

The Church That Surprised Hollywood

With the release of its third film, *Fireproof*, this month, Sherwood Baptist Church is proving that Christians can impact culture with media.

Filmmaking started out as a hobby for Stephen Kendrick. "I was running around the Atlanta area where I lived making movies and documentaries that I was using mostly as tracts," he explains.

Today he and his brother, Alex, have turned that pastime into a ministry as writers and producers for Sherwood Pictures, an outreach of their 3,000-member church, Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia.

Beginning with the \$20,000 project *Flywheel*, the Kendrick brothers' movies have moved beyond amateur productions within one church to a worldwide ministry influencing thousands of lives and drawing surprised reaction from major film companies and acclaim from Christian audiences.

Their second movie, *Facing the Giants*, about a struggling high school football team, was picked up by Sony Pictures and ended up being shown in more than 1,000 theaters. Produced on a \$100,000 budget, the film brought in \$10.1 million in box office receipts, was translated into 13 languages and was shown in more than 50 nations. Stephen Kendrick rattles off a list of the film's other accomplishments: "The DVD was the No. 1 one audio-visual product in Christian bookstores in 2006. ... It was featured as an in-flight movie on Turkish Airlines.

"Disney cruises showed it in the cabins on all of their ships; kids in China produced their own version of it; the NFL passed it out; it was shown in public schools; 8,500 churches bought a license to show it to their congregations; and it was listed

among the Top 10 sports movies of 2006 by Sports Illustrated magazine.”

Not bad for a large but not necessarily well-known church in southern Georgia. Kendrick believes the film’s success stems from a relevant story line and the support of what he calls “a praying church.”

“I want to avoid cheesy movies,” he explains. “People often cringe when they think of Christian movies. In our movies we deal with issues that people are facing while being very up front about presenting the gospel.”

With the release of their third film, *Fireproof*, this month, Sherwood plans to continue doing what many people thought couldn’t be done—reaching the world from Albany, Georgia.

“Christians have always embraced the arts,” explains Sherwood senior pastor Michael Catt. “We are capturing the best of the arts and using them to impact the world. Christ was genuine and met people at their point of need. Jesus gave them hope. Through the movies He is allowing us to do the same.”

Evangelistic Theater

Neither Stephen nor Alex Kendrick had any formal training in filmmaking. But in 2002 the brothers read a Barna Group study that changed their lives and ministries. “I found a survey that basically said the top three most influential factors in our culture were movies, television and the Internet,” Alex Kendrick says. “The church wasn’t even in the top 10.”

The brothers, both associate pastors at Sherwood, thought, Maybe we need to make a movie, Kendrick says. They approached Catt with their idea to make a film about a used car salesman who learns a better way of doing business by honoring God, and the pastor encouraged the Kendricks to realize their vision.

The result was *Flywheel*, which was released in 2003. Alex

Kendrick played the lead and directed the film, while Stephen Kendrick was responsible for the production. "The first movie was basic," Stephen Kendrick says, "but the Lord blessed it. He had bigger plans for the movie than we did."

The brothers' budget increased five times when they set out to make their second film, *Facing the Giants*. And when Sherwood sought permission to use 20 seconds of a song owned by Provident Music, they unexpectedly obtained national distribution through Provident Films, a division of Sony Pictures.

The film gained further notoriety when it received a PG rating from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) for "thematic elements." Producers said they were originally told the rating was due to the film's overtly Christian content.

But after receiving thousands of letters from film supporters, including some lawmakers, MPAA officials said the rating was due to football violence and mature conversations about issues such as depression and infertility. The controversy landed Sherwood in the national media spotlight and eventually led to the film's showing on twice as many screens as planned.

Stephen Kendrick says he and the rest of Sherwood's pastoral team spent time in prayer before embarking on *Fireproof*.

"After a season of prayer and looking for a story line, God led us to the issue of marriage," he says. "We picked up the theme of Christ and the bride in Ephesians 5. The world tramples all over that, but in Hebrews it is held in honor by all."

The movie, which opens September 26, depicts the struggle of firefighter Caleb Holt (played by actor Kirk Cameron), who has drifted apart from his wife of seven years and is considering a divorce. "Holt and his wife are not believers," Kendrick says. "He doesn't know how to fulfill his role as a husband, and she does not feel cherished."

As Holt prepares to enter the divorce proceedings, his father challenges him to commit to a 40-day experiment described in a book called *The Love Dare*. Holt accepts the challenge, but more to please his father than to make any personal changes.

“As he reads the book, he learns what unconditional love is and how God challenges him to love his wife,” Kendrick says. “But he finds that concept to be difficult for him.”

Holt becomes increasingly frustrated and finally asks his father, “How am I supposed to show love to somebody who constantly rejects me?”

When his father explains that this is the love God shows to us, Holt makes a life-changing commitment to love God. And—with God’s help—he begins to understand what it means to truly love his wife.

But the movie doesn’t end there. “His wife is being wooed by a doctor and counseled by a co-worker, so there is no easy solution,” Kendrick says. “There are some unique twists at the end of the movie. You will find lots of laughter but also some tear-jerking moments.”

“It’s a romantic movie,” he adds. “But in contrast to many secular movies, the romance is between a married couple in a dynamic where the fires have faded, a need exists and Christ is shown to be the Lord over our relationships.”

The film is part entertainment and part outreach tool. Seeing the film’s potential to help troubled marriages, pastors nationwide are renting out theaters and planning to buy tickets for firefighters, who suffer a 75 percent divorce rate because of the high stress of their job.

