

Christian moviemakers use their craft to inspire potential missionaries

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ST. LOUIS (RNS)—Three hundred evangelical Christian college students sat in a dark, packed downtown hotel ballroom, the projected glow of a movie the only source of light.

Students in the room, however, would have argued the real sources of light were the movies' subjects—missionaries bringing the gospel to what they believe to be the darkest corners of the world for Christians: China, Burma, India, Africa.

In watching examples of such films, these missionaries-to-be are participating in an artistic renaissance of sorts within the Christian community. The potential of narrative filmmaking as an evangelical tool has grown rapidly in recent years, as the technical tools used to make movies have become cheaper and available to more—and younger—people.



Christian film director T.C. Johnstone, seen here (right) shooting *Hearing Everett*, screened part of his movie at the Urbana film forum in St. Louis. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy of Jon Beck)

“Film is ingrained into our culture, and Christians are using it more and more for God’s kingdom’s purposes,” said Drew Mason, a 19-year-old sophomore film major from San Diego State University who attended the film screening.

The screening was part of the [Urbana conference](#), the largest gathering of mission agencies in the world. Its purpose is to connect more than 16,000 young, idealistic, energetic college students with the 280 mission organizations and seminaries that staffed booths for the five-day event.

Urbana is organized by [InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA](#) every three years. The conference moved to St. Louis in 2006 after nearly 60 years on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. But this was the first year Urbana organizers decided to tap into the younger generation’s interest in movies in a big way.

“At Urbana ’03, there wasn’t a peep about film or filmmaking, and in ’06 there were two discussions that brought in about 50 people,” said Nathan Clarke, 34, a documentary filmmaker with [Fourth Line Films](#) who organized the Urbana Film Festival and Forum.

At the recent event, organizers devoted three formal sessions to the subject, screening six movies. The festival drew more than 1,000 students to the sessions, and also to smaller workshops, roundtables, lectures and one-on-one meetings in which students could get critiques on their film pitches.

“Today there’s a community of Christian filmmakers out there who have access to the technical tools, but many of whom need to learn how to tell a story,” Clarke said.

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**Fourth Line Films video on the
effects of the Prosperity Gospel
in Ghana.**

Probably the most popular evangelical movie ever made, the [Jesus film](#), was produced 30 years ago by the late Bill Bright, co-founder of [Campus Crusade for Christ International](#). The [two-hour movie](#) features the familiar biblical story of Jesus' life and, according to its website, has been translated into 1,000 languages and has been seen by 6 billion people.

But younger filmmakers are turning away from using their craft as an element of the conversion process itself. Instead, they are taking the skills they've learned in film schools and using both documentary and fictional narrative techniques to change the direction in which their movies find an audience.

Rather than making a movie that shows the story of Jesus to a Third World nonbeliever, as the makers of the Jesus film did, today's Christian filmmaker might target an American audience and dramatize the dangers for those leading the underground church in China or examining the [role of the prosperity gospel in Ghana](#).

Christian movie director T.C. Johnstone, 36, screened part of his movie [Hearing Everett](#) at the Urbana film forum, and he explained the movie's genesis was as a promotional video for Rancho Sordo Mudo, a home and school for deaf children in Mexico.

But what began as a simple fundraising tool eventually became a feature-length telling of the story-behind-the-story—part documentary, part narrative history—of how an American missionary family left the comforts of home and began teaching deaf children in the Mexican desert.

Churches are the intended venue for free *Hearing Everett* screenings, after which members may take up a collection for Rancho Sordo Mudo.

But for Johnstone and, increasingly, other Christian filmmakers, the screening itself isn't the end of the movie experience. *Hearing Everett* ends with an "action step" directed at the viewer. Pastors can request a tool kit that includes a small-group study guide Johnstone hopes will lead others toward church service projects.

Other Christian filmmakers have become activists for social-justice issues that both make good sources of drama and mesh with the tenets of their faith. They are unsatisfied just telling a story of injustice and letting an audience decide how to act. For many, their faith propels them to set up nonprofit organizations.

John Shepherd, president of [Mpower](#) and producer of last year's controversial *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, said a new generation of Christians is embracing the arts in a way their parents never did.

"If the body of Christ doesn't get involved in film as a mission field, it's missing a phenomenal opportunity to have their message heard by the world," Shepherd said. "And this young generation gets it. The church had abandoned the arts, but young people are taking it back."

Tim Townsend writes for The St. Louis Post-Dispatch in St. Louis, Mo.