

Pop singer Justin Bieber also low-key evangelist

by [Piet Levy](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

With a smooth voice, a signature mop of hair and a string of hits, Canadian singer Justin Bieber has accumulated millions of fans, and last year he sold 3.7 million albums in the United States. Now Bieber's handlers are showcasing another side of the 16-year-old pop sensation: Christian icon for the tween set.

Bieber's faith is on display in the new 3-D concert film/documentary *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, which hit theaters in early February.

Paramount

Pictures has screened the movie for faith leaders across the country and distributed spiritual discussion guides—the same tools used to promote *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Blind Side* as family-friendly fare.

"People

will walk away [from the movie] knowing faith is very important to him," said Scooter Braun, Bieber's manager and one of the film's producers. "As a Christian, he's someone to look up to. . . . When [fans] are getting the real person is when they can connect to that person."

Bieber has never shied away from faith. He was singing Christian songs on YouTube before he became famous. His born-again Christian mother Pattie Mallette has talked about her spiritual conversion on a Christian TV show and openly shares her beliefs and Bible verses with 281,000-plus Twitter followers.

Bieber's

come-from-nowhere climb to become the fourth-ranked top-selling artist of 2010 has given a higher profile to his Christian beliefs, which he

also addressed in his autobiography, published last fall, *First Step 2 Forever: My Story*. "I believe that Jesus died on a cross for my sins," Bieber told *Billboard* last November. "He's the reason that I'm here."

On his November single "Pray," a departure from his typically pop oeuvre, Bieber sings, "I close my eyes and pray / I close my eyes and I can see a better day." The music video, seen more than 21 million times on YouTube, ends with the written message, "God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer."

In the new 3-D film, fans will see Bieber expressing his faith; several scenes show Bieber praying before concerts, and Mallette discusses how God brought stability to her life as a single teenage mother.

Paramount's spiritual resource guide suggests that the movie "provides an opportunity to teach our children about the power of hope, prayer, faith and family." It lists discussion points and Bible verses related to the movie, such as "the power of prayer" and "the importance of Godly friendships."

David Tai, one of the pastors at the Christian Assembly of Suburban Chicago in Carol Stream, Illinois, said after a recent screening that while the film's faith message is subtle, he might use the movie in discussions as an illustration to show "how authority and responsibility go hand in hand."

Diane Winston, a scholar in media and religion at the University of Southern California, says it's "perfectly natural" for Paramount to market *Never* to spiritual leaders. "Many [Christians] might not have known Justin Bieber was one of them," she said. This campaign reminds them that the movie "is a wholesome product they can take a child to see."

It's also not unusual for teen pop stars to use "the language of faith to widen their audience and project a clean pop image," Winston said, citing Miley

Cyrus and the Jonas Brothers as examples. "For young stars, particularly in those murky young teenage years, it's a quick, reliable way to show parents you are not going to be offering a sexually explicit message," Winston said.

While Braun, the teenager's manager, said the movie may earn Bieber more Christian fans, he dismissed the idea that Bieber's faith is being used as a marketing tool. "There are some stars who speak their faith because they're trying to do outreach to that audience, and there are others who share that side of their lives because that's who they are," Braun said, "and I think that's just who Justin is. When there are 20,000 people chanting your name night after night after night, if there's no sense of faith, if there's not a sense of something bigger than yourself, you can get lost."

Braun, who's Jewish, said he encourages Bieber's faith because "I think it's so important." He said the two regularly pray the Shema, Judaism's central prayer, before the start of each concert.

Winston said one potential setback to Bieber promoting his Christianity is that he may be held to a higher moral standard; Cyrus's wholesome image, for example, took a beating after a pole dancing episode at a 2009 awards show.

Braun, for one, isn't worried. "There's going to be mistakes I'm sure [he'll] make as a young man, like we all make," Braun said. "But overall he has a really good heart and he's a very intelligent kid. . . . For him it's about living his life to be the best example he can be for others."