

Play depicting Jesus as gay packs church

November 15, 2009 9:35 AM

By VIK JOLLY

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

vjolly@ocregister.com

SANTA ANA - A play depicting Jesus as a gay man played to an appreciative audience in a packed church sanctuary tonight while a handful of protesters outside called it blasphemous.

It was the second showing of "Corpus Christi" in Orange County in about two years. The show sparked protests and bomb threats at its 1998 opening at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York.

The play depicts Jesus as a gay man living in 1950s Corpus Christi, Texas, playwright Terrence McNally's hometown. The cast of 13 portray Jesus and the 12 Apostles.

The Church of the Foothills in Santa Ana received hate calls and letters in the past few days since media publicity of the performance.

Pastor Michael Holland said about 20 e-mails, about the same number of telephone calls, including one Saturday from a man claiming to be a priest from Ireland, and four or five letters denounced the performance.

There was also an e-mail from a local couple with a gay son who thanked the church for hosting the show.

"That's why we're doing this," Holland said, "for all those families out there who don't feel accepted. The Bible does not condemn homosexuality as an orientation, it condemns certain homoerotic acts which had nothing to do with people being in love, like we're doing today."

During the last scene of the play, the actors light a final candle together and exit the stage, leaving the audience with the image of a single flame.

Outside the church, before the play was to start shortly after 7 p.m., Todd Jernigan, a construction worker from Tustin, joined about three other protesters, calling what was taking place inside an "abomination."

Depicting Jesus as gay, he said, "is the biggest disgrace there is."

Don Stewart of Riverside got on a bullhorn and shouted at those going into the performance: "Why did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? Can anyone in that church come out and explain it to me in God's words?"

Stewart, an electrical contractor who described himself as belonging to a community of street preachers, accused the church's pastor of teaching a faulty doctrine "that's going to lead them to hell."

Pastor Holland said the protesters were misinformed.

"Jesus was about love and inclusion and affirming people as children of God, and that's what we're doing tonight," he said, adding that the publicity preceding the performance had been a mixed blessing.

Two years ago, a production of the play at Chapman University did not happen because of a scheduling conflict. The play instead took place at the First Christian Church of Orange Disciples of Christ, Holland said.

There was no publicity surrounding the play then, so it did not generate any controversy, he said. Tonight, 250 packed the Church of the Foothill's sanctuary for the show.

Among them was Claire Richardson, a graduate of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, who said she wants to be an ordained minister in Disciples of Christ faith community.

"I support art and I support interpreting the Bible for oneself," said Richardson, who attended with her parents from Orange.

The Church of the Foothills in the past has hosted same-sex marriage rallies and held the first same-sex wedding in the Tustin area in June.

The one-night showing of "Corpus Christi" was performed by Los Angeles-based 108 Productions. Proceeds benefit the church and a

documentary on "Corpus Christi" by 108 Productions.

The group plans to take the show to Corpus Christi, Texas, next year.

<http://www.ocreger.com/news/church-219451-play-jesus.html>