

Reflections of a Hollywood Missionary

When Ted Baehr asked me to write an article for him on the Hollywood Ministries, I have to confess, I wasn't entirely sure how to approach the subject. What is happening with these ministries is in some ways unprecedented in the history of the church.

Over the last few years an entire generation of believers has descended on what's been called "the most influential mission field in the world." They are actors, writers, producers, directors, pastors, teachers—combinations of these and more. Many are highly trained, many have no training whatsoever, but most have come out of some sense of God's calling. Some have come to create evangelistic Christian films, some have come to create moral, uplifting content, others have come just to create and be "salt and light" in the secular arena.

It is a work that has been growing for many years—most notably the last few. It is a movement that invites the full support of a church, which is just beginning to learn of what God is doing here.

I have been working in the Hollywood mission field for several years. A graduate of Fuller Seminary with a pastor's heart, I refer to myself as an ordained actor-producer. This label may raise more questions than answers, but it reflects the uniqueness of this work of God.

From the moment the Lord first drew me to the Hollywood mission field until now, I have found myself in the company of some remarkable people. In the decade preceding my arrival here, a generation of pioneers had a vision of God's heart for Hollywood and began laying the groundwork.

Beside Ted Baehr, who grew up in the entertainment industry

with a father (whose stage name was Bob "Tex" Allen) and mother (Evelyn Peirce) who were Hollywood stars and who has had the Christian Film & Television Commission/Movieguide ministries since the late 1970s, the late David Schall (*ActONE/Actor's Co-Op*), Larry Poland (*MasterMedia*), Karen Covell (*Hollywood Prayer Network*) to name a few, who established a beachhead in the heart of an industry that has responded to the church at best with misunderstanding and at worst with outright hostility.

Over the past few years, that beachhead has grown into an impressive support network for the body of Christ in Hollywood. From the practical training seminars of Ted's "How to Succeed in Hollywood (Without Losing Your Soul)," "Act One" and "Hollywood Connect," and film screening/discussion panels of "Inter-Mission" to personal intercessors of "The Hollywood Prayer Network" and myriad small group ministries—the result is a substantial framework for any Believer who feels called to this mission field.

Bright-eyed and brimming with purpose they have risen up, established and aspiring artists alike. On arrival, "newbies" fresh off the boat (or Greyhound) have been met with many sobering challenges: the high cost of living in L.A., insufficient housing, and tremendous isolation. If there are 45,000 actors already established in Los Angeles, maybe 2 percent of them make a living at it. So, you can see that breaking into "the business" is a little like walking on water.

Over the last few years, established and aspiring Christian contenders in this arena have come to discover the Hollywood Ministries as a lifeline. They have begun to take advantage of these resources and have spread the word to others.

Recently, both Hollywood and the church have begun to take notice. The phenomenal success of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* was a watershed event, which ostensibly unlocked the

door for Believers in Hollywood. Once unlocked, however, the door remained to be fully opened. It's been said, it takes 10 years to "make it" in Hollywood. If this is true then my own journey has just past the halfway mark! So, where is the body of Christ in Hollywood now? Well, the best analogy I can think of for the current state of this work is a story of Peter.

Getting Out of the Boat

We're all familiar with Matthew's story of Jesus' walking on the water. After dismissing the dinner crowd, Jesus, not unlike a mother shooing her kids out of the kitchen, tells the disciples to get into the boat "immediately!" and head across the Sea of Galilee—all this so he can steal away to pray and get refreshed. Dinner for 5,000 can really take it out of you, even if you're Jesus, I guess. A little puzzled, the Disciples climb into the boat and start rowing. Meanwhile, Jesus takes time alone with the Father, recharging his batteries.

A few hours later the disciples were a long way out in the middle of what is technically a large lake. A curiosity of nature in that part of Israel, the winds can whip up a storm almost without warning, which is exactly what happened next. The winds picked up and the waves started rocking the boat. Oh, and it was also 4 in the morning—perfect setting for an M. Night Shyamalan thriller! We don't know who saw Jesus first, but it was decidedly unexpected, and a cross between spooky and awe-inspiring.

Why Water?

Now, walking on water is pretty amazing, but why is it particularly significant? Because the moment Jesus walked on water, he was demonstrating something profound. Prophets and people of God had performed plenty of miracles before, but none had ever walked on water. According to Job: "[GOD] alone treads on the waves of the sea" (*Job 9:8*). Jesus was telling the disciples he was more than a prophet, teacher and healer; he was telling him he was God.

We may understand now the reality of who Jesus is, but at 4 a.m. in the middle of a storm, on a lake, in a fishing boat, with a tired and panicked motley crew—I can understand why they might have been a little distracted at first. Give Peter credit for being the first to at least respond in the moment. He took the initiative asking Jesus to call him out onto the water. Can't you just see Jesus at that moment, donning a big proud-Papa grin on his face?

