



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

The Oregonian

Filmmakers find divide between religion, Jesus

Movie - "Lord, Save Us From Your Followers" is intended to spark conversations

Thursday, March 06, 2008

ANNIE MARTIN

The Oregonian

Nestled in a tiny office space above a video-rental store in Lake Oswego, filmmakers Dan Merchant and Jeff Martin are preparing to launch their first movie together.

The two members of Lightning Strikes Entertainment have spent about three years investigating a nationwide disconnect between Christians and their fellow Americans for their documentary, "Lord, Save Us From Your Followers." The movie is due in theaters June 13, and a companion book is scheduled to come out Tuesday.

The movie explores what Merchant calls America's "bumper-sticker culture" -- people tell others what they think but aren't willing to consider conflicting views.

"Clearly we've decided to have the national debate . . . on our cars," Merchant said. "We won't talk to each other about these issues, but we'll stick the 'God said Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' or 'Who would Jesus bomb?' on our cars."

The film is named after a bumper sticker Merchant saw in the parking lot of his church, Southlake Foursquare in West Linn.

"I remember seeing that bumper sticker and laughing and kind of going, 'Yeah, I hate those judgmental so-and-sos, too; they make (Christians) look bad,' " Merchant said. "And I got about one more step toward the sanctuary when I realized that . . . I'm one of those followers, too."

He and Martin, who attends Beaverton Foursquare Church, decided to create a film that would represent people of different faiths. Merchant interviewed public figures with various political and religious views, including Al Franken, the radio host and a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate; Michael Reagan, son of President Reagan and a radio host; and Rick Santorum, former Republican U.S. senator from Pennsylvania.

Merchant also did person-on-the-street interviews while wearing a body suit covered with bumper stickers representing a range of political and religious views. He asked passers-by questions that included their perceptions of Christians and Jesus. To Merchant's surprise, many people had a positive perception of Jesus while not having a very favorable opinion of Christians.

"It's fascinating that, by and large, people understood Jesus and not Christians," Merchant said. "It just shows

that we haven't done the job of representing him that we are supposed to do."

Wanting to discuss the "culture war" from different perspectives created some challenges for the filmmakers, especially financially. Because the movie isn't told entirely from a Christian perspective, it was hard to gain support from Christian organizations, Martin said. Likewise, many secular groups wouldn't back the film because of the Christian influence.

"People had to believe in the idea or in me and Dan personally," Martin said.

The movie will be released in 10 to 20 cities, including the Portland area. Since theaters are booked only a few weeks in advance, Martin and Merchant aren't sure exactly where it will be shown yet.

The film also will probably be available to churches that want to show it to their congregations.

"I wanted this film to be welcome in an art house and a church," Merchant said. "I didn't make a movie for church people, and I didn't make a movie to beat up Christians. I wanted everybody to be able to have this conversation."

Merchant has handled most of the creative aspects of the project, while Martin has dealt primarily with the business side. Merchant's other projects have included the VH1 science fiction series "Strange Frequency," the children's TV show "Bill Nye the Science Guy" and the Seattle sketch comedy "Almost Live!" Martin helped build Creative Media Development, now CMD, into one of the largest marketing and communications companies in the region.

Based on past screenings of "Lord, Save Us," the filmmakers are hopeful it will be well received. Beyond box-office sales, Merchant said he wants to "find people packed in Starbucks having conversations" about the movie.

"The thing that happens after you see the movie is people stand around and talk for an hour," he said. "And the whole thing starts to feel more like a movement than just a movie release."