FAITH-BASED *Storytelling* FINDS ITS MOMENT

PRODUCERS ARE RECOGNIZING THAT AUDIENCES ARE HUNGRY FOR INSPIRATION—AND THAT SUCCESS BOILS DOWN TO WELL-TOLD STORIES THAT ENGAGE PEOPLE AND INSTILL A SENSE OF HOPE.

WRITTEN BY PAULA BERNSTEIN

It takes a certain amount of faith to produce any film or TV project, but what about stories involving faith?

In recent years, as consolidation and risk aversion reshape Hollywood, studios and streamers are increasingly turning to faith, family, and inspirational content—a relatively low-cost, advertiser-friendly, broadly appealing play. Recognizing an underserved market, major players such as Netflix, Amazon, Lionsgate and Lifetime, among others, are moving into the faith-based space.

The trend has been encouraged by the success of recent faith-based TV hits such as *House of David*, the Biblical historical TV series that premiered in February 2025 on Amazon Prime. It drew more than 40 million viewers, and was quickly renewed for a second season.

In 2025, episodes of the biblical drama *The Chosen* made just over $20 million at the U.S. box office, impressive considering that was just before it went to streaming. Angel Studios found success with *The King of Kings*, an animated retelling of Jesus' life that grossed $77 million worldwide.

Of course, this isn't the first time that Hollywood has turned to faith-based content.

"From the beginning of the studio system, Hollywood relied on the Bible as the source for blockbuster movies. Think of *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*—those were religious epics," says producer Douglas B. Maddox. "The Bible was the original IP."

From left to right: Dr. Holly Carter on the set of Lifetime's *Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery*; on the set of MergeTV's *Food for Thought*; Carter, producer Adam Shepherd and director Roger Bobb on the set of Lifetime's *Christmas Everyday*.

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A BOOM IN FAITH AND FAMILY

But for many producers, the label "faith-based" feels limiting. They emphasize that these stories don't have to be overtly religious. Instead, they highlight universal values like hope, resilience, family, community and perseverance.

"I don't tag myself as a faith-based producer. I'm a producer who happens to be a woman of faith. I call this inspirational content," says Dr. Holly Davis Carter, who has been steadily building a career around faith-focused storytelling. Now, as studios and streamers race to court audiences with inspirational stories, she's in more demand than ever.

"I've always done faith-focused content, even when it wasn't popular," Carter says. "Now that it's getting popular, I'm like, 'Here I am! I've been doing this my entire career.'"

Carter has become one of the most sought-after producers in the faith and family space. As president and CEO of Relevé Entertainment and MergeTV, she has deals to develop faith-based projects for Lifetime and Hulu. Merge TV is her own streaming platform, which is available through In The Black Network.

In 2020, *The Clark Sisters: First Ladies of Gospel*, a Lifetime original movie that Carter executive produced, became the network's highest-rated original in years. Next up, Carter is working with Lifetime to develop a slate of movies inspired by *The Ten Commandments.*

Like Carter, Maddox considers himself a storyteller. "The films I do get pegged as faith or Christian, which is fine, but they're more storytelling about family structures, looking at inspirational moments, redemptive themes, and trying to find the heart language of an audience." Maddox credits the recent boom with creating more opportunities. "We're starting to see a little bit more of an openness, which is exciting for me personally. I've got a whole lot of productions I can pitch now because of *House of David* and other hits."

Some producers are reimagining existing projects to fit within the faith-based space. Veteran producer Danielle von Zerneck had been developing a film about nurse Nichole Jolly, a real-life hero of the 2018 Camp Fire, when she learned that Lifetime was looking for content for its new faith-based film slate.

"We hadn't initially thought to focus on Nichole's faith, but we realized how important Nichole's faith is to her story," says von Zerneck. "We didn't just slap a faith-based label on it. Her faith was there from the beginning, but we just brought it to the surface, which the real Nichole was happy about." *Faith in the Flames: The Nichole Jolly Story* premiered on the network in July 2025.

