

How Chonda Pierce Became the 'Church Grouch' in Christian Film

In the new film *All Saints*, releasing this past weekend from Sony Affirm Pictures, John Corbett (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) plays Michael Spurlock, a salesman-turned-pastor called in to help close a struggling church in Smyrna, Tennessee. During his assignment, as his church is transformed by an influx of a refugee group from Myanmar called the Karen, he encounters resistance from the few members left, including Barry Corbin (*Urban Cowboy*, *Northern Exposure*) as Forrest and comedian/speaker Chonda Pierce (*Enough*, *Laughing in the Dark*) as Ruth.

Pierce, who grew up in the church, said she "didn't have to reach too far" to find characters she'd encountered to base her role upon.

"I couldn't tell you how many church ladies in my past was I channeling," she told Charisma News.

Even though Ruth is not portrayed in a positive light, Pierce still says her "heart goes out" to those real-life members in churches who are disrupted by and resistant to changes they find happening in their churches.

"I feel for both sides of the coin," she said. "Sometimes tradition is comforting and the old way of doing it is comforting. It is hard to forget that God is still a God of the past and the future. We struggle to embrace new ways and new ideas, and in our humanity, I just thank God for the cross. I thank God there's mercy and grace extended to those who are making big mistakes in the name of Jesus and hurting one another in the name of Jesus. That's probably one of the reasons I became a comedian, so that I could find ways to

shine light on how ridiculous we can really be if we're not careful."

The film, which required two days of filming for Pierce, is the latest in about a half dozen acting roles she's completed, including several Hallmark films and other faith-based releases, but the second time she'd been asked to play "a jerk of a person." The comedian, who has another appearance in a film called *Selfie Dad* coming in the spring, jokingly wondered if the acting roles will pick up and allow her more time off the road.

"I don't consider myself a big-time actress, but it is kind of fun to have some diversity in your portfolio," she said. "I'm kind of broadening my chops doing these. Maybe it'll help me get off the road, and I'll just sit around doing movies all the time."

Ruth is a combination of real-life members Spurlock encountered, and while she and Forrest both struggle with change in the small church, one overcomes their fears and the other one withdraws from the congregation. Considering where the character might be today, Pierce humorously imagines a particular filmgoer having an epiphany while watching the true story play out on screen.

"It does make you wonder if there's a pastor in that little town who watches that movie and goes 'Yeah, she came to our church!,'" she said. "I think that's funny!"

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