

Comedians take on Christian film industry in film festival debut

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue



Actor David Koechner in the film “Faith Based.” (Courtesy photo)

It has all the ingredients of a faith-based blockbuster: an astronaut who finds God after she’s pushed to her limits. It also has space monsters.

But you won’t find “A Prayer in Space” in theaters.

The fictional Christian film plays a central role in *Faith Based*, a new satirical film about the Christian film industry that premiered at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival in January.

The comedy stars Luke Barnett and Tanner Thomason of *Funny or Die* fame as two not particularly pious friends who decide nonetheless to make a Christian film, because, as Barnett’s character puts it, “the entire genre is a gold mine.”

Christian films, the two decide, are made with small budgets and see big returns. And they don't even need to be good to make money.

"Christians support anything Christian," says Barnett's character.

Like his character, Barnett's father is a pastor, and he has watched his father's church bus members to showings of new Christian films.

Director Vincent Masciale, who identifies as a Christian, wanted to poke some good-natured fun at "weird things that we do," he said.

"It's not making fun of people that believe in something," Masciale said, noting that some of the movie's scenes were filmed in the church he attends. "It's more just kind of taking this idea that there are people who will believe something blindly, and there are people out there that will take advantage of those people."

Faith Based, which also features Jason Alexander, David Koechner, Margaret Cho, and Lance Reddick, sold out all three showings at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, Barnett said. One audience member said it was what they wished Christian movies actually were—the best compliment, according to the actor.

But not everyone has been thrilled with the movie.

Before the film was even complete, Breitbart and Fox News published stories dismissing the movie as a "Christian-bashing comedy." Those stories racked up hundreds of angry comments—some of which ended up being used in a short video to promote the movie in place of a trailer.

"They will laugh today," reads Barnett, quoting a commenter. "They will cry for eternity."

Recent years have seen a series of successful films aimed at evangelical Christians, including the *God's Not Dead* franchise and a series of films produced by Alex and Stephen Kendrick.

The Kendrick brothers' 2006 film, *Facing the Giants*, was financed with \$100,000 by a member of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, where the brothers were pastors, according to reports at the time. They filmed it on the campus of Sherwood Christian Academy with church members stepping in to act and support the crew.

Facing the Giants reportedly grossed more than \$10,000,000 and led to more films, like *Fireproof*, starring actor Kirk Cameron, *War Room*, featuring Bible teachers Priscilla Shirer and Beth Moore, and *Overcomer*, out last year.

“The Christian film industry as we know it today is more of a product of the evangelical movement and the later 20th century and the culture wars,” said Brett McCracken, who has written about film for *Christianity Today* and the Gospel Coalition.

Like Christian books and Christian music, Christian movies make money, according to McCracken.

“I really don’t think there’s many nonevangelicals going to see these films, and they are commercially successful because they’re tiny budgets and they make enough money because churches sell out theaters to see them, because evangelical audiences are perhaps hungry for that type of safe, family-friendly content,” he said.

Some of the most significant films about faith are being made not by the Christian film industry, McCracken said, but by independent filmmakers like Terrence Malick, whose most recent film, *A Hidden Life*, tells the real-life story of a farmer in Nazi-occupied Austria who, motivated by his Catholic faith, refused to swear loyalty to Hitler.

Third Coast Content founder and CEO Ben Howard is a veteran of the faith-based film industry. What critics miss, he said, is that many Christian viewers have different criteria for what makes a good movie: a strong message that lifts up their beliefs.

Howard, for one, is looking forward to seeing *Faith Based*.

“I believe that the skill or talent of being able to laugh at ourselves, poke fun at ourselves, is a necessary trait for life,” he said. “I think the Christian film business makes for great fodder—and I can say that as somebody who’s lived in it for a long time.” —Religion News Service