

## As 'goblins' knock, evangelicals answer the door



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Bruce Watters used to simply hand out candy on Halloween, just like his neighbors in St. Petersburg, Fla., until he decided the holiday's ghoulishness really didn't jibe with his Christian beliefs.

But rather than skip the neighborhood ritual, he's put a Christian stamp on it. For the third year in a row, kids will leave his porch with a piece of candy, plus a religious tract - a concise, colorful handout telling how to attain salvation through Jesus Christ.

"If they want supernatural, let's give them Godly supernatural," Mr. Watters says. "We've got to spread Christianity one person at a time. This is an opportunity to reach younger people, and some parents along the way, on a very strange night."

Halloween, long associated with pagan traditions, is now high season for an old American tradition of evangelizing through tracts. The nation's four major publishers of tracts say they sell more at Halloween than at any other time of year, including Christmas and Easter. And the push is on to grow the seasonal market. This year, thanks to new glow-in-the-dark tracts, the Texas-based American Tract Society expects to set a new Halloween record by shipping out more than 4 million tracts.

Buoying tract sales, observers say, is a rising tide of evangelical passion for Halloween rituals. Four years ago in Frisco, Texas, for instance, most churches either shunned the holiday as a perceived festival of mischief or staged their own alternative event. This year, at least 11 congregations are equipping members with tracts for doorbell-answering adults and trick-or-treating kids to hand out.

"It's the only time of the year when people come to your door and ask to interact with you," says Wayne Braudrich, senior pastor at Frisco Bible Church, which offers tracts to members for Halloween distribution. "That just seems like a chance that shouldn't be missed."

pportune momentThough many evangelicals still avoid Halloween, the opportunities seem to be trumping old hesitations.

One telling sign: About 50 Southern Baptist congregations have been in touch with denominational mission offices this month, and every one plans to share the gospel through some form of trick-or-treating, according to Toby Frost, senior director of strategic evangelism for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"The all-out rejection of Halloween, and just ignoring it completely - I'm seeing less of that now" than five years ago among Southern Baptists, Frost says. "I think those days are over for most churches."

What's less clear, however, is why formerly taboo territory has become fair game. Are evangelicals, once wary of the night's ties to witchcraft and spirits of the dead, now accepting Halloween as a harmless night of fun? Or are they pushing back to reclaim it from pagan roots and seemingly sinister forces?

Pagan roots mix with Christian ritualAt stake is the latest phase in a centuries-old struggle to define religious meaning as harvest season wraps up. Pagans first marked Oct. 31 as Samhain, a time of dwindling daylight when the living could most easily communicate with the dead. Christians later planted their own rituals for honoring the dead, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, now celebrated on Nov. 1 and 2, respectively. Oct. 31 over time became known to Christians as Allhallows Eve, or Halloween, and acquired legendary status as a night when less-than-saintly spirits made themselves known.

Today's evangelizing of trick-or-treaters suggests the religious struggle for Oct. 31 is not finished, according to William Brackney, a Baptist minister and professor of Christian thought and ethics at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

"It's not out of the question at all that people would be trying to put a Christian spin on [the pagan holiday] in the same way as the cathedrals were built on old Roman pagan sites," Mr. Brackney says.

For his part, Watters regards Halloween as "a satanic celebration" that he tries to counter by displaying a cross and an angel statue on his porch. He also asks parents for permission to pray over their children. He got the idea from friends in St. Petersburg, Pam and Bill Malone, who have been encouraging Halloween evangelism since they first observed a pagan circle in San Francisco 16 years ago.

"After we saw the evil side of this night, we decided we were going to bring light to it," Pam Malone says. The Malones now set up tables in their front yard, play recorded Christian music, and hand out doughnuts along with collections of scripture verses to trick-or-treaters.

Halloween as flight of fantasyOthers, however, see a less combative trend.

Some evangelicals are increasingly comfortable with fantasy that depicts the paranormal, such as horror movies or Harry Potter books, according to Todd Hertz, associate editor of Ignite Your Faith, a Christian magazine for high school students. That growing sense - although evil forces still warrant caution, their depictions are harmless - may be affecting attitudes toward Halloween.

"More and more, we are hearing voices from pastors and speakers - not just people sitting at home - saying that maybe as entertainment, [the occult] is different" and not necessarily dangerous, Mr. Hertz says. Discussions on that subject "would also translate to the subject of celebrating Halloween" as a potentially harmless activity.

Whatever the trend may be, pagans need not be worried by evangelical inroads into Halloween rituals, according to Mary Gelfand, a Wiccan high priestess in New Orleans. She notes that Satan, like Halloween, is a Christian invention of no importance to pagans, who practice an earth-centered spirituality. What pagans do in communicating with deceased ancestors has nothing to do with the commercial act of trick-or-treating, she says. Therefore, she's not troubled by Christian efforts to make it an occasion for evangelism.

"They're not affecting my holiday," Ms. Gelfand says. "If [evangelism] is a meaning they want to reinsert in this, that doesn't really bother me."

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