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A trip down I-70: porn shops and churches intersect

BY BRIAN PELLOT
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Billboards lining the Interstate-70 stretch between Kansas City and Columbia promise nude girls and sex toys, forgiveness and salvation. So what happens when Missouri's adult entertainment industry and the Bible Belt intersect?

A weekend road trip down the highway reveals that common ground between these long-opposed institutions is more common than people might expect. Porn addicts, on occasion, visit churches for solace, and parishioners sometimes slink into sex shops for pleasure. Adult shops and churches straddle the bustling highway and beckon drivers like proverbial angels and demons. Although often close in proximity, the two establishments maintain a dignified distance in the public eye. But what happens in private can blur this division.



BRENDEN NEVILLE

Passion's Adult Video, located off exit 103, is one of many adult entertainment businesses that line I-70. Although it lies on the other side of the road from the Santa Fe Trail Baptist Church, employee Leann Stossmeister says she has never witnessed a major protest on behalf of the church.

Exit 71: Midnight Video

Propped on a hillside service road along I-70 in Saline County sits Midnight Video and Strip Club, a bright blue barn flanked with the 10-foot silhouette of a nude pole dancer and a pink XXX sign. Carol Bridges, 67, who considers the spectacle an eyesore, drives by Midnight Video on her way to Sweet Springs First Baptist Church every Sunday. "Every time I go by it, I say a prayer for God to intervene with this place," Bridges says. "I've often thought it would be a good idea to do a prayer walk around the shop, but then again, I would be interfering with their rights, too." To do this, Bridges would have to avoid the used condoms, crushed beer cans and empty tins of chewing tobacco strewn about the parking lot.

Max Bocchine has learned to navigate through the vice-filled lot after working at Midnight Video for two and a half years. He says the aisles of porn and dildos don't seem to bother some clientele who, in passing conversation, inadvertently identify themselves as being religious. "We have a few guys that are fairly religious, but it really doesn't affect what they do here," Bocchine says. "Sometimes they'll make off comments about religion. But we don't get many religious fanatics in here."

Across a dark, narrow hallway from Bocchine's counter is Midnight Video's strip club. Thumping rap music blaring behind a black wooden door muffles the entrance buzzer. The bartender, a middle-aged man dressed in flannel, pokes his head out and demands a cover fee. A mirror behind the door crack reveals a young blonde in red lingerie dancing for two or three patrons.

But a few miles down the service road, in the heart of Sweet Springs, lies First Baptist Church, where David Goode, 61, leads Bridges in Sunday prayer. Goode, who has been

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Members of the Santa Fe Trail Baptist Church such as Joan Bosma are hesitant to ...

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Bridges' pastor at First Baptist for two and a half years, says giving into carnal temptations by viewing pornography or using sex toys goes against God's wishes. "There are persons in our society that think this type of behavior needs to happen somewhere, and thus it's better for it to happen out in the open countries," Goode says. "I disagree. I think the end result of lewd behavior is depravity."

Goode conducted funeral services in late February for Carl Berryman, who leased Juice Bar, which is located in the same building as Midnight Video. Goode struggled with conducting the services in the church due to Berryman's lifestyle. "Carl was the best of men, and he was the worst of men," he says. "He was the most evil of men and the most godly of men. He almost personified the two different extremes of human life."

Berryman and his nine children were members of Goode's congregation, but Goode says Berryman rarely attended services. "Maybe before he started the pornography shop he attended," Goode says. "He was a very godly father. A very good father — I wouldn't say godly."

Pastor Goode believes direct engagement with adult store patrons is the best way to spread his Christian message, but he is reluctant to do business there. "We could take Bibles in," he says. "I doubt anyone wants to do this. I don't want to be in the store."

Exit 103: Passion's Adult Video

Across the highway from Passion's Adult Video in Boonville, a painted white cross on faded red brick marks the location of the Santa Fe Trail Baptist Church. Five blond toddlers race around the day care room while *Barney & Friends* plays on a small TV in the corner. Joan Bosma, 57, who has attended services here for 20 years and now works with children, steals a few moments during snack time to chat about her neighbors. She has never crossed the highway to engage or confront employees or clients at Passion's Adult Video. Even the prospect of doing so disturbs her.

"It's a different lifestyle, and it's wrong," Bosma declares bluntly. "That's how they make their living, but it's not something I would do. It's not some place I would go to talk to someone about Christ." Bosma adds that these stores aren't where she would want to be when Jesus comes back.

Leann Stossmeister, 44, who has worked at Passion's for almost two years, says Bosma is likely not the only person avoiding the shop for religion's sake. Stossmeister has never seen major protests at the store, but some have tried to make their point with religious outreach. Once, a man laid a Bible on the store counter then quietly walked away. Another time, Stossmeister had a response for the visitors: "I had two college girls come through the parking lot one day when I was outside smoking a cigarette, asking if there was anybody here that they could pray for," she recalls. "I said: 'No, thank you. My father's a pastor, and he prays for me every day.'"

