

Quiet Faith Inside Disney

While some Christians have supported a boycott of the Disney company, others say there is a better way to influence: By sharing Jesus inside Disney World.

As concerts go, it doesn't seem to be much of a source for controversy. There's no profanity, no raunchiness, no excessive noise. Parents and children are sitting together in the audience smiling, clapping along to Four for a Dollar's crisp little set.

Indeed Doug Teel, David Wise, Marshall Webb and Andrew White are four wholesome, family guys who love Jesus and like to sing. With their doo-wop standards and jazzed-over contemporary hits, they are helping make memories for the 2,000 or so waiting for the main event to begin.

It's the location that is the problem for some Christians. The acappella quartet's 15-minute warm-up is entertaining families awaiting the start of the live Beauty and the Beast show at Disney's MGM Studios, one of four Disney theme parks in Orlando, Florida.

As Disney celebrates the 100th birthday of founder Walt Disney this month, critics maintain that his cute Mickey Mouse is now the Big Bad Wolf in disguise, his once Magic Kingdom a front for the Evil Empire.

The company founded by the man named one of the 100 most influential Americans of the last millennium is viewed by many as public enemy No. 1 in the country's culture wars. They say that through its various subsidiaries Disney has aggressively sought to make money from less-than-wholesome fare and

promoted a gay agenda while hiding behind the family-friendly heritage of its founder.

As Beauty and the Beast start their romance on stage, Four for a Dollar return to their small dressing and rehearsal room. As they prepare for their next performance, the group talks about why they are working at the company that has been the target of a long-running and broadly championed boycott by Christians.

“What better place for a Christian to be than out in the world,” says second tenor David Wise. “I mean, talk about ‘go into all the world.’ We are the world. We are Disney World. We’ve got such an open door to all these people every day that we see and work with.”

They know they are not at Disney to “do ministry.” They pursue that through their after-hours incarnation as Return 2 Zero, a Christian music group that performs at churches and has been invited to take part in Southern Gospel giant Bill Gaither’s prestigious Homecoming celebration. But the four—from Baptist, independent and charismatic churches—see their theme park days as a way to provide for their families, an opportunity to “bring joy” to people and live out their faith before others.

As sheep in the Mouse’s clothing they are in good company. Charisma found many Christians among the 50,000-plus employed across Disney’s Orlando-area attractions, from those selling souvenirs and snacks along the boardwalks to those making major decisions in the boardrooms. Several sat down with Charisma to discuss the ministry challenges and opportunities in the imaginative world of Walt Disney.

Mad at the Mouse

Such a strong presence of Christians may come as a surprise to many who have seen Disney become the chief target of conservatives attacking what they see as the overthrow of traditional family values.

Since the American Family Association (AFA) launched its Disney boycott in 1996, the stand has been adopted and applauded by the likes of Focus on the Family's James Dobson, the Christian Broadcasting Network's (CBN) Pat Robertson, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God. Charisma once published an editorial supporting the action.

But not everyone agrees.

"[It's] a stupid strategy," says Neil Kennedy, whose Assemblies of God congregation in the Disney-created town of Celebration (see related story on page 44) includes a number of Disney employees. "The church is best served when we are crusading for Christ, rather than against something," he adds.

Tim Grosshans, executive pastor at First Baptist Church of Orlando, shares that view. The large church has not joined the Southern Baptist boycott, and members are frustrated that the denomination seems to be coming known "for what we are against, [when] we are for Jesus so much that what we are against is negligible," Grosshans says.

The church sees the Disney enterprise on its doorstep—the largest single-site employer in the country—as an opportunity rather than an opponent. For years it ran buses to carry short-term foreign Disney workers to and from its midweek

ministry program. "We could help influence the world because they bring the best of the best not only from all over the [United States] but around the world," Grosshans says. "Lead them to Jesus and send them back."

Calvary Assembly of God, another large church in the Orlando area, has taken a similar approach. As a result of its contacts with the church, Disney passes along truckloads of surplus clothing that are distributed overseas by short-term missions trips. Another church in the area commissioned its Disney workers as "missionaries" to the place.

Derrick McKenzie was a missionary before he went to Disney. He spent a year serving in China and now works as an assistant effects animator at the Orlando studio. Currently laboring on the Lilo and Stitch feature due to be released next year, he takes part in a weekly lunchtime Bible study and admits that being a Christian in his work situation can be "challenging."

Many at Disney are "very liberal-minded," he says, and there is not a lot of respect for Christianity. "[But] I think we have done that ourselves to a big degree. I think the best way to get a corporation to change is from within."

James McKee drums in his church worship band on weekends and in the Tarzan show at Animal Kingdom during the week. A 23-year Disney veteran, he asks: "If we boycotted totally, then who would be there? Do we boycott the world and just live in our little Christian communities? We can't do that."

Phil Card, a street performer at Epcot who appears as a caveman or a bumbling professor, isn't shy about his faith. A member of an independent Pentecostal church, Card was known to

scribble Bible verses on the back of customers' receipts when he was waiting tables. He says he has never been asked to compromise his faith in any way and has had opportunities to minister to other workers.

