

News Watch Article: DM812

## MORMON FILMMAKERS SEEK BOX-OFFICE BLESSINGS

This article first appeared in the News Watch column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 25, number 2 (2002). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

The advertisement for *The Other Side of Heaven* appeared promising. "From the Academy Award-winning producer of *Schindler's List* and *Jurassic Park*," the ad said, "comes the true story of an ordinary boy on an extraordinary adventure." Rated a benign PG and promising the wholesome presence of Anne Hathaway (*The Princess Diaries*), *The Other Side of Heaven* seemed like a sensible film to promote in San Diego's *Southern California Christian Times* and three other Southern California papers owned by iExalt Inc.

A vague hint of what awaited filmgoers appeared in the lower right corner of the ad. Two men are in a small boat, one wearing a white shirt and the other wearing not only a white shirt but also a coat and tie. What ordinary boy would travel on an extraordinary adventure dressed as if he's bound for an office building? That would be John H. Groberg, who served a two-and-a-half-year term as a Mormon missionary to Tonga in the early 1950s. Groberg, who continued missionary work in the South Pacific in subsequent years, now serves on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' First Quorum of the Seventy.

Some readers of the *Christian Times* discovered, to their chagrin, that the film portrayed its hero as promoting the LDS doctrine of eternal marriage and depicted a Methodist missionary as someone who asked thugs to beat up this Mormon interloper. (Director Mitch Davis says he toned down the Protestant missionary's initial hostility toward Groberg, which Davis believes was motivated as much by Groberg's "white man's advantage" in 1950s Tonga as by his Mormon faith.)

"I was disappointed to have spent money to view a film, advertised in the *Christian Times*, which disparaged my faith and which presented the Mormon faith as essentially indistinguishable from Christianity," wrote Glenn Barr of Rowland Heights, California.

Compared to the claim of Mormon forefather Joseph Smith, Jr., that Jesus Christ condemned all Christian churches as apostate or to past Temple rites that portrayed non-Mormon clergy as hirelings of Satan, *The Other Side of Heaven* ([www.othersideofheaven.com](http://www.othersideofheaven.com)) is almost kindly toward evangelical Protestants. The same missionary who shuns and harasses Groberg eventually confesses that he had feared the young Mormon and makes a costly sacrifice to save Groberg's life.

"One of my specific desires was to make an ecumenical film," Davis says in an interview with the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL. "We don't preach any Mormon doctrine or quote from Mormon doctrines, although we make it clear that he's a Mormon missionary."

Davis, former bishop of a Mormon stake in Colorado, says that evangelical Protestants were among his closest friends as he grew up and that they spent many hours arguing about religion. Davis believes relations between Mormons and Protestants will improve during the next few decades. "We will look back on this era with as much disdain and disgust as we look back on the treatment of blacks in the South," he says. "I'm not about converting the world to Mormonism, but I would really love it if we put our arms around each other."

Davis, nevertheless, does appreciate whatever interest the film generates in Mormon faith. The LDS-owned *Church News* quotes Davis as describing a young man who saw the film and "found me afterwards and grabbed me by the hand and tearfully said, 'I want you to know that seeing the movie made me want to join your church just so I could go on one of your missions.' And we actually are working on that."

The Dove Foundation says members of its review board “evaluate each film or video based upon Judeo-Christian ethics.” It has given *The Other Side* its seal of approval. “We are thrilled that the Dove Foundation has recognized the value of this story as one that people of all faiths can appreciate and enjoy,” said Mary Jane Jones of Excel Entertainment Group. “While *The Other Side of Heaven* does tell the story of one missionary of a particular faith, the experiences he has and the lessons he learns are accessible to all people. This movie is no more a Mormon film than *The Mission* was a Catholic film.”

*The Other Side* also drew a supportive review from *Preview* ([www.PreviewOnline.org](http://www.PreviewOnline.org)), an online film-review service distributed through [Gospelcom.net](http://Gospelcom.net). “Although *Preview* follows more traditional Christian orthodoxy, the positive messages in *The Other Side of Heaven* can be recommended,” said a brief review that gave the film high marks for both entertainment value and acceptability.