The brothers even created a book out of the once-fictional *The Love Dare*, which will release in paperback in late September. The book will be used as a resource along with a website, , where more than 50 marriage ministries have posted materials

to help couples and church leaders.

"This is an evangelistic tool," Fireproof co-producer David Nixon says. "They're not making it to be purely entertaining. It's a vehicle to evangelize. The goal is to get the message out about God's love."

The producers say *Fireproof* is a long way in quality from *Flywheel*. For the first two movies, the Kendrick brothers used basic film equipment, edited it on a Macintosh computer and called on the congregation's members to do set construction, make costumes and appear as actors.

For *Facing the Giants*, the team hired a 15-member production crew and rented a high-quality production camera. Members of the congregation volunteered as the cast and production crew, which they did again for *Fireproof*. Even Cameron volunteered his time and talent, though Sherwood presented a donation to his nonprofit organization, Camp Firefly.

"From the minute I read the script, I knew I had to be part of this," says Cameron, who was asked to audition for the part because the producers wanted to ensure that the right person was cast in each role. "I really believe the Lord ... directed them to do this [film]."

Actress Erin Bethea, who plays Cameron's wife, Catherine Holt, in *Fireproof*, quit her job to be part of the film. "It's one of those things; you know the Lord is going to take care of you," says Bethea, who was offered a better position as a performer at Disney after completing the film.

Church-Based Filmmaking

Catt does not find his church's venture into filmmaking to be at all inconsistent with its mission. "People are driven by visual images," he says. "Young people get a spiritual message in a secular setting. They will go to a movie and will hear the gospel or any other message that is presented. God has

gifted the body to reach others through many means, including film.”

Catt says that a church can be successful at using a mass medium such as film if they have a calling from God, can put together the right team to carry out the project and have a compelling story.

“I think if you start off with, ‘Wouldn’t it be cool to get together and make movies?’ without a real calling from God behind that and a specific need or vision in place to move you along, you run the risk of having it degenerate into just a very human effort,” says Scott Johnson, a producer with Living Hope Ministries in Brigham City, Utah.

“Then, regardless of whether you succeed or fail, you end up judging the results by very human standards. And that’s a dangerous thing to do in a ministry context.”

Ted Baehr, publisher of Movieguide, a Christian publication that examines the moral content in movies, says that technological advancements are making film production more accessible. “Everybody is producing films and DVDs now, and more churches should be doing this,” he says.

Baehr points to nonprofit groups, schools and businesses that are creating commercial DVDs and documentaries as production costs drop.

“Practically speaking, it’s never been easier financially to break into video production,” Johnson says. “Realistically, if you have between \$10,000 and \$30,000 you can, equipment-wise, acquire a pretty decent video production setup. And you hear stories of people producing award-winning films with a \$600 camcorder and a computer with a \$100 piece of video-editing software.”

Phil Cooke, a TV producer and media consultant, isn’t as optimistic about the viability of church-based feature-film

production. But he notes that forward-thinking congregations are using media creatively.

He points to the creators of , who he says inspired an “army” of Christian filmmakers to produce short films for sermon illustrations, and California pastor Erwin McManus, who adapted his books into the Crave and Wide Awake short film series. In Oklahoma City, pastor Mark Crow created , an Internet-based television network, through his Victory Church.

“Fifty is the median age of the television audience,” Cooke says. “That means the classically coveted 18- to 49-year-old audience is now looking somewhere else other than television. So there’s a dramatic shift happening in media. TV is not the first choice of the next generation. Alex [Kendrick] is doing really good because he recognizes that.”

Johnson says that ultimately the success of church-based filmmaking is based on the content of what is produced. “I’ve seen videos with great content and cheaply produced, and they do much better than the videos with great production values, but with content that is lacking,” he says.

Alex Kendrick says not every church is called to make movies, but every congregation must start thinking outside the box to reach the culture with the gospel.

In addition to the movie ministry, Sherwood Baptist Church has a television ministry that airs in 90 markets nationwide, operates its own 24-hour TV channel on a local cable system and at one time broadcast programming into China via FEBC shortwave in the Philippines.

“While we are impacting the world from Georgia, we don’t want to forget our Jerusalem,” Catt says, referring to Albany. “We want to maintain a balance and work with the community as well.”

Catt says that revenue from the films is being used to build

an 80-acre sports park to reach people “who would never come to hear me preach in the church.”

“We can feel the power of the Holy Spirit among us,” Stephen Kendrick reflects. “We can see that our movies have the power of the Spirit.”

Kendrick points to thousands of e-mails and letters that the church has received from viewers around the world as evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit. “One man said that he had been in a crisis and after seeing Facing the Giants, he threw out his pornography. That evidence causes me to trust God even more.”

“This is a prayer ministry every step of the way,” he says. “We pray when we write, when we produce, in all of our work.”

“We say that we are impacting the world from Albany, Georgia,” Catt says. “Some ask how that can be, but when we see that Facing the Giants was shown in 57 countries; when we received e-mails from every continent from people facing all kinds of situations such as depression, potential suicides, from pastors, laypeople, priests; when we know of at least 5,000 to 6,000 people who have told us that they came to Christ through Facing the Giants, we know that we are making an impact for the Lord.”

Kenneth D. MacHarg is a retired missionary journalist who lives in Carrollton, Georgia, with his wife, Polly.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Click [here](#) to see behind-the-scenes footage from Fireproof.