

# **‘Jesus’ film producers plan release of animated version**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The Jesus Film Project is producing an animated *Jesus* film that is set to release in theaters around Christmas 2025.

“Do you realize that there are more people in the world today who have little to no knowledge of Jesus than ever before in history?” asked Pastor David Platt, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board.

Platt spoke at the announcement of the new project at the Museum of the Bible in Washington on Nov. 30, where Jesus Film Project staffers joined animators and supporters.

“What an opportunity we have to use a medium that God has ordained to reach not just people, but the next generation with the gospel,” Platt said.

Similar events announcing the film were held in South Korea and Uganda.

The original *Jesus* film, released in 1979, has been translated into more languages than any other movie, according to the Guinness World Book of Records. The 2,100th translation recently was completed.

## **‘Relevant for kids. and for families’**

Josh Newell, executive director of Jesus Film Project, said he views animation as a fitting means to speak to younger generations about the life of Jesus.

“Animation is a compelling way to tell stories,” he said in an interview

ahead of the event. “There’s a moral resonance that people have with the story of Jesus, that what he teaches is good and is true, and is relevant for kids and for families.”

The new film’s director, Dominic Carola, has worked on films such as *The Lion King*, *Mulan* and *Lilo & Stitch*. He said the animators are working closely with historical experts to depict the faces and clothing of characters living in the time of Jesus, including Jesus himself.



A “concept image” of the Jesus character from the forthcoming animated version of the “Jesus” film. (Image courtesy Jesus Film Project)

“He’s from the Middle East, he’s Jewish, so we knew there’s certain skin tones, textures, things that we can lean into, because this is the part of the world he came from,” Carola said in an interview ahead of the launch, noting the importance of getting confidential feedback from global focus groups.

“We don’t want him to be a surfer from Malibu or looking like somebody from a *GQ* magazine. He walked among us, and he lived in the flesh. So we went through a very strict process of trying to stay in these bumper rails.”

Carola said he and the animation team will have to approach certain parts of the story of Jesus, such as the crucifixion, “definitely delicately.”

“We don’t want to minimize what he did for us, obviously, but we certainly can’t show it to the level of *The Passion of the Christ*,” he said. “We’re not doing that. So it’s a fine line.”

The clip that aired Thursday at the Museum of the Bible, depicting the Gospel story of Jesus’ raising the synagogue leader Jairus’ daughter from the dead, was shown to focus groups in different cultures and countries. Newell said even those who might never have heard of Jesus reacted positively to the story.

## **Grow from 100 to 2,100 languages**

While the original film, produced in a docudrama style, was two hours long, the new version is expected to run about 90 minutes. Both are based on the Gospel of Luke, but the storytelling will differ in pace through the animation.

“We will linger in those moments of where there aren’t words in the Bible, and we’ll see Jesus interact in some new ways that we didn’t see in the previous version,” said Newell. “There’s going to be some surprising scenes that are added to it that we really think are fun and meaningful from the Gospel of Luke that we’re going to share.”

As of mid-November, Newell said, about a third of the estimated project cost of \$150 million had been raised. Some donors made contributions in honor of Paul Eshleman, Newell’s predecessor, whose family created a memorial fund after his death on May 24 at the age of 80.



Josh Newell speaks about the Jesus Film Project at the Museum of the Bible on Nov. 30 in Washington, D.C. (RNS Photo / Adelle M. Banks)

Newell said he hopes the animated version will launch in 100 languages and that three to five years later, it, like the live action version, will have expanded to 2,100.

The latest translation is in the language of the Waorani tribe. Jim Elliot, a U.S. missionary, was killed when he sought to spread the Christian gospel among the Waorani people in Ecuador in 1956. Newell said in a statement that the version in this language follows a request for it and features voice actors from different Waorani communities.

Gabe Handy, executive program director for the film, said he expects the quality of animation will match other biblical animated films, such as *The Prince of Egypt*, but the new *Jesus* film will feature three-dimensional animation, also used in films such as Pixar's *Toy Story*.

"They are using some virtual reality in the pre-production process, in some of the design and modeling that they're doing," he said of the animators in an interview at the museum before the start of the event. "Because they're doing it in that way, that's producing some assets for us that we can apply beyond just making a movie."

The producers are hoping to create ancillary footage for use in immersive digital experiences. Users of virtual reality goggles, for instance, might follow Jesus along the Via Dolorosa as he approaches Calvary or travel the rocky trip on the Sea of Galilee where the Bible says Jesus calmed the waters.

Bill Bright, the late founder of Cru, previously known as Campus Crusade for Christ, asked Eshleman after the original film debuted in U.S. theaters in 1979 to translate and dub it into dozens of languages. Eventually the ministry, first known for its work on college campuses, crossed the 2,000 mark in 2022.

Asked what Bright, who died in 2003, might think of the new version of the film he debuted 44 years ago, Newell said he believes the founder would approve.

“He would love it because he was so creative,” said Newell, who joined Cru’s staff 25 years ago when Bright was nearing the end of his leadership.

“Anything that we can do to kind of continue that trajectory of reaching younger people and giving them the opportunity to share about Jesus themselves and make an impact and an influence, he’s all over that.”

*Editor’s Note: The first paragraph was edited after it originally was posted. RNS ran a correction, clarifying the Jesus Film Project — not Cru — was producing the animated film.*