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May. 30, 2010
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SEX INDUSTRY MINISTRY: XXXChurch.com strives to demonstrate Jesus' love in Las Vegas

Group's methods untraditional

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LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

The strip club is dark enough to obscure faces but not the shape of a woman gyrating on a platform, entertaining three men at the bar.

Down on her hands and knees, the dancer, Simone, focuses on her moves and allows nothing to distract her. Then Joy Hoover, an agent of Jesus, walks by bearing a pink pastry box full of frosted treats.

"Cupcakes!" Simone yells, stretching an arm toward Hoover. "I want a cupcake. Save me one!"

A few minutes later, Simone (her stage name) is in the back room, cupcake in hand. She suspends her no-carb diet for a pink-frosted, sugary moment.

It is a moment of triumph for Hoover: pastries trumped pasties. Wielding her cupcakes, she works the room, handing out business cards to a handful of dancers taking breaks or preparing for shifts.

"We look forward to their visit," Simone says of Hoover and her partner-in-pole-ministry Krissee Danger (her real name). "They're phenomenal."

Hoover and Danger, both 23, are representatives of the nonprofit organization Strip Church, the ministry arm of XXXChurch.com. The "church" serves porn stars, strippers, prostitutes and anyone who subscribes to the belief that people deserve the love of Jesus Christ without the judgment of organized religion.

Porn pastor Craig Gross, 34, founded XXXChurch.com 10 years ago to do outreach at porn conventions. There is no physical church, just their desire to take God's message to the masses. About two years ago, Gross set up an office in Las Vegas and expanded the group's outreach to strip clubs, brothels, even the card flickers on the Strip. It's no fun when churches want to serve only the religious, Gross says.

They fund their outreach through donations and retail sales of products such as the Strip Church Bible or the book of Bible stories, "Jesus Loves Porn Stars." Like their name, their methods are less than traditional. Some might even say they're quirky, odd or downright unreligious.

"Our approach is to ask, 'What would Jesus do?'" Hoover explains. "Jesus hung out with prostitutes and everyday people. These women need love more than anything else."

Cupcakes and strippers are an odd mix, Hoover admits. But it works. The approach has helped them foster relationships with 15 strip clubs. Every Tuesday, Hoover makes a cupcake delivery to two of them, sometimes taking gifts for dancers who are celebrating birthdays.

On a recent visit to Cheetahs and then Rick's Cabaret, reactions are identical: The workers all dive into the cupcakes like kids at a birthday party.

With the exception of the calories, the cupcakes are free. No sermons. No proselytizing. No damnations for being in what many consider an unsavory business. The point is to let the women know they are loved and have someone to turn to if they need it, Hoover says.

That's a tough message to sell; a lot of dancers are used to scorn, especially where religion is involved. "Because there are these little church emblems on the cupcakes, I thought it was these ladies trying to poison us," a dancer at Rick's Cabaret says of the Strip Church's first visit to the club.

It's not often that a strip club allows this kind of access to a religious organization. Some clubs have been burned in the past -- people have bought lap dances and then used the time to pray for the women, Gross says -- so, not surprisingly, that access hasn't come easily.

Diana, a manager at Cheetahs who didn't want to give her last name, was at first reluctant to let Hoover in to talk to the women. Too many bad experiences with religion.

"She told us this industry and religion don't mix," Hoover recalls.

"I've had people hide in the bathroom so they can tell the girls they're going to hell," says Diana, who has worked in the business for 29 years.

But there was something about the women from the Strip Church that made her reconsider her policy. They don't preach, Diana says. They bring treats, offer help to the girls and sometimes, help the house mother.

It's all about trust and the truth, Hoover says. They're upfront about their intentions and they don't deviate from them. They have also managed to make connections with people in the local porn business by following that same philosophy.

After the strip club visits, they often go to Porn Star Karaoke at Brando's Bar. It's a weekly industry event where producers, managers, porn actors and fans get together to sing karaoke and mingle. Recently, Danger, Hoover and her husband, Philip, hung out with porn stars Rebecca Love, Monroe Valentino, Gavin Steel and others. Their agenda is the same as at the strip clubs.

"We want them to feel loved and cared about," Hoover says.

What does that mean? Well, it can be anything from providing a shoulder to cry on to doing hair and makeup for the women.

They seem to back up their message through their actions, too. Recently, a woman called from a brothel in Reno, imploring them to help her get out of prostitution. The Strip Church flew her to Las Vegas, at their expense, where she slept on Hoover's couch until they got her into a halfway house. The organization will pay for her initial stay, Gross says.

"No one really wants to be a lifer in this business," Gross says of those who work in adult entertainment. "For us, it's not hey, here's my card, call us when you want out. It's call us if you want to get your hair done or go have a spa day with Joy."

"I feel like I'm a psychologist," says Hoover, who moved here five months ago from Michigan with her husband. They both heard the call to do this unconventional ministry about a year ago. "I wanted to go to school for social work but decided I couldn't do it because I get too emotionally affected by people's problems. But now here I am, doing this."

Philip Hoover, 31, usually assists with the nonprofit's other outreach programs: Free bus rides and burgers. On a recent Wednesday night, Gross drives while Philip Hoover and Danger jump off the bus to hand out free burgers and water to the card flickers who stand on nearly every Strip corner. In

the background, the Bellagio fountains explode to the music of Lee Greenwood singing "God Bless the USA."

The point to this outreach is to be among the forgotten souls, Philip Hoover says. Sometimes, they bring representatives of Spanish-speaking churches with them.

Once the food and water are exhausted, they troll bus stops for would-be passengers.

The bus attracts a lot of attention; it's wrapped in a mural proclaiming "Jesus Loves Sin City" with a giant portrait of Jesus gazing out onto the world. As they move down the Strip, people point, stare open-mouthed or laugh.

There are times when the bus is filled to capacity but on this night, not a single person accepts, even though the ride is free. At one stop, a couple move toward the bus quickly, as if to beat the crowd. But when the man catches sight of the colorful Jesus mural, he grabs his companion's arm and pulls her back. His face crinkles in disgust.

Apparently, the sight of Jesus on the Strip elicits plenty of outraged expressions, incredulity, even the occasional middle finger salute.

"I always tell them we're not going to make them drink our Kool-Aid,"Â Danger jokes. "Christians get a bad rap sometimes and deservedly so. People think we're going to try and convert them when they get on our bus. That's not what we believe Jesus would do. He would love people, minus an agenda."

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