So, Peter turns to get out of the boat. Now, I've been on a boat or two in my time, and even in calm waters getting over the side can take some doing. This was no Windjammer cruise; it was a first-century fishing boat—open aired, maybe a 20-footer. Cue the wind, cue the waves and perhaps a little rain starting to coat the pitch-sealed insides of the boat, and I think Peter had a little trouble getting out of the thing.

Slipping and sliding with the rocking of the boat, he manages one leg over the side, then another. Finally, he straddles the side of the boat, both legs dangling for a moment. What now? Does he just leap? Does he gingerly step out? If I know Peter, he took the plunge without thinking twice.

Taking the Plunge

In the spring of 2000 the Lord called me as a missionary to Hollywood. For a Bible-belt born and raised preacher's kid, these waters were decidedly unknown. Nonetheless, full of faith I responded, not unlike Peter, without really thinking twice. I leapt full force into it. I began taking acting classes (three at a time!), I tracked down talent agents, managers, casting directors.

By trial and error I learned the game and pressed forward not just because the Lord called me to make a difference in the Entertainment Industry, but because He made me fall in love with it, and its people. This is why years later, as one actor in 45,000, I'm still here.

I am not alone. I have a large and growing family. In addition to the dedicated support of my loved ones at home, I have brothers and sisters here. Each one is bound to another through a sovereign work of God.

For some, such as myself, this is a time of giving birth. Business and marketing plans (as well as screenplays) are being written, rewritten and honed to perfection. Production companies are starting up. It is a work, caught in between two moments—the moment Peter’s heart responded in faith to get out of the boat, and the moment his feet actually walked on the water. We are a generation of sons and daughters who have responded in faith to God’s calling. Now we are in process of getting out of the boat. **The question of the hour, I believe is this: is this really about walking on water, or, is this about something greater?**

Junior high school is a traumatic time for most people. Adolescence is disorienting and difficult. We are tempted constantly to blend in, to be like the “cool” kids on the block. Anything that would make us stand out in the crowd is shunned in favor of compliance. In many ways, the Body of Christ in Hollywood is in adolescence.

A lot of us are still figuring things out. Jesus’ walking on the water declared that He was God. For Peter to know and truly understand the call of God on his life and his role in history, he had to receive that revelation. He couldn’t know who he was, until he understood and saw who God is. I believe this is the state of the Body in Hollywood.

The missing element in our quest is a revelation of God. Until we grasp this revelation we will continue to meander like adolescent school children, forever trying to be like the “cool” kids. Until this revelation takes hold of us “with fear and trembling”, the voice of the People of God in Hollywood will remain unheard.

I say it often in our industry fellowship meetings: “We have a job to do.” If we don’t do it, who will? “How will they hear (or see?) without a preacher?” Or a filmmaker, a storyteller? I believe the Lord has created a void for His creative children to fill. Popular culture, as finicky and fickle as it may be, is craving something it hasn’t yet tasted. We’ve got the goods and it’s time to “get out of the boat”. It’s gotta happen.

Yet, **without constant and focused prayer support, this will not happen.** Without the emotional and relational encouragement of family and friends across the nation, this will not happen. Without financial bolstering, this will not happen. We live in a media-culture. We need a media gospel—well-told, well-written, well-executed, biblically informed stories that first entertain the audiences of the world and entertain them well.

Secondly, in the immortal words of Norma Desmond of Sunset Boulevard, we need moments with “nothing else—just us and the cameras and those wonderful people out there in the dark) in which to move them and demonstrate for them the love of God and the living presence of Jesus through the power of story.

For years Ted Baehr has supplied the church with understanding and has equipped us with invaluable tools, not least of which for guarding our children to be media wise in this media-culture. Now, there is another front on this battlefield—an infiltration of the Industry that seeks to transform from the inside out, one life at a time.

Artists create from their own experience, from what they know. Change their hearts and you’ll change the content. This is at the heart of the mission of both the Arts, Media, & Entertainment Ministries () and Ted Baehr’s ministry. These efforts need your support. I invite you to discover the Arts, Media, & Entertainment Ministries. Find out what they are doing. Catch the vision of God for Hollywood and cast it for others. Support the Hollywood missionaries and ministries with

prayer, and as often as the opportunity arises, with ticket and DVD sales as I and my comrades here prepare to walk on water. Pray that our gaze remains on the Lord—who He is and who we are.

Film is a collaborative art, just as any work of God. We are not all the head or the tail, an ear or an eye. The entertainment industry is more often the pride and joy of the Enemy. Help us take it for Christ, make it the pride and joy of our heavenly Father.

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