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## **Contra Costa Times Christian clergy wild about 'Narnia'**

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For churches across the country, this is the weekend of "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

It began last night with midnight screenings and continues through Sunday, with pastors weaving the classic C.S. Lewis tale into their sermons.

Buoyed by the success of "The Passion of the Christ," which banked \$600 million and proved the enormous profitability of direct marketing to Christians, Walt Disney Pictures hired agencies to market "Narnia," which opens today, to the same audience.

In addition to sermons, "Narnia" is popping up in Sunday school, youth group all-nighters and singles events. Outreach Media Group Inc., the sponsor of a San Diego sermon contest, is even offering \$1,000 and a trip to London to the winning pastor.

"It's a great group to market because they just run with it," says Pete Sealey, a UC Berkeley marketing professor and former president of marketing and distribution for Columbia Pictures. "They're so hungry for films."

Sealey calls Disney's efforts a "below-the-radar marketing program," with less than 10 percent of the \$150 million epic's marketing budget going to direct church mailers and religious outreach programs.

While Mel Gibson's film was a gritty and literal retelling of the biblical story, "Narnia" and the six books that follow it have a wider, more secular appeal.

They tell a softer, more allegorical story of Christ -- His crucifixion and resurrection -- through a messianic lion named Aslan.

"It's told in such a beautiful, poetic way that people who wouldn't normally go to church would see this movie," says Shawn Robinson, senior pastor of Clayton Community Church in Clayton.

Robinson's church rented out a 440-seat Concord theater for a Sunday matinee, and it is nearly sold out. His Sunday morning message series, "The Untamed Jesus," uses illustrations from the book to tell the Christmas story in time for the holiday.

He calls "Narnia" a "God-honoring movie, not a slick marketing campaign." But, he admits, the hype doesn't hurt.

"It says that the story of Christ has value for the world," Robinson says. "It's a message of substance."

Substance is key for Jane DeYoung, who selects films for her Christian singles group, True North Fellowship, and its 700 members. The group will see "Narnia" for its monthly Matinee and a Mocha event.

"Lewis' work is profound, entertaining and forces you to think," says DeYoung, of Walnut Creek.

And it doesn't hurt that it's getting generally enthusiastic reviews from critics.

Once required grade-school reading and a timeless favorite a la the Tolkien trilogy, "Narnia" is sure to entertain crowds with its vivid imagery and soft-speaking, Shrek-like giants, courtesy of director Andrew Adamson.

As a Christian and a film buff, DeYoung seeks movies that "push people's boundaries and challenge Christians to think about how they're living out their beliefs." She counts "Dead Man Walking," Antonio Banderas' "The Body" and even "Fight Club" as Christian films.

"Back in the 1950s movies could be overtly Christian and they'd sell because everyone was going to church," says DeYoung, citing "The Bells of Saint Mary's," with its "snowflakes and church bells," as a traditional Christian movie. "That's not the case anymore."

Kevin Murphy, senior pastor of Saint Matthew Lutheran Church, has referenced the karmic "Pay It Forward" in his teachings. For "Narnia," the Walnut Creek pastor has planned activities through February.

"I think churches are becoming much more culture-savvy," says Murphy, a frequent university lecturer on Lewis. "We are looking at things that we can latch on to and communicate how the faith works for us. Lewis' work is a good example of that."

Next month, Murphy will lead a series on the seven years, from 1950 to 1957, that Lewis, an atheist-turned-Christian, spent writing the "Narnia" books. Murphy's Sunday morning lectures, "The Lion and Judah in Never Never Land," will help his advent congregation prepare for Christmas.

"I love the idea of the Christian life as an adventure, and that is why we use journey language so often here at Saint Matthew," says Murphy, referring to the adventures of the "Narnia" characters. "Lewis helps us see the adventurous side of faith and the importance of relying on others. What happened in Narnia has much to say to us right here in Walnut Creek."

The church rented out 200 seats for a Sunday matinee of the film. But Murphy, a fan of the books long before he ever led a congregation, couldn't wait that long. Last night, the pastor and five buddies joined thousands of children for a midnight screening.