Academy Award-winning filmmaker Richard Trank, who spent decades at the Simon Wiesenthal Center producing Jewish-themed films for Moriah Films, recently launched Sea Point Films and Media with a similar goal. The films he makes aren't necessarily about religion.

"We're telling stories to inspire people and to attract a big general audience. We didn't just set out to make films for Jewish people," says Trank, whose documentary *Never Stop Dreaming: The*

Life and Legacy of Shimon Peres was acquired as a Netflix Original in 2022.

FINANCING FAITH

The business model for faith-based content often breaks from the Hollywood norm, relying less on studio financing and more on mission-driven investors or grassroots crowdfunding. Some productions are fully funded by fans, who vote on which projects move forward—a strategy that's proven successful for Utah-based Angel Studios, home to 1.6 million paying members of its Angel Guild.

Through his company Reserve Entertainment, producer Darren Moorman has worked with Angel Studios on multiple projects, including 2024's *Sight*, a true story of a Chinese immigrant who became a world-renowned eye surgeon. "I like the Angel Studios model because their audience tells them in advance what they want to see," says Moorman. In addition to a limited theatrical release, *Sight* is available to stream on Angel, Angel Studio's streaming service.

Across the ecosystem, many faith-driven films are powered by grassroots support from church groups, nonprofits, and believers aligned with particular messages. "On the nonprofit side, you've got individuals and foundations that might want to get a faith message out into the public," says Maddox, who executive produced the independent film *The American Miracle* with funding from the Patterns of Evidence Foundation. Another example: the Come and See Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that is funding the sequel to *The Chosen*.

"From a funding standpoint, faith-based investors are still out there," says Trank, whose company has three documentaries in the works—two in production, *Always 28* and *The Road Home*, and another in development, *Toto & Coco*, which is simultaneously being developed as a narrative project.

For *Always 28*, Trank said he has partnered with a nonprofit, Operation Benjamin, which is dedicated to memorializing the Jewish soldiers who fought in U.S. wars. The film is about the efforts to bring a Jewish-American soldier's body home. The Anti-Defamation League is backing *The Road Home*, a feature-length documentary written and directed by Trank, about Israeli life after October 7.

"They might not expect huge returns. They're motivated more by impact and message," says Trank, who says the film will have an educational impact campaign.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN ANGEL

Above: Robert Kessel, Amber Sealey, Daniel Stiepleman, Peter Saraf and Dan Angel with their 2025 Peabody Award for *Out of My Mind*.

Right: Angel on the set of *If I Run* with star Kat Graham and Fezziwig Studios partner Barbara Fisher.

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Budgets for faith-based films vary widely, but the genre often benefits from a fiercely loyal fan base—audiences eager to spread the word and, in some cases, help finance the projects themselves. An engaged audience helps to reduce marketing costs because the campaigns rely on word of mouth and

church and nonprofit promotions.

Moorman saw modest theatrical box office returns for 2025's *Green and Gold* ($1.7 million), a story about a farmer who bets on the Green Bay Packers to help save his farm, released theatrically by Fathom Entertainment.

"We didn't spend much on P&A, and we had some amazing partners (including the Green Bay Packers and Midwest burger chain Culver's) that sponsored the film and helped to market it," says Moorman. *Green and Gold* is now streaming on Angel as part of a larger deal. Though Moorman won't reveal the film's budget, it was likely in the $1 million to $2 million range.

Part of the appeal of the faith-based model comes down to economics. "We're not making $100 million movies," says producer Dan Angel, president and CEO of Fezziwig Studios. "We make them for a price, with a built-in audience and a recognizable star—and that makes them almost impossible to fail."

But recognizable stars cost money, so these projects are not made for $1 million, either. Though Angel won't share numbers, sources say midbudget faith-based films like these have budgets in the $10 million range—or more if they feature recognizable stars. Lifetime faith and Christmas movies generally fall within the $1 million to $4 million range, according to one producer, noting that most faith-based films don't require expensive special effects or far-flung shooting locations.

