

Michael W. Smith, Kevin Jonas to Launch Music Center at Liberty University

Grammy Award-winning artist Michael W. Smith hopes to share the secrets of his success with students at Liberty University this coming fall.

He'll be joined by Kevin Jonas, the father and original manager of the Jonas Brothers, the megapopular sibling rock trio.

Both will play key roles at the new Michael W. Smith Center for Commercial Music, which opens Aug. 1 at Liberty, a conservative evangelical Christian university based in Virginia.

Smith, a Christian artist with crossover success, will direct the center.

Jonas' role is still being defined but will involve working with Liberty students to record and promote their work as well as connect with mainstream artists interested in signing with the new music label it plans to launch alongside the center.

The school hopes the center and label—working name: Liberty Music Group—will not only give students experience recording an album but also will attract artists—both mainstream and Christian—from across the country, according to Vernon M. Whaley, dean of the School of Music.

"Our mission for the university is training and equipping champions for Christ," Whaley said. "What I tell my students is it doesn't matter what kind of music you're going to go into, God's called you to take worship to the nations."

Liberty's School of Music has about 980 resident students,

according to the dean.

When it opened its music and worship program in 2005, it grew exponentially semester to semester—89 students, then 210, then 318, now nearly 700.

So, Whaley said, “We decided, ‘OK, we’re going to claim the territory for training and equipping for worship majors and worship pastors and those who are going to be involved on a vocational basis in the area of worship.’”

The new center will take that training to the “mainstream market,” which the school views as a place for evangelism.

“The passion we have is not just to train a bunch of people to go into the music industry—or just go into the Christian music industry, for that matter—but to be equipped as musicians that go into the music industry fully equipped to do what they believe God’s called them to do, whether it’s the mainstream market or the faith-based market,” said Whaley.

The center will house several existing programs, including a Bachelor of Music in commercial music with emphases in artist development; songwriting; recording, engineering and producing; publishing and producing; or film score production.

It will also be home to a brand-new \$2 million recording studio for its label, according to Whaley.

Former Christian artist and music industry executive Al Denson will be the center’s commercial music industry liaison.

Denson has served on the advisory council for the School of Music for 14 years. He helped bring Smith and Jonas to the center and is expected to attract more artists who want to give back to budding musicians.

“These artists remember how hard it was starting out, working years and years to have the opportunity to record on a major label,” he said in a written release.

“So when they have a chance to give back to those who are really wanting to seek what they did, and walk down the same path, they are more than willing and excited to invest in them.”

Denson called Jonas “a liaison to the other side of the coin.”

Jonas, a music prodigy-turned-Assemblies of God pastor, met his wife, Denise, on their first day at the Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas. He went from directing worship for Christ for the Nations and Assemblies of God churches to directing their sons’ music careers, according to Good Housekeeping.

Early in their careers, brothers Kevin, Nick and Joe wore purity rings—jewelry indicating one’s desire to save sex for marriage that was popular in the Christian purity movement in the 1990s —while singing mainstream pop songs like “Burnin’ Up.”

Smith found success on both the Christian and mainstream charts with songs like 1991’s “Place in this World.”

Last year, he performed at the funerals of evangelist Billy Graham and former President George H.W. Bush in 2018.

The opening of the new center follows reports Liberty cut staff at its School of Divinity at the end of the last school year.

Liberty President Jerry Falwell Jr.—more often in the news for his vocal support of President Trump—told Inside Higher Ed at the time that those cuts were part of a “cultural shift from full-time ministry workers to Christians in all professions working to make a difference.” {eo}

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