

Reel faith: Can Hollywood teach and inspire?

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

On the five Saturday nights before the 2003 Academy Awards show on March 23, a young adult group at a large church in Pasadena, California, has been discussing the five Oscar nominees for best picture. "What do Hollywood's best films have to say about our culture, our values and ourselves?" was the question inviting churchgoers to the series at Lake Avenue Church, aligned with the Conservative Congregational Christian churches.

Not far away, on a pre-Lenten Friday, liberal All Saints Episcopal Church screened *Antwone Fisher*, followed by a conversation between Rector Ed Bacon and the real Antwone Fisher. The next day included a filmclip-enhanced look at "movies and meaning," and the Sunday morning program featured a forum with a *Los Angeles Times* film critic.

Okay, they go ga-ga in La-la-land around Oscar time. And many churches in southern California include members of the entertainment industry.

But in churches throughout the U.S. the riveting art form of the motion picture is being spliced into liturgies or used to illuminate morality and biblical verities. And there are more and more resources to help churches make use of film clips in worship and in teaching.

"We tend to watch films mostly for entertainment, which is fine," says David Rhoads, professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. "But good filmmaking also takes a slice of life and eliminates all irrelevancies, allowing us to focus on some conflict or situation that may illuminate or critique a biblical theme."

He added that he and his wife identified with two different characters in the Oscar-nominated film *The Hours*. "While the film is not about God at all, she experienced the grace of God wrapped up in a wonderful, tearful release," he said. "I was able to identify with a different character and find myself able to think about choices that I

can make, whereas [before seeing the movie] I had been feeling stuck.”

Rhoads has teamed with colleagues to teach a film-and-faith course four times in the past 10 years, once with Robert Jewett, author of *St. Paul Goes to the Movies*. The literature on theology and movies is extensive, including books by Margaret R. Miles, dean of the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California, and Bernard Brandon Scott of Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

At Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, the class “Reel Spirituality” is the first to fill up. The course is taught by Robert Johnston, a professor who authored a textbook with the same title, and screenwriter Craig Detweiler.

At a clergy retreat last fall for the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego, Detweiler suggested that movie images be woven into the liturgy. He cited *Signs*, in which Mel Gibson plays an Episcopal priest who has lost his wife and his faith. A suspense thriller “that ends in a surprising, faith-affirming manner,” *Signs* has “a six-minute scene about faith and doubt—where God is when bad things happen—that could be used by any congregation,” he said.

“Craig was fabulous at getting people to think about the possibilities of using video,” said Shannon Jenny Vervynck, a priest in the diocese. “I can’t say I know of parishes putting together something yet, but his talk was important for people, to [help them] think about the church not fighting the culture but engaging it [from its own perspective],” she said.

In Lockport, Illinois, pastor and confessed movie buff Kelly Fryer employs Hollywood movie clips in services at the Cross of Glory Lutheran Church, where attendance averages nearly 300 adults. The church, which emphasizes outreach, has a big screen in the sanctuary that is used not only to display words to hymns but also movie scenes to introduce a liturgical segment or illustrate a sermon point, she said.

“One of my favorite clips is from *Sixth Sense* in which a young boy sees dead people all around who do not know they are dead,” said Fryer. “Though he is afraid, he discovers his job is to help them.” The pastor said she sees an analogy to the way “Jesus sees us walking around—some of us dead to life, empty despite material wealth, or some desparately poor and hurt—all needing help and healing.”

People in her congregation, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, are mostly 25 to 50 years old, and 70 percent were not raised Lutheran. Fryer herself

selects the film clips used in the service about two Sundays a month. “We don’t want to do it too often—it would get old,” Fryer said. When people hear about her use of movies in church, she rarely gets a disparaging or indifferent response. “Most questions are: ‘How?’”

Woodland Hills (California) United Methodist Church uses a 45-inch television set for a monthly Saturday night showing and discussion—large enough for a dozen participants. “We got some flak for showing *Pleasantville*,” said Pastor Tom Griffith, who prepares viewers in advance for potentially upsetting sequences.

