

A look into the Christian mirror

LO filmmakers create not just a movie in 'Lord Save us from Your Followers'

By Linda Hundhammer

The Lake Oswego Review, Mar 27, 2008

When was the last time you went to the movies and felt something big ... something deep from within ... something that made you want to stand up in the theater and shout out, "Yes! I've been feeling that way too! Thank you, thank you for finally talking about this!"

Lord Save Us From Your Followers, Why is the Gospel of Love Dividing America? a new documentary created by Lake Oswego filmmakers Dan Merchant and Jeff Martin might just be that movie.

In screenings around the Portland area, standing-room-only crowds have left in tears, in laughter, and, most importantly to Merchant and Martin, in conversation.

The movie, due in theaters on June 13, 2008, and the accompanying book, written by Merchant and in bookstores now, take an honest look at Christianity in America.

"As Christians, we had to ask ourselves, what is missing? How did the public perception of Jesus' followers get so wacked out? Christians are supposed to love one another, yet there seems to be some sort of a disconnect," said Merchant.

Martin added, "Our film asks Christians to take a look in the mirror. Are Christians really doing good PR for Jesus? Can we do better?"

The idea for the movie started when the team returned from filming in Ethiopia in 2004.

"The Christians we met there had nothing but a yurt and a yak, but they were happier, more content and more giving than any we knew in the U.S. The purity of their faith seemed so simple. We came home to the Bush-Gore election where Christianity was an issue that was divisive, noisy and culturally and morally crippling. The contrast made us realize that something had gone terribly wrong," said Merchant.

But it also told them that they were on to something – something atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Jews and, yes, even Christians – needed, and wanted, to talk about. With nine out of 10 Americans claiming a belief in God, why is faith more contentious than ever?

Martin, the executive producer, took the role of moneyman. He scraped together funding from private donors, churches, Christian organizations and friends.

"It was not easy. The title itself was an obstacle. Christians feared we were creating another 'go to the zoo and look at the weird Christians' movie, and, the secular groups feared it was all too Christian. What we wanted was something balanced, something truthful, something that represented people of all faiths – something that would help start a much-needed conversation."



VERN UYETAKE / Lake Oswego Review

Dan Merchant, left, writer and director, and Jeff Martin, producer, of Lord Save us from Your Followers, have spent the last three years taking the hundreds of ideas from their post-it-note wall and turning them into the powerful documentary they envisioned.

Merchant, the creative side of the team, interviewed public figures with varying religious perspectives including Al Franken, radio host and Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate; Rick Santorum, former Republican senator from Pennsylvania; Michael Reagan, radio host and son of former president Ronald Reagan; and Tony Campolo, author, professor and evangelical Christian.

“I was disappointed that some of the faces of Christianity – Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Tony Perkins – turned us down,” said Merchant. “I actually sat in a hotel room for three days waiting for an interview promised by Jerry Falwell, and never got it. It was a shame because the public seems to misunderstand the good work these people do.”

Then Merchant took to the streets of New York City wearing a white jumpsuit covered with bumper stickers stating everything from “Jesus Called He Wants His Religion Back” to “God Wants Spiritual Fruits, Not Religious Nuts” and “Nuke A Gay Whale for Christ”. In his on-the-street interviews he asked people what their perceptions were of Jesus and Christians, and if they thought the gospel of love was dividing America?

“It seemed that people understood Jesus and the Bible, but they did not get Christians. As for the Christians – they loved the Lord and loved their church – but often found something to be missing, particularly the under-40 generation.”

After more than two years and 100 hours of footage, Merchant and Martin sat down to shape their efforts into an entertaining movie.

“Most of what we had was surprising. The movie looked very little like our original idea. We had not planned to have an interview with Sister Mary Timothy (gay rights activist in San Francisco), it just happened. During the Culture Wars segment (a simulated game show between Conservatives and Liberals) we discovered that conservatives were not at all as aware of the non-Christian viewpoint as their opponents. The movie just continuously evolved,” said Merchant.

The next hurdle was to get the movie to the public. Merchant, an Emmy Award-winning television writer/producer, has had enough experience in Hollywood to know the ropes. He knows that studios often take ideas from small movie makers and steal them, change them and water them down.

“We have an obligation to our investors to not let this film be remade. We have taken the film to every indie film maker and every art house shop – we have been ‘good meeting’d’ to death. We’ve been told that as hard as this is, it is what we get for doing something original,” said Martin.

On June 13, Lightning Strikes Entertainment, Merchant and Martins’ company, will team up with Different Drummer and other distribution partners, to put “Lord Save Us” in theaters in 20 American cities, including Portland. In addition, LSE is doing something that has never been done before, a co-premiere plan with dozens of mega-churches called their “Direct-to-Churches” strategy.

So far, “Lord Save Us” has been shown locally at three early screenings: One at Imago Dei Church in Portland, one at Lewis and Clark College (named the country’s least religious campus) and one at Southlake Church in West Linn.

“The response has been unbelievable. People come up to us in tears, thanking us for hearing them and thanking us for getting it. It seems this is a conversation the country is ready to have,” said Merchant.

Creating, writing, promoting and fund-raising for “Lord Save Us” has been all-consuming for Merchant, Martin and their families. They agree that they would not be near the men they are – nor would it be near the movie it is – if it had all been easy.

Would they do it again?

“We might do it a little different because of what we’ve learned,” Merchant said.

And Martin added, “We will do what God tells us to do.”

For more information on the movie, the book and Merchant and Martin, visit their Web site at www.