As might be expected with such a large number of "cast members"—cozy Disney-speak for "workers," who wear "costumes" rather than uniforms as they serve the "guests," or customers—not everyone has had the same experience. One middle management Christian who quit said being outspoken would have been "a hindrance."

Disney does make room for Christians in some ways. There is Cross Talk, the employee network for believers that is sanctioned along with the likes of sports clubs and gay and lesbian groups. Rooms have been set aside for National Day of Prayer gatherings.

Some say their beliefs are more tolerated than celebrated. But the longtime employee who was told to stop signing off his e-mail messages with GTG—which he told anyone who asked stood for "Glory to God"—says the ban had more to do with corporate policy regarding any personal salutations than singling out his faith.

Many of the Christians Charisma talked with at Disney's Orlando enterprises acknowledged a strong "gay culture"—evidenced by the company's introduction of same-sex partner benefits in the early 1990s. Those involved in boycotts often cite that move as a prime example of Disney's drifting from traditional values. Another is the company's stance on the annual Gay Days celebration.

The company says its parks are open to everyone and that it has no official part in the weeklong event that draws upward of 120,000 homosexual holiday-makers to the Orlando area each year. Critics say that's disingenuous and point to Gay Days organizers' acknowledging "quiet, behind-the-scenes cooperation" from Disney.

Homosexuality is "so accepted, there are so many," says one Disney worker who left homosexual practices himself after becoming a Christian through a then-boyfriend. He believes that the boycott merely reinforces gays' views that Christians hate them. "I think it hurts more than it helps. There are other ways [to see change], through focused prayer and the Holy Spirit."

A Not-So-Wonderful World?

While many Christian "cast" members at Disney admit they don't agree with everything the company does through its various subsidiaries, they reckon decisions are made more on principles of profit than some sinister plot to undermine traditional values. One musician says his pastor noted that most every business these days has links to something a Christian could find objectionable and that the only way to avoid being caught in that situation "would be to leave the country."

Four for a Dollar first tenor Andrew White, once a backup singer for Larnelle Harris, observes that while championed as a bastion of family values, Disney has always had elements Christians could find questionable. "You got magicians and themes that are not godly, necessarily. You have to take everything that Disney does with caution, just as you would with anything else."

Christian movie critic Ted Baehr agrees that Disney is oftentimes a "mixed bag." While the head of the Christian Film and Television Commission in Hollywood effuses over the recent Princess Diaries, he laments the dark elements of its latest animated effort, Atlantis: The Lost Empire. Yet he points out that Disney still produces more family-friendly films from a "Judeo-Christian perspective" than any other major studio.

While he is not against boycotts per se, he wonders if the Disney one is a little too broad in its scope to be effective. More important, he worries that it is simply a waste of time. If all 130 million or however many Christians there are in the United States boycotted Disney, the company could still make more money this year than ever, he says.

"They only need an audience of 13 million. [So] they don't need the church, and one of the things that happens [if you boycott] is that you lose a little bit of the impetus to speak to the situation."

As it is, the boycott has thrown up its ethical dilemmas for supporters. Southern Baptist leaders told members it was OK for them to watch Monday Night Football on Disney-owned ABC (because they weren't actually handing over any money to the company). They also could tune in for the network's screening of The Miracle Maker.

Pat Robertson, who criticized Disney on his 700 Club show a few years ago for supporting Gay Days, now finds the company broadcasting his program after Disney bought the Fox Family Channel—and with it a standing agreement to carry the CBN broadcast—in a \$5.3 billion deal earlier this year.

For its part, Disney dismisses the idea of the boycott having any economic impact. Spokeswoman Rena Callahan says: "We have a strong 'no discrimination' policy. Our policy is to be hospitable and appreciate everyone who comes. We are proud of our commitment to family products and family entertainment."

Lynda Stein, who works special events at Epcot to support her church drama ministry, has "shared the Lord with many" during her time there, reminding other co-workers "that God is there for them." She doesn't agree with the boycott because "Jesus went to where the sinners were. He didn't run away from them."

"If I'm going to be a true Christian and He calls me to the sinners and if they are at Walt Disney World, then that's where I'm going, I'm answering that call," Stein says.

Like quite a few others, she also believes that if Christians looked more closely at Disney, they would find things not only to celebrate, but also to replicate. "The reason Disney attracts so many people is their, 'Come on in, we appreciate who you are and what you are,'" she says. "That is how God accepted us when we first came to Him."

Disney Magic in God's Kingdom

Clark Whitten, Stein's senior pastor at Calvary Assembly, says he has been "spiritually inspired" at Disney by presentations such as the annual Christmas celebration. David Loveless, pastor of Orlando's 1,200-member Discovery Church, whose members have run Bible study groups at Disney, is more outspoken.

"When I walk into the Magic Kingdom, the standards they have there reflect more of what a part of the [book of] Revelation describes as the environment of heaven than many churches, where there is trash everywhere and the bathrooms stink and everything in the service is done half-baked because people think this is only for God, so it doesn't matter," he says.