Stossmeister's father, a Church of Christ pastor in Illinois, has visited his daughter at work. His primary concern is for her safety. "My dad's the sort of pastor who says, 'Live and let live,'" she says. "Jesus was about love. As long as you don't hurt other people, it's not our place to judge."

Stossmeister keeps that mantra in mind as the regular Sunday crowd, clad in sweater vests and ties, trickles in to watch porn in the backroom arcade in the late morning.

Exit 127: Bocomo Bay

Down Wilkes Boulevard, a drab street located just north of downtown Columbia, a small adult shop called Bocomo Bay draws customers in with a tropical-themed sign out front. John Hawkins, 58, says his former fellow Catholics judged him harshly when he left the religion, divorced his wife, came out as a gay man and opened Eclectics Adult Store (now Bocomo Bay) 17 years ago. Hawkins says, "By the time I opened shop, I had realized that a lot of what mainline religion teaches is a lie, so I didn't have any internal problems or conflicts whatsoever."

Hawkins' business upset many members of his former church, but it also attracted a quiet minority. "People still come in from when I went to church," he says, noting that he recognizes his former congregation members. "Not just the parishioners but also priests. And not just from the Catholic Church: I've got ministers from the Protestant religions and from other religions, people from all walks of life, coming in."

Hawkins says that most church members he recognizes come into the shop as customers though at least once, visitors have had other motives. "Years ago, we'd have people dropping prayer beads behind our magazines," he says. "Sometimes they would drop a bunch. We'd have a customer find one, then I'd go through and find them all and take them out. They'd have little cards attached to them with a prayer."

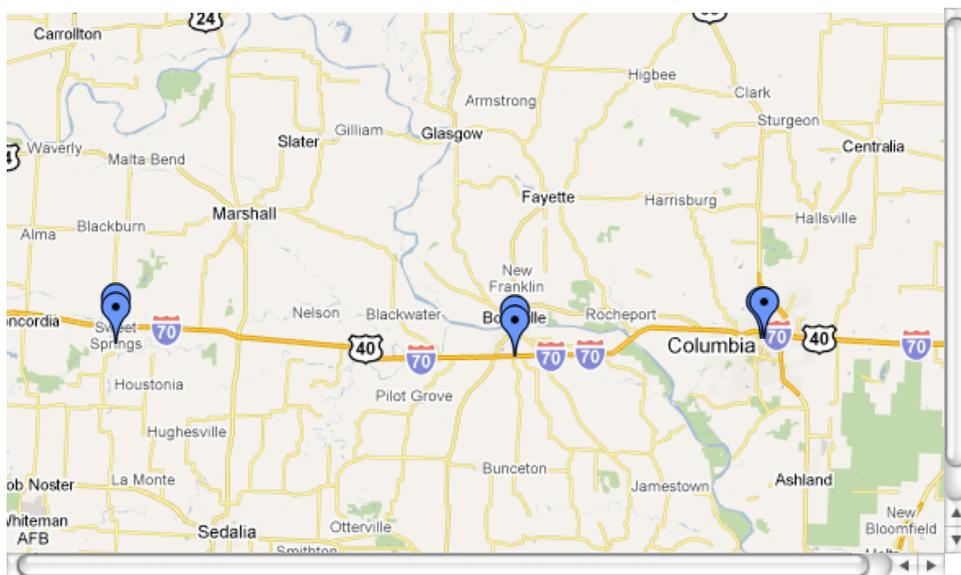
The Rev. Jill Sander-Chali, 28, has led Wilkes Boulevard United Methodist Church, just three blocks from Bocomo Bay, since 2008. She questions the effectiveness of indirect outreach tactics such as hidden rosaries and organized prayer targeted at individual establishments. "If a church is going to be more active in dealing with these shops, I think we need to build relationships (with them)," she says. "The church has a role in teaching and modeling sexual norms that are healthy and life-giving to partners in relationships. That might be an area of ministry we have yet to explore."

Sander-Chali points to the Song of Solomon, a book located within the Bible that she says is full of sex, but sex the way it should be. "It's all about two lovers who meet and celebrate each other's bodies," Sander-Chali explains. "They steal away to enjoy each other. It's all about sexuality, that beautiful interaction of the senses that happens when we see someone who is our love."

Sander-Chali says the church has a responsibility to teach and demonstrate healthy sexual norms. She doubts that stores such as Bocomo Bay have the same motive. "Exploiting sexuality is all about power over another person," she says. "As a church, we think sex is God's sacred gift to humans. When we talk about salvation, we're talking about being saved from things that deter us from living life abundantly, to live as Jesus lived. That's incredibly empowering."

Geographic proximity counts for naught in determining how closely churches engage with adult stores along I-70. Visitors might sometimes be one and the same, but religious leaders seldom cross the street to spread their message. As turn signals flash along the exit ramps of I-70 — right for a quick prayer, left for porn — the battle between faith and sin continues.

Churches and Porn Shops on I-70



View Churches and Porn Shops on I-70 in a larger map

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