

 

## The Local Newsroom

# Porn-again Christians

The XXX Church opens a local branch to address the city's sins

By [Matt O'Brien](#) | May 27th, 2010



Pastor Craig Gross, co-founder of the XXX Church.

Credit: Anthony Mair

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What would Jesus do about legalized prostitution, pornography and sex addiction? One local church believes he'd reach out to those employed in the sex trade, as well as to those who patronize it, with a message of love and acceptance. So that's exactly what Pastor Craig Gross and the members of his latest endeavor, the Strip Church, are doing.

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In the past 18 months, Gross and his flock have renovated brothels, handed out lip gloss and cupcakes at strip clubs and driven the "Jesus Loves Sin City" bus up and down the Strip handing out Bibles and bottled water to tourists. They've also gone to run-of-the-mill conventions to convince attendees that what happens here can destroy your life back home.

"It's been exciting and a challenge," says Gross, who co-founded the XXX Church with Jake Larson in 2002. "We've enjoyed it. I think we do well in places where we're the only group doing what we do and we stand out. It's been rewarding to see the things that have taken place here."

Gross made national headlines with the XXX Church by bringing his anti-porn message to industry conventions and debating porn stars at colleges across the country. With the Strip Church, he and his flock have settled in Las Vegas to concentrate on the sex industry in Sin City.

And they've branched out. Their umbrella organization, Fireproof Ministries, includes the XXX Church, the Strip Church and heartsupport.com, which helps people battle drug, food, money and other addictions.

The story of Gross and the XXX Church has been documented by GQ, CNN, The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Good Morning America, Nightline and many other media outlets: Grand Rapids, Mich., youth pastors Gross and Larson notice their flock watches a lot of porn, and that many of them feel it's a problem, so they create a place online where kids can get support. In a stroke of marketing genius, they launch the website—xxxchurch.com—and set up a booth at the AVN Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas in 2002. KTNV, Channel 13 airs the story and Gross and Larson are invited to other porn shows and churches. They become semi-famous and decide that addiction counseling is their calling. In 2008, they move to Las Vegas.



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“I thought it was funny,” porn star Ron Jeremy says of the move. Jeremy has known Gross for four years and debated him at colleges across the country. “In some ways, I thought he was leaving the porn industry behind and focusing more on gambling and alcohol and prostitution. Las Vegas is known more for those kind of things than porn.”

It’s really just a matter of going where you are needed, Gross says.

“When we started all this, we had no intention of doing a full-time ministry and moving to Las Vegas,” he says, noting the ministry is supported by donations, speaking fees and merchandise sales. “But I’m open to where this leads and hoping we can expand what we’re doing here. I feel like there are so many opportunities.”

The church’s soft-sell approach helps it reach its target audience. “Rosa,” 21, for example was working at a brothel in Carson City, broke and depressed. She stumbled on stripchurch.com. A few days later, the ministry flew her to Las Vegas and put her up in a staffer’s home.

“I was raised Catholic and I’ve wanted to be religious again, but I didn’t think I was good enough,” says Rosa, who started working as a prostitute when she was 18. “In most churches I would be looked at as a sinner. The Strip Church was appealing to me because they’re religious, but they don’t push it on you. They just reassure you about everything.”

Although local churches have been reluctant to collaborate and some staffers and volunteers haven’t liked Las Vegas, Gross says the move has been worth it.

“We just want to get passionate people involved in every aspect of what we’re doing and let them run with it.”

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