

'Passion' Sparking Church Interest

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By KEN KUSMER, Associated Press Writer

The release of "The Passion of the Christ" is just days away, but anticipation is so strong that churches from Maine to California have struck deals to see the film in their local theaters ahead of time.

At the East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, 2,400 tickets to Monday and Tuesday showings of Mel Gibson's graphic crucifixion drama disappeared quickly. The film premieres Wednesday — Ash Wednesday on the Christian calendar.

Senior Minister Derek Duncan didn't blanch at the \$23,000 cost, which the church picked up: He saw a unique opportunity to spread the message of Jesus. "I believe our society is so visual, so if you can see it — present it in that way — it might move you in a deeper way," Duncan said.

Other evangelicals have had the same idea, encouraged by the proliferation of testimonials, Web sites and books plugging the movie. Some pastors and Christian radio stations contracted with theaters for private screenings — many aimed specifically at conversion — well before the release date.

They're getting sneak peeks while interest builds in the \$25-million film, which Gibson co-wrote, directed and financed. His Icon Productions and distributor Newmarket Films said this week they've added 800 additional theaters to the original 2,000 to meet demand for advance tickets.

Merchandising deals are helping to stoke the fervor.

Bob Siemon Designs, producer of millions of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets, is selling "Passion" lapel pins, key rings and inch-long nail pendants. Already, it has distributed 1 million "Passion" witness cards, inscribed with scriptural verses, said Dwight Robinson, a spokesman for the Santa Ana., Calif.-based company.

The Christian Booksellers Association screened the film Feb. 5 at a meeting in Indianapolis, and displays of "Passion"-related books, jewelry, artwork and other items have begun appearing in member stores. The CBA Web site proclaims "Gibson's Film May Be a Precursor to Revival."

It's a vision that pastors like Duncan embrace. Those attending his church's three screenings, one Monday and two Tuesday at a nearby megaplex, will see a one-minute trailer with a personal message from Duncan before the "Passion" rolls.

As they leave, the moviegoers will be handed fliers inviting them to East 91st Street Christian, where a series of sermons over the next seven Sundays, concluding with Easter, will discuss themes such as the resurrection, the divinity of Jesus and the love of God.

"Sometimes we water down the story of the Bible in terms of Christ's suffering and what he went through," Duncan said.

Duncan is not among the thousands of pastors who have already seen the film — but he trusts the endorsements of those who have, including the Rev. Billy Graham and pastor-author Rick Warren.

"The momentum behind this thing is incredible," said Duncan, a professed movie-lover.

In one respect, the marketing of "Passion" to evangelicals and other Christians is no different than that of other films. Marketing is launched "initially with a core audience, people who have an

affinity for the story and whose lives are affected by it," said A. Larry Ross, a spokesman for Graham who's also working with Icon Productions to promote the film.

On the other hand, a DVD sent to many pastors encourages them to build evangelization efforts around the film. Among its outreach ideas are block ticket purchases, "Passion"-related sermons, and distributing copies of the gospels to those who see the film.

Icon also has granted licenses for "Passion"-related merchandise, including a 160-page coffee-table book of movie stills, film-related framed art, and the International Bible Society's New Testament with images from the movie.

"A lot of Christians don't go to movies because they're not happy with the moral values that are being portrayed. There's not enough wholesome films out there," said Robinson of Bob Siemon Designs. "People are just waiting for that movie that they can go see."