In contrast to Loveless' view of some churches, Disney's customer care is famed. Workers pounce on discarded wrappers almost before they hit the ground. No gum is sold in the parks to make sure it doesn't end up on someone's shoes or clothes. Staff is taught to offer directions with open palms rather than pointed fingers to avoid accidentally poking any passers-by in the eye.

"Jesus said very often the children of light need to learn from the children of the world," Loveless observes. "We are not supposed to be as wise as doves, we are supposed to be as wise as serpents. So where will you learn that? [But] we become as wise as doves and wonder why we are not making an impact on our culture."

Community Church of Joy in Phoenix has taken that view a step further, organizing three national conferences on "The Imaginative Church" and how congregations can learn things from Disney that will make their ministries more effective.

"The incarnation of Jesus shows us that God uses human stuff to reach the church shouldn't be afraid to learn from secular folks, and nobody does creativity better than Disney, nobody does customer loyalty better, and we can learn from them how to do it," says Tim Wright, executive pastor of the 10,000-member church. "They do it for profit, and we do it for the kingdom of God, but there is still a lot we can learn."

Rich Taylor, Disney vice president for entertainment, says the boycott unfairly ignores the positive things Disney does. The park has hosted its annual Night of Joy concerts of Christian artists for 19 years and draws thousands to its spectacular Christmas celebration, he points out. A Baptist responsible for Disney's Super Bowl halftime show last year, Taylor says it may not be brain surgery, but he is in "the happiness business, helping people have a great memories."

And Disney is making a lot of them. At least 700 million visitors have passed through the Orlando gates since they opened 30 years ago.

While recognizing Disney's motive is money and not ministry, Celebration pastor Kennedy says, "if the church cared about its brand name like Disney cares about its name, then we would be a lot better off." He also finds something profound in the very heart of Disney. He believes the reason Disney strikes a chord in so many families' hearts is that its founder was, in some ways, a modern-day prophet.

"Walt Disney's middle name was Elijah," Kennedy says [actually it was Elisha, the Spanish equivalent], "and the prophet Malachi said God would send the prophet Elijah to 'turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to the fathers.' [Disney] operated in the spirit of Elijah. He is not the prophet Elijah, but he operated in the same spirit, where he turned the hearts of fathers in America and around the world toward their children—and the church certainly needs to learn that lesson."

Celebrating Disney's Dream Town

A Spirit-filled congregation thrives in a new community that aims to capture the best of America's past.

A picture-perfect town demands a white Christmas. So they'll be having one in Celebration, Florida, this month—even though it's up into the 70s during the day—thanks to some typical Disney magic.

Singers dressed in Victorian-style attire lead the caroling as the snowflakes—created by soap suds—fall nightly on cue in the community that aims to translate Disney's vision of a yesteryear-like, good neighborly America into everyday reality.

Since Celebration was founded not far from Disney's theme parks in 1996, around 5,000 people have moved into the mix of stylish Victorian, colonial, classical and European homes. The golf-cartish NEVs (neighborhood electronic vehicles) dotted around suggest that this kind of carefully appointed small-town living doesn't come cheaply.

But despite critics who have knocked Celebration as utopian, Neil Kennedy maintains that living there "is not The Truman Show"—a reference to the 1998 Jim Carrey movie about a man who discovers his life in a cozy, clean little town is actually the subject of a 24-hour reality show on television.

"These are not actors. They are real people with real families and real needs," Kennedy says. "And the fact of the matter is the pillar of any community is the spiritual pillar, and you can't build an American dream city without having the Christian influence."

That is why he arrived in town a year ago, to start Celebration's first Spirit-filled church. Celebrate Family Church (CFC), affiliated with the Assemblies of God, is the fourth congregation in town and draws more than 100 people to Sunday morning services at the local movie theater.

"The people who live here are very real, very down-to-earth, hard working families. We deal with the same issues that any pastor would. Their basic needs are met, obviously, but the spiritual needs are as obvious in the people here as they would be anywhere."

Kennedy is enthusiastic about Disney's attempt to recapture the charm and sense of community of past times. "I grew up in a small town, and this is just a lot cooler than [that one]," he says with a laugh. "Jesus is the one who came to give us life to the fullest, so it should not be unusual for the church to align itself with the vision of Celebration, that exemplifies life to the fullest."

Celebration, he believes, "captures the best of America. And it's actually reuniting families—generational units are coming back together. The average age is 35, and they are attracting the grandparents to be near the grandchildren."

CFC runs The Grind, a monthly coffee bar outreach to local youth. Other events have included a neighborhood open-air concert by Grammy-nominated quartet 4Him—whose scheduling was made easy by virtue of the fact that member Andy Chrisman is the church's worship pastor.

He, his wife and their children moved to Celebration to work with Kennedy, who pastored Eastern Shore Christian Center, a

congregation they were part of in Mobile, Alabama. Celebration is “a beautiful little community, and everything is real about it,” he says. “I had some friends tell me, ‘Watch out,’ but once we got here and spent time and began to interact with our neighbors and other people in the ‘s wonderful.”

Andy Butcher is senior writer for Charisma and editor of the Charisma News Service.