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'A Walk to Remember' blurs definition of 'Christian' film

By Marshall Allen

PASADENA, Calif. (ABP) -- "A Walk to Remember," a new movie creating a stir in Christian media, is breaking new ground not only in Hollywood's portrayal of Christians on screen, but also in unprecedented recognition of the audience potential of the faith community.

The movie, released Jan. 25, stars 17-year-old multi-platinum recording artist Mandy Moore playing a Baptist preacher's daughter. That's right, a known and open Christian character is the movie's centerpiece.

Moore's character, Jamie, is portrayed in a flattering light. She is prudent, smart and willing to live according to her faith, even if she's made fun of for it. The audience is encouraged to emulate Jamie's character and her life seems to be consistent with the Bible she carries.

For these reasons the movie, which is based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks (author of "Message in a Bottle") is being marketed to Christian audiences like no release by a major studio ever before.

Producer Denise Di Novi said she even had to show Warner Bros. statistical evidence that a large Christian audience exists before the studio would agree to make the film.

Executives hope Jamie's character will be attractive enough to Christians to bring in big box office profits. The studio certainly has gone to extreme lengths to get the word out to Christians.

"This is the broadest and largest campaign targeting Christians ever by a major studio," Di Novi said.

It remains to be seen whether the gamble will pay off among the audience normally drawn to Christian films, however. While "A Walk to Remember" clearly affirms Jamie's beliefs, it never fully explains what those beliefs are.

Jamie carries a Bible with her to class, but the name of Jesus is never mentioned in the movie. Landon -- a bad boy in the movie -- is transformed into a better person. He gives the glory not to God, but to Jamie and the "faith" she had in him.

The publicity campaign included special screenings for Focus on the Family and a Christian radio advertising campaign. A Christian publicist, Jonathon Bock of Grace Hill Media, was hired to help create a buzz in the Christian media. Bock even viewed early cuts of the movie, at one point advising that several curse words be removed so as not to offend Christian audiences.

And in the boldest move to target the Christian audience, the studio sponsored a Bible study based on "A Walk to Remember." About a month before the movie opened, the study was sent to about 10,000 youth pastors around the country, along with a movie promotion kit.

The Bible study promises to help leaders "integrate the movie into a solid, biblically based discussion that will reinforce your young friends' faith in God, and their understanding of his transforming power."

Even a surface reading of the material, however, reveals that the studio's motives aren't completely altruistic. The Bible study recommends that youth leaders hang the "A Walk to Remember" movie poster that came with the study. Then, it says they should show the promotional trailer to their youth group and encourage kids to bring their friends when the youth group sees the movie. Information for ordering group tickets, naturally, is included.

Given the hard sell, some Christian viewers are likely to walk away feeling the film is more an effort to cash in on the Christian audience than a portrayal of the Christian faith.

To their credit, even if their marketing suggests otherwise, the film's makers don't pretend it's a Christian movie, per se.

Di Novi said "A Walk to Remember" is not a Christian movie, but a film for young people with a Christian character. She said the first aim of the film is to be a hit and make money.

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-- Marshall Allen is a free-lance writer in Pasadena, Calif.

Former WMU leader uninvited because of ties to new group

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The Florida Baptist Convention has withdrawn an invitation to former Woman's Missionary Union leader Dellanna O'Brien to speak at its annual statewide WMU meeting.

The reason given for the withdrawal is O'Brien's involvement with a new missions organization, Global Women.

"We do not believe that a person involved in a third-party parachurch missions organization would prove to be a valuable spokesperson for the missions-education emphasis of Florida Baptists," said convention spokesperson Don Hepburn.

"We support Southern Baptist missions education and the missions offerings," he said.

O'Brien, a former Southern Baptist missionary, said she had "no animosity" about being uninvited from the meeting and hoped she would have other opportunities to speak in Florida in the future.

O'Brien, who led WMU's national organization in Birmingham, Ala., 10 years before retiring in 1999, is one of several past leaders of the SBC auxiliary to serve as an incorporator of Global Women.

Formation of Global Woman, a missions organization led by and focused on women, was announced Dec. 13. Though started by Baptists, it is open to all "missions-minded evangelicals," according to founding documents. The organization has hired a coordinator and plans eventually to appoint missionaries.

O'Brien said she helped incorporate Global Women because she believes in the concept that more work needs to be done in the area of helping women reach other women. She said she withdrew from ongoing leadership, however, after realizing that some people perceived it as being in conflict with WMU.

The WMU's current top executive, Wanda Lee, recently issued a statement clarifying that Global Women has no connection to WMU. "While many of our former leaders are involved in the new organization, their participation is a personal decision and not one connected to national WMU," she said.

Lee said she learned of the organization shortly before it was publicly announced but that no current WMU leaders were involved in its planning or incorporation.

Founders of Global Women say a third of the world's people are non-Christian women but they could find no other evangelical mission board specializing in worldwide ministry and witness by women.

In her statement, which later was endorsed by the WMU executive board, Lee said there are similarities and differences between the two organizations.

"WMU's desire for 113 years has been to create the kind of environment through missions education in the church that enables individuals to hear God's call to serve in whatever way he leads and to support our missionaries," Lee said.

O'Brien said Global Women in her view "certainly is not" a competitor to WMU and that she was surprised that having her name linked with the organization would cause anyone to question her support for WMU.

"I would be so happy if we would remember who the enemy is and we would all be able to work together," she said of the controversy.

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