

Fed up with Hollywood, churches make their own films

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YORBA LINDA, Calif. -- This year's Oscars may have been passed out, but for some churches across the country the major motion picture season is just getting started.

Frustrated with the movies Hollywood has been releasing, more and more congregations are making their own feature films.

One is Friends Church here in Yorba Linda, a Quaker congregation with an evangelical megachurch worship style where members are finishing production on a film called "Not Today."

"I still hear people say it in the church, `What are we doing? We're making a movie? What are you talking about?'" Jon Van Dyke, Friends Church's media director, told the PBS show "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."

Van Dyke is director of "Not Today," which tells the story of a spoiled young American who goes on a partying trip to India and gets pulled into the search for a little girl sold to human traffickers. The film was partly shot in India and centers around Dalits, the so-called "untouchables" on the lowest rung of the traditional caste system.

Friends Church connected with Dalits during mission trips.

"I had never heard of the Dalits until I went to India," said Brent Martz, producer of "Not Today" and pastor of creative ministries at Friends Church.

Friends Church committed to help free Dalits who had been trafficked and to build 200 schools for Dalit children. And, because the congregation is in the backyard of Hollywood, members decided to make a movie as well.

"It wasn't just to make a movie, because we're not in the movie business; we're a church," said Matthew Cork, the congregation's lead pastor. "But as a church, we do have an obligation and a responsibility to tell the message, and we believe that this was the best way for us."

Some experts question whether this is something local churches should be doing.

"I guess I have an outdated notion that churches are there to inspire parishioners to then go and do things, in whatever genre, whether it's politics, or media or whatever," said Mark Joseph, a film producer with the MJM Entertainment Group who writes about religion and pop culture.

"I'm not sure about church as film studio or church as commercial enterprise," he said. "But that's, I think, the danger down this path."

The church filmmaking trend began at Sherwood Baptist in Albany, Ga., where associate pastors and brothers Alex and Stephen Kendrick have

released three feature films since 2003. They are finishing the fourth one, "Courageous," about policemen struggling to be good fathers.

In Sherwood films, volunteer church members make up nearly all the cast and crew and do everything from catering to building sets. Sherwood teamed with Provident Films, a division of Sony, and found a very receptive audience. Their third film, "Fireproof," starring Kirk Cameron, was made on a \$500,000 budget, and it took in more than \$33 million at the box office, making it the highest-grossing independent film of 2008.

Sherwood films have a specific message, and making their own movies allows them to express it. The films have an overtly Christian tone, and the upcoming "Courageous" continues that.

Sherwood's efforts have inspired other congregations.

"You've got these church media directors and their pastors going, 'Hey, why can't we do that?'" Joseph said.

At Calvary Church of the Nazarene in Cordova, Tenn., optometrist David Evans wrote and directed the church's annual passion play for 15 years. He says after watching "Fireproof," he came away believing Calvary should make a film too.

"I realized that God had been preparing us for the last 15 years to do something far greater than we could ever imagine, and that's what set off the course of actions for me to begin writing the basic story of 'The Grace Card,'" he said.

"The Grace Card," which Evans also directed, is a story about forgiveness and racial reconciliation. Although many in the cast are Calvary Church members, the film stars Academy Award winner Louis Gossett Jr., and it has several Hollywood partners, including Samuel Goldwyn Films.

"We want, number one, for God to be glorified through this movie," Evans said. "We want to plant seeds that result in people demonstrating forgiveness and extending grace. That's something we all need to do on a larger scale."

At Friends Church, filmmakers said they tried to incorporate their characters' faith into the story in a natural way.

"This isn't a Christian movie," Martz said. "It's a movie about human trafficking that happens to be (seen) through the experience of a couple of Christians who are really struggling to live a good Christian life."

Friends Church intends to deliver Hollywood quality with "Not Today," and they have an advantage over other churches. Director Van Dyke spent more than 22 years working in Hollywood and other church members are in the business as well.

He says it's important the film, which the church hopes to release early next year, not be perceived as a "B" movie.

"Clearly, there's tons of talent in the church, so why are we making crappy home movies? I mean ... Hollywood should be following us. They should be going, 'Wow, look what the church is doing.'"