

Religious or Relevant?

Three years ago I sent some of our editors out on the streets to uncover why non-Christians do what they do. We talked with drug dealers in Atlanta, teen runaways in Chicago, hard-core bikers in Daytona Beach and gay prostitutes in San Francisco in an effort to help Charisma readers better understand how to share Jesus' love with people who don't talk or dress like you and I.

The whole process gave me a burden for evangelism. But the reaction from our audience was mixed.

Some people loved the approach. One woman called to say that she wept for days after reading about an 18-year-old male prostitute I interviewed—and she pledged to pray for him regularly. In letters and e-mails, other readers begged for more articles that would blast them out of their religious comfort zones. "We've stayed inside the church too long. Take us outside," they demanded.

So we proceeded to take you "outside"—to see things that we avoid discussing on

Sunday mornings in church. But not everyone has been eager to leave the G-rated safety of the sanctuary.

One reader tore a page out of the magazine and mailed it back, saying he did not want to look at pictures of filthy sinners. When we did an investigative report two years ago about neo-pagans, readers rebuked us for interviewing witches. One woman said she would no longer display Charisma on her coffee table since the image on the

cover was disturbing. I guess it didn't match her sanctified living room decor.

Recently I sent our senior writer, Andy Butcher, to report on the brave Christians who share their faith during the drunken revelry of Mardi Gras. But readers rebuked us for describing the immorality that occurs during that annual hedonistic festival.

After we published July's cover story on the so-called "gay Christian" movement, readers threatened to cancel their subscriptions because the issue of homosexuality is "disgusting" to them. (Maybe they assume that if we ignore a problem, it will go away.)

I wonder what people will say when they read this month's report on the underground Goth culture. You probably will never find our cover image on the front of Guideposts. But I hope the photograph and the article will provoke you to pray that God will visit a younger generation that is desperately seeking spiritual reality.

I'd like to put this issue to a vote:

* Should we continue to take our readers to the front lines of the culture war? Or should we be content to produce a nice, sanitized magazine with photographs of sunsets, mountain peaks and airbrushed Christian celebrities?

* Should we dare to go to bars, drug dens, covens and homeless shelters where real people are living and dying? Or would it be safer if we forgot those people and just huddled in the choir loft?

* Should Charisma have the guts to deal with today's toughest moral and cultural questions—and risk a PG-rating? Or should we be more concerned about offending the white-gloved Pharisees?

We are at a critical juncture today. The church is faced with an obvious choice: We can be religious, or we can be relevant. Jesus is concerned for the people “out there.” I don't think He cares too much about your coffee table. *