Davis says he strived to show Mormon missionaries as complex characters who struggle with the same problems any other people have. Groberg, for instance, successfully prays for a child who appears to have died after falling from a tree. Later in the film, however, he can only attempt a blessing of a dying young man, but the evangelical Protestant missionary forbids it. After the young man dies, Groberg wails with grief. “I want all the born-again Christians who think we’re going to hell to think, *Well, they may be going to hell, but we can identify with them,*” Davis says.

Davis says his film almost enjoyed the wider exposure of a national ad campaign on Salem Radio Network, but Salem rejected the ads after discovering the film’s Mormon content.

Bill McKeever of Mormonism Research Ministry first alerted the *Christian Times* to the Mormon themes in *Other Side*. “While I would defend anyone’s right to produce a film that is favorable to his or her worldview, there is a problem with how this film is being marketed,” McKeever wrote on his ministry’s Web site ([www.mrm.org](http://www.mrm.org)). “Whoever was in charge of the promotion of the film was very determined to make it difficult for the general public to know of its Mormon theme. Some might call that good marketing strategy; however, knowing how the LDS Church continually deals with its image in the public arena, I just can’t help but think that this was a bit of, for lack of a better word, deception.”

For its part, the *Christian Times* apologized to its readers for accepting *Other Side* ads without realizing the film had Mormon elements. “I looked at the ad, and it looked harmless to me. We rarely get movie ads,” says Lamar Keener, publisher of the *Christian Times*. “Our lesson for the future is to check with the movie experts first.”

“I don’t regret at all the ads we took out,” Davis says. “I regret how they were perceived and that the film wasn’t embraced more widely. I guess we could have put a warning on the ad that it’s about a Mormon. I don’t know what people expect.”

If people reject the film because of its sympathetic portrayal of Mormons, “that’s just 100 percent bigotry, and there’s no other way to describe it,” Davis says. *The Other Side* promotes “chastity, abstinence, fidelity, purity, and Christianity,” he says. “I know what movie I made and why I made it.”

“I cannot imagine a sadder thing,” Davis says, than concluding that he is an “evil and sneaky” proselytizer for Mormonism. “If I had one wish, it would be that we focus less on who is right and more on what is right.”

**The Entrepreneur.** Excel Entertainment Group, a company based in Salt Lake City, distributes not only *The Other Side of Heaven* but also the films *God’s Army* and *Brigham City* by Richard Dutcher. Step into the typical LDS bookstore, and you’re likely to find the same types of pop-culture alternatives that appear in a store owned by evangelicals. Films by Richard Dutcher, children’s videos by The Living Scriptures (also endorsed by the Dove Foundation), clean pop music by and for young Mormons — and even the occasional CD of contemporary Christian music (CCM) — are on display in stores such as Latter-day Harvest of Nauvoo, Illinois.

Excel distributed most of the music, including the CCM, to LDS stores. An energetic man named Jeff Simpson leads Excel. He acquired a few small music labels and a music-distribution company seven years ago when he moved to Salt Lake City from Los Angeles, and he combined the different businesses

into Excel Entertainment. Dutcher connected with Excel when he needed some contemporary LDS songs to include on the *God's Army* soundtrack. Excel not only provided the songs but also ended up distributing *God's Army* to more than 200 theaters across the nation — and Excel Motion Picture Entertainment was born.

Simpson worked for the Disney empire before moving to Utah, and he brought along entertainment savvy to his new project. Like director Mitch Davis of *The Other Side of Heaven*, Simpson emphasizes what he believes Christians and Mormons have in common — a desire for wholesome music and films and art that supports rather than attacks and divides families. “If all these things that divide us are brought together in one big pile, they pale beside the grace of Christ,” Simpson says.

Simpson quotes a passage making a similar point from the book, *Believing Christ* (Bookcraft, 2002) by Stephen Robinson, the coauthor of the earlier book, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (InterVarsity, 1997). Simpson runs Excel on the assumption that the divide is not so wide after all.

After nearly two centuries of sustained disapproval and distrust between Mormons and Christians, Simpson has managed what would have once seemed impossible: selling the music of evangelical Protestants in Mormon stores. “I felt that the evangelical Protestant expression was so well done and so missing in LDS culture that I wanted to bring it into LDS culture,” he tells the JOURNAL.

Simpson attends the annual conventions of the Gospel Music Association and CBA (formerly the Christian Booksellers Association) to scout new talent for music distribution by Excel. “The only gold record I have on my wall is by Jars of Clay,” he says, laughing. (Excel was a small part of that band’s success, he says, but bands like to thank everyone who helped.)

