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Rick Santorum says his faith-based movies will 'rival Hollywood'

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It's not the message you might expect to hear from Rick Santorum, the Christian-conservative former presidential candidate: Faith-based films tend to be lousy, and Christians should quit trying to lock modern popular culture out of their lives.

Instead, Santorum says, Christian conservatives should acknowledge that modern popular culture is here to stay, and use that platform to produce Christian-themed films that will also have quality and popular appeal. It's a strategy he says he intends to pursue in his new role as CEO of a ground-breaking faith-based film studio.

In an interview here, Santorum also stood by his strong views against same-sex marriage, citing the necessity to adhere to religious teachings -- but then disputed his own religion's leaders on the issue of immigration.

Santorum, a former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and darling of the religious right in the crowded GOP field for the 2012 presidential nomination, was in St. Louis on Monday to promote his own foray into popular culture. He has been named CEO of EchoLight Studios, which bills itself as "the first movie company to produce, finance, market and distribute faith-based, family films across all releasing platforms."

"For a long time, Christians have decided that the best way to fight the popular culture is to keep it at bay, to lock it out of their home. ... That's a losing battle," Santorum said in an interview at America's Center Convention Complex, where he was attending the International Christian Retail Show.

With "the pervasiveness of (media) right now, the content just seeps through. The only option is to go out into that arena and try to shape the culture, too."

Santorum said one problem with Christian-themed films was that they've traditionally been aimed at just Christian audiences, rather than attempting to appeal to audiences that don't necessarily share the movie's messaging going in.

He blamed that limited appeal on what he said were often the "hokey" and "cheesy" feel of such films, with all the filmmakers' attention focused on the message and not enough on artistic quality.

"Quality. Quality acting, quality directing, quality scriptwriting. That is going to be a watchword for me," Santorum said at a news conference talking about the studio's pending projects. He said the goal was to produce movies "that rival any good Hollywood film."

Dallas-based EchoLight's first theatrical release, "The Redemption of Henry Myers," is slated for release in the fall. Promotional material describes it as a Western about a bank robber who finds redemption from a widow and her children who take him in after he's wounded.

Santorum's St. Louis visit came as the nation awaits a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the Defense of Marriage

Act, which denies federal marital benefits to same-sex couples. It also comes as the national immigration debate heats up in Congress.

Santorum dismissed the suggestion from some Republicans that the GOP should soften its official opposition to gay marriage rights to widen its appeal to young people. Among his reasoning is that a federal stamp of approval on gay marriage would be a direct affront to religious teachings and would hurt religious institutions.

"The destruction of the institution of marriage and a redefinition of it will not only harm the family but will do incredible damage to the church" by labeling church teachings as outside the mainstream, said Santorum, who is Catholic. "It's going to do great damage to the church and its ministries, and I think, therefore, the country."

But on the issue of immigration, Santorum himself voiced opposition to his own church's position. He stood by his hard-line view against federal legislation that some conservatives claim provides amnesty for unauthorized immigrants, even as Catholic leaders embrace it as a humanitarian approach.

"Certainly, the Catholic bishops have a very different point of view than I do" on the immigration bill, Santorum said. "I think it's wrong, I think it's short-sighted. Every country has a right to protect its border. (The bishops) don't see that right as legitimate."

[Kevin McDermott writes for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.]

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