes comical, sometimes controversial. But we are talking about a \$70 billion a year industry — so you've got to be loud," he said during a recent telephone interview.

XXXChurch.com was founded by Gross and Mike Foster (who is no longer involved in the venture) in 2002 in California as a faith-based Web site that would be a safe place where people with pornography-related trouble could get help. From its beginning, the site and its name drew attention from the media. Gross said he and Foster appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America" and their site prompted a story in The New York Times.

Some people were skeptical about the ministry because of its name. But Gross said the skepticism faded and he has been invited to churches in every denomination. The ministry, now based in Grand Rapids, Mich., has a small staff devoted to the Web site and out-reach programs such as Porn Sunday.

That effort began in October 2005, and 85 churches participated, Gross said. He said XXXChurch.com provided churches with sample sermon series ideas and other ways to help congregations address the pornography issue.

"Doing it on a Sunday, you have a built-in. You know people are going to be there," he said.

And he's encouraging churches to continue to "confront the elephant in the pew" — this year's theme — long after Porn Sunday is over.

"The hard part comes Monday after you've told your wife about it (porn addiction), and now she feels you've cheated on her."