Dan Angel recently wrapped *A Dog's Perfect Christmas* for Netflix's Christmas 2026 slate. The story, an expansion of the hit *A Dog's Purpose* brand, attracted name stars, headlined by Mary Steenburgen and Dennis Quaid.

"A lot of the stories are true stories about people of faith, but we're not hitting you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable. We're not trying to preach to audiences," says Angel, who executive produced *Rescued by Ruby* (2022), a Netflix hit based on a

Above: Ahmos Hassan (third from right) at the 2024 Burbank Film Festival with the cast and crew of *Cash for Gold*.

Right: Hassan on the set of *Cash for Gold* with lead actor, writer and codirector Deborah Puette.

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true story about a state trooper and his rescue dog.

COMFORT CONTENT FOR CHRISTMAS

"There's a built-in appeal for Christmas content," says von Zerneck, who says she's proud to have executive produced the first Christmas movie centered on a lesbian relationship for Lifetime, *Under the Christmas Tree* (2021).

As with many Christmas movies, it's not overtly religious. Set in Maine, the film focuses less on any religious aspects of the holidays and more on romance, eggnog, and the challenge of seeking out the perfect tree, all while finding romance. "Christmas content is something you can watch with your great aunt, your dad, and your kids. People are stressed and looking for comfort," says von Zerneck.

Carter, who recently executive produced *Christmas Everyday* with Grammy-winning singer-actor Brandy Norwood for Lifetime, wants to provide comfort while also "giving the audience a good story with values—with redemption, with entertainment, and with a message."

A film doesn't need to be a Christian story, per se, to be set during Christmas. For example, the 2025 independent film *Cash for Gold*.

"Some people joke that it's a Muslim Christmas movie because it's a Christmas movie with significant Muslim characters. But there's no reason that someone who isn't Muslim is going to think 'this film wasn't made for me,'" says Ahmos Hassan, a Muslim American producer who launched Chariot Entertainment in 2017 to produce content featuring Muslim characters beyond Hollywood's go-to portrayals of terrorists and taxi drivers.

"There's been a misconception of Muslims for a long time," says Ahmos, who hopes that his films can help to make a small difference. "The universal way we can reach each other is through well-told stories that have faith within them. As long as it's not promoting divisiveness, then you achieved something—forgive me if this sounds corny—to make the world a better place," he said.

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Other religious holidays and stories stemming from traditions can make for compelling cinema, and faith-friendly storytelling seems to travel well. Producer Namit Malhotra is encouraged by the worldwide success of *RRR*, which, though not a faith film per se, relies in part on concepts from sacred Hindu literature.

Malhotra is the executive producer of the two-part film *Ramayana*, based on the Hindu epic, which will bow globally in time for Diwali 2026. It will likely be the most expensive film ever produced in India, and Malhotra expects it to appeal to audiences worldwide.

"This isn't a presentation of religion. This is a presentation of culture," says Malhotra. "Spirituality is the cornerstone of Indian culture. You get a point of view that goes beyond the obvious and beyond logic."

Malhotra says he wants the film to serve as a salve for the world during a challenging time. "Beyond making an epic that promises all the spectacle and entertainment and cinematic storytelling at its best, what's more important is that there is a whole ingrained spirituality," he adds. "I feel good about what we're trying to bring to the world."

WITH OPPORTUNITY COMES CHALLENGE

Despite the momentum, insiders warn that the faith-based boom isn't a guaranteed gold mine. "From a business standpoint, it might look attractive," says Angel, "but it's still like pushing a boulder up a hill. You have to do it for a price, or with IP or a known star, to get buyers to say yes."

Despite the possibility of built-in viewership or promotional partners, there are no shortcuts with faith-based projects. "You still have to do the heavy lifting and produce it like any other movie—follow best practices, secure funding, make the film, get it distributed, and find your audience," says Maddox.

Still, in uncertain times, the demand for faith-filled storytelling is only growing. "People right now need hope and inspiration," says Carter. "They need stories that remind them what's possible." ■