Simpson has not asked any evangelical stores to begin stocking Mormon artists from Excel’s lineup, such as Julie de Azevedo, although “I think it would be great if we could join forces with evangelicals someday and distribute a Christian film.”

**The Pioneer.** *The Other Side* is part of a nascent “Mormon renaissance” in films that began in 2000 with *God's Army*. The ads for *God's Army* made no secret that this was a movie about young Mormon missionaries. It showed young LDS men in their familiar uniforms of white shirts, dark ties, and black plastic nameplates. Even so, director Richard Dutcher laughs when remembering an e-mail message from a youth pastor who accused him of trying to lure in unsuspecting evangelicals by casting a lead actor (Matthew A. Brown) who reminded the pastor of Kirk Cameron (star of *Left Behind: The Movie*).

“If you can’t tell from my films that I’m a Mormon, then I’m not doing my job,” Dutcher says. Making films primarily for Mormon audiences became a high priority for Dutcher a few years before he made *God's Army*. He had directed a film, *Girl Crazy*, and his distributor urged him to add nudity or a sex scene every nine minutes to improve the film’s box-office results. Dutcher rejected the advice, and the distributor accepted *Girl Crazy* anyway. “It would have made a lot more money, but I would have gone to hell,” Dutcher says. “I think I would prefer less money.”

Dutcher briefly dropped out of making films. “I felt like I was going down the wrong path and not doing what I was supposed to be doing,” he says. “It was all about money, and the values were so messed up.” One afternoon, however, as he was grilling burgers on the patio at home, Dutcher noticed ads for niche films — black films, movies from India, films about homosexuals. Where, Dutcher wondered, were the niche films for *his* people? Dutcher felt God calling him back to directing films. “I have no doubt about it,” he says. “I think he had more important things for me than making trivial popcorn entertainment movies.”

Dutcher has attracted criticism from fellow Mormons for showing LDS sacraments in his second film, a taut murder mystery called *Brigham City* (2001). Indeed, a distribution of Mormon communion elements is the center of the film’s heart-rending final scene. “You can’t tell Mormon stories without telling specifics of Mormonism,” Dutcher said in the LDS-owned *Deseret News*. “I had no interest in making Mormon doctrine look just like any other Protestant religion. Why would I do that?”

*Brigham City* is more complex and engaging than *God's Army*. Dutcher plays Wes Clayton, a county sheriff and Mormon bishop whose world is disrupted by the first murder in the small, peaceful town of Brigham. Dutcher depicted the killer as a faithful member of an LDS stake center, showed another member with a pornography addiction, and included one "Jack Mormon" in a fairly sympathetic role as an FBI agent.

Downplaying Mormon identity is "a common practice by Mormon storytellers, whether they're authors or directors, that drives me up the wall," Dutcher tells the JOURNAL. "That just bugs me. It smacks of a sense of shame or embarrassment about who they are. The more specifically you identify your characters or setting, the more universal your story becomes."

Dutcher's pride in his Mormon identity sometimes leads to a feisty attitude toward the critics of Mormon theology. One of the least sympathetic characters in *God's Army* is a missionary who spends most of his time reading evangelical critiques of Mormonism and expressing his resulting doubts. Finally, a veteran missionary named Elder "Pops" Dalton (played by Dutcher) pushes the doubter against a wall, saying he worked his way through all those books years ago and rejected their lies. The reader of anti-Mormon creeds eventually slinks off into the night and abandons his mission.

Dutcher will explore similar tensions in his next film, *The Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith, Jr.* One principal character will be ex-Mormon Robert Foster, one of several men who tried to publish a weekly newspaper called *The Nauvoo Expositor*. The *Expositor* published only one issue, and the destruction of its printing press led to the arrests of Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum. The Smith brothers were killed on 27 June 1844, when a mob attacked the Carthage, Illinois, jail, where they were being held on charges of tyranny.

Despite his clear theological differences with evangelical Christians, Dutcher believes niche filmmaking could be a means of dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons. "There seems to be a real bridge there that people don't even try to cross. I see some of the bigger Christian films out there and find myself just wishing that they had called me for help on their script," he says, citing the multiply flawed *Omega Code* as an example. "If we could share work with one another, I think it would be mutually beneficial."

– Doug LeBlanc