Pastor Kay Barre, 32, at St. Paul’s United Methodist in Encino, California, hopes to begin a multi-media “alternate service” like one she did at a previous pastoral assignment. A movie scene can serve as a sermon illustration or as a backdrop for a scripture reading. “Some call this ‘worshiptainment,’” Barre said, “but this is the visual language that the younger generation speaks. For the survival of the church, we need to speak the vernacular.”

To those who think the cost of movie screening would be prohibitive, Fuller’s Detweiler counters that prices are down significantly in recent years. “A projector for about \$1,600 would give you good resolution and powerful images,” he said.

For clergy wary of violating copyright laws United Methodist Communications (UMC) since September has processed annual licenses for \$45 to \$200 (priced according to church size) through Christian Video Licensing International. “We are quite pleased with the numbers—264 churches applied,” said Leslie Alexander, director of UMC production. “We expect a big increase in April.” That’s because the office is ending the offer of group licenses, which regional conferences once bought to cover individual churches.

For pastors needing film synopses and insights into a movie’s religious metaphors or moral themes, the variety of resources is growing in print and on the Internet. The competition is so heavy that the United Methodist Publishing House (www.cokesbury.com) has stopped writing “Reel to Real” lesson plans for high schoolers. “It became less cost effective,” said Bob Shell, director of youth resources. But the publishing arm is joining with the communications branch, starting in April, on an “Igniting Worship” series of paperback books and DVD film clips, including videos about bread and grapes to accompany the serving of communion.

Fuller Seminary is writing study guides for new films, such as *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Gods and Generals*, at www.moviemission.com. The Web site, run by Hollywood publicist Jonathan Bock, also serves studios that feel certain releases have a potentially large religious audience. The Web site has links to film review sites, though missing from the list was www.spiritualityhealth.com which carries reviews by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, whose top picks for 2002 are in the March issue of *The Lutheran* and *Spirituality and Health* magazines.

No film guide is more impressive than the three-volume *Lights, Camera . . . Faith! A Movie Lectionary*, published by the Boston-based Pauline Books & Media. Movie expert and Catholic priest Peter Malone of London and Sister Rose Pacatte, director of the Pauline Center in Culver City, California, are coauthoring the series, whose third book will be out in time for the next ecumenical lectionary period.

Two examples of the lectionary-movie connection: *Billy Elliott*, about a boy who is learning ballet dancing and whose dreams are nearly killed by economic pressures on his father, a man trying live up to his town's macho image, is the film for March 16. On that day the Bible readings include the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son and the Transfiguration narrative in Mark. *The Matrix*, a 1999 movie about computer programming and virtual reality, stars Neo who is picked as the One (an anagram of Neo) by a remnant band of humans hoping to destroy the Matrix, a virtual reality universe in which humans are trapped, and restore the world. The film, which contains echoes of the Jesus story, is Malone and Pacatte's selection for Easter Sunday.

Ralph Sariego, a former vice president for television production at Universal and a past president of Catholics in Media, gave recent presentations on *Chocolat*, the 2000 film set in a small French Catholic village. Vianne, the new owner of a chocolate shop, "is an obvious free spirit and to Christians an obvious Christ figure as she dispenses food and drink in the form of life transforming chocolate candy and beverage reminiscent of the body and blood of Christ," Sariego said.

"Many of the better films to talk about are adult-rated," Pacatte said in an interview, "and a discussion leader or pastor has to see the film ahead of time." *The End of the Affair*, she noted, "is a fabulous movie, which contains explicit sexuality but also shows God's relentless pursuit of the soul."

Fuller's Robert Johnston, like Pacatte, warns that a worship leader using a clip from a movie may misrepresent the scene if he or she does not preview the entire film. "The worship leader will need to know how best to set up the clip so those who have not seen the movie can also benefit from the experience," Johnston said. The experience can be transcendent, he said, citing the Italian-made *Life Is Beautiful* about a father and son sent to a Nazi prison camp.

"The final scene of Joshua shouting 'We won!' as the tank passes by brings tears to my eyes," Johnston said. "I am not only crying for him. I am crying for myself, as I wish I could have been as extravagant in my love to my daughters as Guido was to his son."