

## New Line a believer in faith market

**Studio gets a religious education as it woos Christians with 'The Nativity Story.'**

By Lorenza Muñoz Times Staff Writer

Shortly before Easter, New Line Cinema executives sat down in a Los Angeles screening room for a class they nicknamed "Christianity 101."

The movie studio was preparing for the holiday release of "The Nativity Story," based on the biblical account of Jesus' birth. Taught by an evangelical preacher, a Presbyterian minister and a Pauline nun who doubled as a film critic for a Catholic magazine, the lesson was aimed at educating executives who were well-versed in slasher movies, fantasy thrillers and raunchy comedies but knew little about one of Christianity's most sacred events.

"They wanted to get a better handle on understanding the story and what it meant to people," said Sister Rose Pacatte, the critic who also directs the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Culver City. "I never had such a good class."

New Line's religious education is the latest effort by Hollywood to get in touch with the Christian market. The status of that moviegoing set climbed in the wake of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," about the crucifixion, and Walt Disney Co.'s "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," which had underlying Christian themes. Twentieth Century Fox has launched FoxFaith, a theatrical and home video distribution label for Christian films.

Lately, low-budget, independently produced faith movies also have shown resilience at the box office, even though they are playing in a fraction of the theaters a typical studio release does.

"Facing the Giants," an inspirational sports movie funded by just \$100,000 in donations from the Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Ga., has grossed more than \$8 million since it was released Sept. 29. "One Night With the King," about the Old Testament figure Esther, who is said to have saved the ancient Jews from death, has grossed about \$13 million since its October release, although it has yet to make back its \$26 million in production and marketing costs.

"It's like a tide rising," said Billy Joe Daugherty, pastor of Victory Christian Center, a Tulsa, Okla., congregation of 14,000. "The producers and companies that catch this will ride a wave. These are not one-time moviegoers."

"Nativity" also is a radical departure for New Line. The company, owned by giant Time Warner Inc., made its name with such low-budget hits as the "Nightmare on Elm Street" slasher series. More recently, it released the acclaimed "Lord of the Rings" trilogy and last year's hit comedy "The Wedding Crashers."

Costing more than \$65 million to make and market, "Nativity" is one of the biggest and most expensive biblical-themed releases from a major media company. The film, recounting Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, will open Dec. 1 on 2,700 screens, in time for the Christmas season.

"There is no paradigm for this strategy," said Russell Schwartz, head of marketing for the studio. "We talked about a smaller release. But as we have screened it more and more, it becomes a much bigger idea for us."

The film stars 16-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes, a best actress Oscar nominee for "Whale Rider," as Mary and Shohreh Aghdashloo, a supporting actress nominee for "The House of Sand and Fog," as her cousin, Elizabeth.

The film is benefiting from unprecedented cooperation between media-savvy Christians and studios eager to tap into the audience.

This month, the studio participated in the National Media Prayer Breakfast, an annual event organized by the evangelical ministry Mastermedia International and its partner, the Hollywood Prayer Network. Gathered at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza, 700 Christians in media and entertainment prayed for Hollywood to make movies with a "positive global impact." Billionaire Philip Anschutz's Walden Media and FoxFaith were also present.

"There is a new spirit from the Christian perspective on the entertainment industry, which is not to bash or boycott Hollywood but to demonstrate Christ-like love and hope," said Larry Poland, founder of Mastermedia. Religious movies were once a staple of Hollywood, which through the 1950s and early 1960s released such epics as "The Ten Commandments," "The Greatest Story Ever Told" and "King of Kings." But the genre had largely fallen out of favor with studio executives, who until now believed that it had limited box-office appeal.

"Hollywood does a great job creating films that suspend belief, but when it comes to this Bible thing, it makes everybody nervous," said Erwin McManus, head pastor at the nondenominational evangelical church Mosaic, who spoke at the New Line Christianity seminar.

Tom Newman, founder of Impact Productions, a Christian movie production and marketing company based in Tulsa, said there are 54,000 evangelical churches nationwide that incorporate videos and DVDs into their worship service.

"What is happening out there is a silent revolution where a lot of church people are getting experience in making video announcements and using them within their own congregations," said Newman, who helped market "One Night With the King" and "The Omega Code" in 1999. "There is hope that there will be some great filmmakers coming out of the church."

For the last month, New Line has been reaching out to evangelical churches and organizations by hosting screenings and discussions. So far the studio has held 200 showings of "The Nativity Story" nationwide, with 100 more planned.

The studio got a big boost in early November, when the Vatican agreed to host the worldwide premiere of the film for 7,000 people. "The Passion," which grossed \$612 million theatrically in 2004, received a huge publicity push when Pope John Paul II saw the film and said, "It is as it was."

On Tuesday, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops screened the movie at its annual gathering in Baltimore.

"It gives us credibility with all Christians," said Rolf Mittweg, New Line's head of worldwide marketing and distribution.

The movie has brought filmmaker Catherine Hardwicke, director of the teen drama "Thirteen," back to her Presbyterian roots. Every Christmas while growing up in McAllen, Texas, Hardwicke would build a nacimiento — a reproduction of the Nativity scene in her family's living room, complete with a cave-like grotto for the baby Jesus, Joseph, Mary, the three wise men and, for a little south Texas flavor, a woman making tortillas.

"I've thought much more deeply about Christianity, about the origins of it and how profound it was," Hardwicke said.

"If you think about what is important, it is not money and power, it's the heart and spirit, and that was very powerful for me."

With the movie opening in less than two weeks, New Line has little time left to get the word out. Hardwicke, who finished editing the film in early November, is only now touring the country's churches with it.

Karen Watson, who buys fiction for Christian publisher Tyndale House, said the firm rushed to publish a novel, a coffee table book and an account of the Nativity story as companions to the movie. She noted that the "Nativity" novel and the account have shown up

among Tyndale's bestsellers on Amazon.com.

Paul Braoudakis, communications director for the Willow Creek Assn., a nonprofit branch of Willow Creek Church, based outside Chicago, said there hadn't been a lot of buzz around "Nativity" yet. "It has been below the radar," he said.

Still, 1,000 people previewed the film at Willow Creek this month. The association plans to encourage its network of 12,000 churches around the world to use the movie as a launching pad for discussion.

"We look at "The Nativity Story" as a great outreach tool," said Braoudakis, who said the church encouraged members to see and discuss this summer's controversial "The Da Vinci Code." "Nativity" is a great way to communicate a timeless story that hasn't gone away in 2,000 years."

On Sunday, Mosaic will preview "Nativity" to 3,000 churches and 20,000 leaders through the Christian Communications Network, a satellite broadcast service. The event will occur the same day as the Vatican screening.

New Line executives hope their education will help them market "Nativity" not only to devout Christians but to those who are not avid churchgoers.

"The more we learn, the more opportunities present themselves in advertising with special interest groups and with promotional partners," New Line's Schwartz said. "This has made us realize how large and diverse the Christian world is. It's mind-boggling."