

The Future of Faith-Based Films

Hollywood or the Heartland: Which will bring us tomorrow's Christian movies?



As Christian films become more popular, will the temptation to partner with Hollywood studios lead to a compromised message? Or will churches and other independents continue to make their own films—the kind intended to improve the culture more than the bottom line?

At issue is a scenario not unlike the early days in contemporary Christian music. Then, artists made records for independent labels and emphasized ministry, playing at churches and coffee houses for offerings or a chance to sell records. But some people argue that as the genre became popular and corporations bought many of the labels, the message was diluted to appease radio and shareholders.

Although churches have been making films with limited screenings and selling DVDs on websites for years, Sherwood Baptist in Albany, Ga., was one of the first to break this mold and partner with a major distributor to get its films into theaters on a large scale. Sherwood pastor Michael Catt is noted for inspiring Alex and Stephen Kendrick to start making films after they heard him exhort followers to change the world from their small town.

“I do believe being a part of a church in an active, ongoing basis gives accountability for the filmmakers,” Catt says.

Sherwood produced *Flywheel*, *Facing the Giants* and *Fireproof* with church members serving as extras, crew members, caterers and more. Their latest film, *Courageous*, a faith-filled drama about law enforcement,

is to open Sept. 30.

Will Christian filmmakers follow the Sherwood model or go the more traditional route of raising private equity and working with mainstream studios?

An example of the latter was this year's *Soul Surfer*, the story of champion surfer and shark-attack victim Bethany Hamilton. The film starred AnnaSophia Robb, Dennis Quaid and Helen Hunt and opened in more than 2,400 theaters in April. It has grossed more than \$43 million, according to .

Dallas Jenkins has been on both sides of the fence. He produced *Though None Go With Me*, *Hometown Legend*, *Midnight Clear* and *What If* as an independent producer but recently partnered with Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago to make films. "Combining Hollywood talent with heartland values is dynamic, and I think it allows us to sow fertile soil. It's simply a great model," Jenkins says. "Even if the film doesn't make a financial profit, it's still ministry."

Yet Jenkins sees a distinction between the need for a business versus a church to turn a profit. "If [churches] don't profit financially, who cares as long as the church's basic needs are still being met? No churches really 'profit.' The goal is service," he says.

In the end, are the Hollywood studios really serious about hopping on the faith-based film bandwagon? "The studios are excited about faith-based films, but mostly at very low budgets or with the risks being taken by independents," Jenkins says. "If they're going to spend a lot of money on it, it needs to be safe and middle-of-the-road, not explicitly faith-based."