

Charismatic Church Protests Theme Park's Halloween Show

A charismatic church in Florida is protesting a Tampa theme park's Halloween show, and several area churches and community leaders have joined the effort.

Ignited Church in Lakeland, a city roughly 35 miles east of Tampa, has united area churches, business leaders and school board members in opposition to Busch Gardens' Howl-O-Scream show, which they say makes light of criminal brutality in a letter being sent this week to officials at the African-themed park. Florida state Rep. Kelli Stargel also has signed the letter.

The SeaWorld-owned attraction, which features hundreds of animals and a vertical-dive roller coaster, hosts a Halloween attraction each year that requires separate admission like other central Florida theme parks, including Walt Disney World and Universal Studios in Orlando.

This year Busch Gardens features a skit, "Revenge Rocks," at the center of several "scare zones." The skit tells the story of a young woman who takes revenge on her rocker-boyfriend after he betrays her. In the live-action show, the woman severs several of his fingers and imprisons him before murdering him.

Ignited Church youth pastor Holly Strader said one of the scare zones shows college-age girls at a sorority house torturing and murdering their former boyfriends.

"From a standpoint of entertainment, if I was going as someone wanting to see Halloween haunted house, that is not what I would be expecting to see," Strader said. "I would be expecting for people to jump out at me and their purpose would be to scare me. But this was all about acting out murder and

torture.”

Busch Gardens said its Halloween show is mature content for adults and is intended only as entertainment.

“Each year’s theme is based upon a fictional character or event and is intended for entertainment only,” the company said Thursday in a statement to the Lakeland Ledger. “This year’s theme plays upon the character of an edgy musician. Advertising is never targeted to young children. This year, we took extra precautions with our outdoor campaign to not depict blood. We trust that adults understand that Busch Gardens does not condone nor support real life violence.”

Park officials acknowledge that minors are not restricted from the show. Strader and her husband toured Howl-O-Scream after hearing several complaints from parents, and she said half of the attendees were middle school and high school students. She worries that the show’s theme sends a message to youth that it is OK to physically hurt someone who offends them.

“Our biggest concern is for the youth,” Strader said. “Adults can make their own decisions.... But youth who have no clue, who are still forming morals and who are exposed to all kinds of violence already and bullying and rejection, it’s extremely dangerous for them to see not fantasy-type characters, not fiction-type characters, but real people who are attractive who could be copied. The theme person is a sexy rock star. It’s not like it’s a monster.”

Four Polk County school board members share her concerns, including Kay Fields, who also leads Girls Inc. of Lakeland and is the mayor’s wife. The school officials along with Stargel of the Florida House of Representatives, Christian business leaders and several local pastors, including Strader’s father-in-law, Ignited Church pastor Stephen Strader, have signed on to a letter being sent to Busch Gardens.

Holly Strader said the church is not calling for a boycott of Busch Gardens but is hoping for a positive resolution. She said her goal is to see the revenge and torture themes removed before the show ends Oct. 31, or at least for minors to be prohibited from attending.

"This is not an anti-Halloween [protest]," she said. "If that were the case, we'd be going to Universal and Walt Disney World, all of them, for doing their Halloween events as well. Our big thing is the theme, and that's what really we are standing up against."

Ignited Church became known worldwide in 2008 when Canadian evangelist Todd Bentley began leading nightly revival services there. The meetings, known as the Lakeland Outpouring, grew increasingly controversial when media outlets struggled to verify alleged healings. Bentley later left in scandal after announcing he'd had an inappropriate relationship with a female staffer, whom he married last year.

The Busch Gardens protest has gained local media attention and was even discussed on Rush Limbaugh's radio show. Some disagree with the church, arguing that the show is harmless entertainment. But Strader said many have shown support, including some atheists.

"We really feel God is with us and standing behind us because it goes beyond religious belief or denomination," she said, noting that October is both National Bullying Prevention Month and Domestic Violence Awareness Month. "It goes beyond that into morals that all of us should possess."

Strader is seeking a meeting with Busch Gardens officials this week and so far has heard nothing from the company. Whatever the outcome, she said the protest will send a message to Busch Gardens and other Florida theme parks. "Just to caution them just to think twice when they're deciding what they're going to do for next year, what's appropriate for our families," she

said.