

## RELIGION: ‘Son of God’ rare wide-release Christian film

BY DAVID OLSON  
STAFF WRITER  
February 24, 2014; 06:27 PM



/AP

This image released by 20th Century Fox shows Leila Mimmack, left, and Joe Coen as a young Mary and Joseph in a scene from "Son of God."

Inland churches are receiving thousands of free tickets for a major film about Jesus' life that is being released in multiplexes this week alongside Hollywood blockbusters.

"Son of God" is the first wide-release film about Jesus since 2004's "The Passion of the Christ," which has earned \$612 million worldwide.

Christian films typically have limited showings in a few dozen cinemas. "Son of God" is opening on 3,000 screens nationwide, including at least 15 in the Inland Empire.

Riverside's Harvest Christian Fellowship and Crossroads Christian Church in [Corona](#) are among about 100 churches around the country that received free tickets from the Colorado-based Christian charity Compassion International. Three thousand went to Harvest alone.

Churches and religious organizations also are renting out entire theaters for previews on Wednesday and Thursday before the movie is released Friday.

Orange County's Saddleback Church rented a 232-seat theater at Edwards [Corona](#) Crossings Stadium 18 for members of the church's Corona campus, along with venues elsewhere.

"For the purpose of evangelism, for inviting someone to know Jesus, this is awesome," said Pastor David Williamson of Saddleback in [Corona](#). "I think people will leave there with a great understanding of who Jesus is."

The church sold the tickets at 2-for-1 and encouraged congregants to ask a non-Christian friend, family member or neighbor to accompany them, Williamson said. The film's high-end production and its screenings in multiplexes alongside secular Hollywood movies make it more accessible to non-Christians than other religious films, he said.

The movie also is meaningful to believers, he said.

"It's one thing to go through the Bible, but this film puts the pictures in your mind and gives you a visual image of what's already in your heart," he said.

#### BASED ON HIT SERIES

Williamson saw the movie earlier this month at Saddleback's main Lake Forest location with an audience of pastors that he estimated at about 1,000, part of a nationwide effort to promote the film among churches.

"Son of God" producers Mark Burnett, producer of TV shows such as "Survivor" and "The Apprentice," and his wife Roma Downey, who starred in the TV series "Touched by an Angel," spoke at the showing.

"Son of God" is based on the hit 10-hour History Channel miniseries "The Bible" and includes parts of the miniseries that were about Jesus along with segments specially filmed for the release, said Paul Lauer, a publicist for the film.

The DVD of "The Bible" is the biggest-selling TV miniseries ever, according to The Hollywood Reporter.

Burnett and Downey are Christians who have the rare ability to create entertainment that Christians embrace and that appeals to a wide audience, said Professor Diane Winston, who studies the intersection of religion and entertainment and is the Knight Chair in Media and Religion at USC.

Winston said that no major film about Jesus had been made after “Passion” because of the difficulty of making religious films that can sell millions of tickets.

“Finding a script that is written sensitively and that doesn’t offend certain groups, and that is not going to be wildly costly, is not easy to do,” she said.

Upcoming Hollywood films on Noah and Moses already are running into problems with Christians who say the movies are not faithful enough to the Bible, she said.

#### GRASS-ROOTS MARKETING

“Son of God” has received plaudits from leading evangelical, Catholic, African-American, Latino and Asian American religious leaders, including Saddleback’s Pastor Rick Warren and Los Angeles Roman Catholic Archbishop José Gómez.

Fifty “faith advisers” of various theological outlooks helped producers to ensure the film is one that all Christians can embrace, Lauer said.

Leading Christian religious leaders were sent advance copies of the film. Auxiliary Bishop Rutilo del Riego of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino saw it at a January retreat of Southern California bishops. He said the film is both respectful of Jesus and has the potential to reach a large audience.

“The broader the appeal of any piece of entertainment that has an opportunity to evangelize people, the better,” he said.

Churches across the country have received “Son of God” promotional materials, including links to a 22-minute video and emails with suggested Facebook, Twitter and Instagram postings about the film.

Warren created a study guide to accompany the movie, and a trailer of the film has gotten more than 2.8 million hits on YouTube.

The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic organization, bought tickets for Spanish-language screenings at 10 California cinemas, including Riverside’s AMC Tyler Galleria 16, said Santiago Pozo, founder and CEO of Arenas Entertainment, which is spearheading Latino marketing for the film. Arenas is working with about 1,000 priests and pastors around the country to promote the movie, he said.

“Son of God” is a rare wide-release movie that Christians can feel comfortable seeing, said Kasey Husen, a spokeswoman for Crossroads Christian Church in Corona, which received more than 100 free tickets from Compassion International.

“The films out there other than this don’t lend themselves to what we believe as Christians and the way Jesus calls us to live,” she said. “They’re against that in a lot of ways. It’s great to have

a movie about Jesus that shows people who he is and his story and why we believe what we believe.”

Contact David Olson at 951-368-9462 or [dolson@pe.com](mailto:dolson@pe.com)

<http://www.pe.com/local-news/local-news-headlines/20140224-religion-son-of-god-rare-wide-release-christian-film.ece>