

'Sick,' 'gruesome' house of horror to offer church's religious message

By Douglas Kreutz
The Arizona Daily Star

It is billed as "A Nightmare on 22nd Street."

The fundamentalist minister in charge of the event tomorrow night says it is a "religious presentation" featuring graphic depictions of people paying for their sins — including a woman suffering through a bloody abortion and a Roman Catholic nun being viciously punished in hell.

But residents of Prescott, where similar "nightmare" shows were held last October, described the presentation as "sick," "gruesome" and "far from religious."

A Roman Catholic priest in Prescott said members of his parish were deeply disturbed at what he called a "reprehensible" depiction of a nun in hell.

A Prescott police spokesman said officers responded "two or three times" to complaints about the shows, including statements that some people were held against their will to hear religious messages.

Event organizers were warned not to hold people against their will, but no charges were filed, the police spokesman said.

A flier advertising tomorrow night's event in Tucson describes it as a "haunted house" that will "scare hell out of you!"

"Absolutely no children under 13 without parents! ... People with bad hearts, high blood pressure and weak stomachs, enter at own risk!" says the flier, which includes a drawing of a ghoulish horror film character. The flier makes no mention of church affiliation.

The Rev. Wayman Mitchell, pastor of Potter's House Christian Center in Prescott, said the event will be held from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. in the Tucson Potter's House

congregation, in a rented building at 2920 E. 22nd St.

"It's a religious presentation, a Gospel presentation," Mitchell said.

"About 35 people from our congregation set this up," he said. "It's similar to things that have been done in maybe 50 cities around the country over the past three years.

"There are people who are shocked by the graphic presentation," he said. "It's very realistic, to say the least. ... But we've found that the bizarre and the gruesome seems to attract people. If you get results, it's foolish not to continue."

Mitchell said the presentation includes several rooms in which congregation members enact examples of mankind's sinfulness.

He said the enactments include:

- A scene in which a person dressed in a nun's garb is shown hanging over the flames of hell. The nun says things such as, "I made my confession; how can I be here?"

- A scene in which a woman is suffering physically and emotionally from the effects of a bloody abortion.

- A scene depicting a rock concert, emphasizing the presence of "drugs and satanic influence."

- A scene showing a gruesome car wreck caused by a drunken driver.

Mitchell said people attending the free presentation are escorted through the rooms in groups of 10 on a 20-minute tour followed by a religious message.

"There's a minute and a half at the end where they (church members) present the Gospel," he said. "Those

Friday
February 23, 1990 Arizona Daily Star

The Arizona

Horror

Continued from Page 1B

who show interest follow through and get a chance to join" the church.

"We had about 1,450 people go through it in Prescott over four days around Halloween," he said. "And 150 made decisions for Christ."

Mitchell said response has been "both positive and negative."

"The abortion, the nun and the hell scenes caused the most reaction," he said.

"With the nun, it's no particular assault on Catholicism. A Jewish rabbi or some well-known preacher would do just as well," he said. "The idea is to show that there's a possibility of anyone going to hell, even someone religious."

Mitchell maintained that "the complaints are because it's religious, not because it's graphic. Nobody complains about other haunted houses. We can't even compare with what's going on in the local theaters and video shops."

Residents of Prescott, including a police spokesman, acknowledged that some who attended the presentation were in favor of its strong, if very graphic, messages.

But others, including the Rev. Richard DeTore, a priest at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Prescott, said they were shocked when they heard about the presentation.

"I viewed the whole situation as reprehensible," DeTore said. "And some of our Protestant brethren here expressed their condolences to me, particularly because of the way the nun was depicted."

"From what I understand, they accuse people of being terrible sinners and needing to change," he said. "Some of the young people from my parish who went

through there were actually accused of sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends without any evidence whatsoever."

Don Karcie, chairman of the Prescott Planning and Zoning Commission, said he feels "very strongly that people need to be aware of what's going on before they stumble into this kind of thing — especially with their kids."

"I steered my kids away from it after I found out (from Prescott acquaintances) that it was quite gruesome," Karcie said.

Jeff Casserly, a reporter for the Prescott Courier, described his reaction to a tour of the haunted house: "It was shock, mainly. Basically, they bring you in and tell you it's going to be a haunted house. They did not mention a church affiliation."

"You go into various rooms depicting things like a nun hanging and spitting up blood. . . . In the abortion room, there was a woman laid out on a surgery table with pieces of cut-up chicken guts spread around her crotch. She was saying, 'I'm going to hell because I killed my baby.'"

Greg Fister, a spokesman for the Prescott Police Department, said police responded two or three times to complaints about the show.

"No charges were filed and there were no arrests," he said. "Police determined that the advertising (flier) was legal. But they (church members) were told that if people wanted to leave, they had to let them leave. And they cooperated."

Mitchell, the founder of Potter's House, described his church as a "fundamental, Protestant, pro-Gospel" congregation with 550 members in Prescott and several hundred other affiliated congregations around the nation.

He said the Tucson congregation hosting tomorrow's presentation has 50 to 75 members. Efforts to reach the Rev. Ralph Blanco, pastor of the Tucson congregation, were unsuccessful.