

Using Halloween to evangelize

Some Christians evangelizing on holiday with pagan roots

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By **SAM HODGES** / **The Dallas Morning News**

Faith Meyer gives the good stuff at Halloween – Snickers, Butterfingers and Baby Ruths. But each child who stops by her North Dallas home also gets a Gospel tract.



NATHAN HUNSINGER/DMN

Colorful booklets deliver the Christian message to trick-or-treaters.

She even has Spanish tracts, for the Hispanic families who have become common visitors in recent years.

"It's just so wonderful to be bilingual with my tracts," she said. "You'll see the child take the tract and hand it to the parent. You'll see the parent reading it, and most of the time I'll have someone turn around to me and smile."

Evangelical Christians have long debated whether to observe Halloween, with its pagan roots and witchcraft imagery. But an increasing number of evangelicals are, like Ms. Meyer, making Oct. 31 a prime time for witnessing.

They do so with colorful little booklets whose bottom line is that only those who profess Jesus as savior will go to heaven.

Come Monday night, millions of such tracts – written at a child's level, and illustrated with cartoons – will flutter into outstretched candy bags at doorsteps across the country.

Halloween night provides "the two biggest hours of the year" for delivering scriptural tracts, said Dan Southern, president of the Garland-based American Tract Society.

Big night for tracts

That organization, founded 180 years ago in New York City, sells about 3 million Halloween tracts a year to individuals and churches, who give them out for free. That's roughly 10 percent of the society's total tract sales – more than for Christmas, Easter or any other special day.

Good News Publishers, a nonprofit firm in Wheaton, Ill., sells about 20 million tracts a year, a third of them Halloween tracts.

"Our company's ministry is very dependent upon the Halloween season," said Geoffrey Dennis, executive vice president of publishing services.

Halloween occurs on the night before All Saints' Day, which is followed by All Souls' Day in the Roman Catholic calendar. But Halloween's roots are in the pre-Christian Celtic festival Samhain (pronounced "sow-in," and rhymes with "cow -in"), marking the end of harvest and the beginning of winter. On Samhain – beginning at sundown on Oct. 31 – the spirits of the dead were said to move freely among the living.

Americans long ago adapted Halloween into a secular night for costume-clad, candy-craving kids. But many evangelicals – who insist on a "born again" Christianity and see the Bible as infallible – distrust the occasion's pagan heritage and associations.

The Internet carries postings from evangelicals arguing against observing Halloween. These days, it's common for evangelical and even mainline churches to offer a fall festival as a substitute for neighborhood trick-or-treating.

Aggressive marketing

But *Christianity Today*, an influential evangelical magazine, has in recent years published essays challenging the idea of sitting out Halloween. And tract sellers such as Mr. Southern and Mr. Dennis have

aggressively marketed Halloween as the perfect occasion for witnessing.

"We saw this as a huge opportunity many Christians were missing," Mr. Southern said. "They were closing down and hiding out." Jimmie Dillon of Balch Springs is among those who have been won over. She now buys about 500 Halloween tracts a year. She leaves most at her church, New Covenant Baptist in Mesquite, for fellow members to hand out on Halloween.

The rest she and husband Mike Dillon hand out themselves. "I don't believe in Halloween, because it's a satanic holiday" she said. "But they're going to come here anyway, so why not put a piece of candy in their bag and put a tract in there? You never know."

'Redeem the time'

At Frisco Bible Church, some 300 families are lined up to hand out tracts and candy.

"Rather than worry about all that could be ugly or difficult about Halloween, we must redeem the time and make it positive," said Pastor Wayne Braudrick. Frisco Bible Church is in its fifth year of officially encouraging participation in Halloween through tracts. The effectiveness of tract ministry is hard to gauge. But Mr. Braudrick said,



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Garland-based American Tract Society produces about 3 million Halloween tracts a year.

"Every year, we've had families join the church, and be baptized as believers in Christ, all because they got that tract." Mr. Southern said he gets a handful of complaints each year from parents who don't approve of the tracts. Mark Briskman, regional di-

rector of the Anti-Defamation League, has heard no objections from Jewish parents.

Proselytizing through tracts, Mr. Briskman said, "becomes problematic from the point of view of sensitivity and diversity." But he added, "From a legal point of view, they're well within their rights." Some Halloween tracts are edgier than others. Chick Publications' tracts – drawn in comic-book style by Gospel tract legend Jack Chick – threaten eternity in hell for any child who doesn't profess Jesus as savior.

'A little extreme'

Landover Baptist, a highly irreverent Web site (www.landoverbaptist.org) for adults, spoof Chick Publications' tracts. "It kind of takes advantage of [children's] vulnerability," said Chis Harper, who edits the site. "I'm sure there's lots of nice tracts out there. With Chick tracts, the approach is a little extreme." Not so, said Karen Rockney, secretary to Mr. Chick, who declined to be interviewed.

'The truth is scary'

"Mr. Chick isn't writing to scare people, but to tell the truth," she said from the company's California headquarters. "Sometimes the truth is scary if you read your Bible."

Etiquette is an issue with the handing out of Gospel tracts. Mr. Southern said a stereotype has formed of the cheapskate Christian who leaves a tract instead of a tip at restaurants.

Accordingly, Mr. Southern preaches a short sermon to his Halloween tract customers.

"Give the best candy you can afford. Go with a full-size candy bar."

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