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Sunday's Cinema Feature: Church Congregations Renting Theaters

By David Cho
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The marquee outside the Regal Countryside Cinemas in Sterling reads "X2: X-Men United." But inside, rock music blares and the big screen in Theater 14 is displaying not action-figure heroes but lyrics about Jesus. For an hour or so each Sunday morning, the sound of worship displaces the soundtracks of Hollywood in this unlikely setting.

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Donations are collected in a large popcorn container during New Life Christian Church services at the Regal Countryside Cinemas. (Photos Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post)

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From their cushioned stadium seating, members of New Life Christian Church call on God, lifting their hands in prayer while a live band leads them in song. Later, Dan Smith, one of the pastors, gets up and puts on a show. He has a special performance prepared—a rap—and then tells Bible stories with a Gen-X twist.

"David's the Mac-Daddy," he says. "He leaves the States; there's an FBI search for him. Now David's on the run."

From the sticky floors to the buckets used to collect monetary offerings, New Life is bringing God to the box office.

And soon He could be coming to a theater near you.

From Annapolis to Georgetown to Sterling and beyond, churches are finding a home near the big screen. Regal Entertainment Group, owner of the largest theater chain in the country, started the year with 10 churches meeting in its auditoriums. Now it has 50.

The venture has shown so much potential that company officials are looking for ways to attract more congregations, said Ray Nutt, executive vice president of Regal's marketing division.

In the past, churches might rent theater space but only until they could afford a building of their own. But now there's

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a trend of congregations moving into cinema multiplexes because the locations are well known in their communities and the atmosphere is more appealing to people who consider traditional churches intimidating -- or boring, leaders say.

Church at the Mall, for instance, moved into Crown Theaters at Annapolis Mall last month, leaving behind the red-brick, white-steeple church it built in 1965. Attendance had been dipping for two decades and was down to about 60 people, said Senior Pastor Bill Chamberlin, but it started picking up again just two weeks after the move to the mall.

"Our motto is, 'Change the way you think about church,' " he said. "It was evident to us that people that we want to reach out to feel very uncomfortable about coming into a traditional building."

Many theater churches have been successful in drawing young adults by emphasizing a spiritual experience over religious rituals. To that end, traditional hymns have been replaced by Christian rock, and sermons also dip into pop culture, for example by exploring biblical themes in hit movies or television shows.

"We try to bridge a cultural gap that a lot of people have with the church today," said David Drake, an associate pastor of New Life, a nondenominational church. Holding services in a traditional church setting "doesn't fit a casual-dress, rock-and-roll church," he said. "We don't want people to have preconceived notions . . . that church is stuffy."

For multiplex owners, hosting churches makes financial sense.

"On Sunday mornings when movies aren't playing, why not? It's just more money for theaters," said Lynn Marschke, who heads the special events division for Loews Cineplex, adding that he's been fielding lots of inquiries from pastors.

Theater chains are always alert to opportunities to make money during the hours when moviegoers are usually elsewhere, Nutt said. On a Tuesday evening in October, for instance, singer Tom Petty kicked off the release of his new CD with a concert in Los Angeles that was broadcast live in 40 Regal cinemas nationwide. Tickets were \$10 and the showing drew enough fans to fill about 40 percent of the seats on what is traditionally a slow night at movie houses, Nutt said.

Using two-way broadcast technology, Regal also hosted 3,300 students for a special showing of the Titanic documentary "Ghosts of the Abyss" in 13 cities last month. A student at each site was able to ask the producer, James Cameron, a question about the movie, while NBC's Katie Couric moderated from New York.

But churches remain the most unusual way that theaters are diversifying.

The Rev. Mark Batterson, who leads the 600-member National Community Church at the theaters in Union Station and is about to launch a second cinema church in the Georgetown or Ballston area, says the multiplex is the right place to be. The theater is a popular gathering spot for young people, and many of

the films they see there shape how they think, he said.

Churches, too, "want to be in that marketplace of ideas," he said. "A generation ago, it was a given that churches would rent facilities until they could buy or build a permanent building. The reverse is happening in our generation. Churches are moving back into the marketplace."

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