

The Selling of Evangelical Christianity

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Larry Ross' A. Larry Ross Communications brings Christian marketing into the twenty-first century

"Moses stood there on top of a cliff, and as long as he held up his arms, the children of Israel won. Well, after a while he got tired, so there were two men that came and held up Moses' arms so they could win the battle. That's my job--to hold up the arms of the man of God, like Billy Graham or Rick Warren, in the media." -- Larry Ross, *New York Times Magazine*, April 16, 2006

You've probably never heard of him or his public relations company, but you've certainly heard of many of his clients. Over the years, he has represented such heavy hitters as the Rev. Billy Graham, Pastor Rick Warren of Lake Forest, California's Saddleback Church, Texas's African American MegaChurch Pastor T.D. Jakes, and the up-and-coming Ohio Pastor, Rod Parsley, the head of Ohio's Center for Moral Clarity.

He has worked with the Promise Keepers, the international men's ministry, as well as such movies as "Left Behind," a film based on the popular series of apocalyptic novels of the same name, "The Prince of Egypt," and actor/director Mel Gibson's blockbuster, "The Passion of the Christ."

He is Larry Ross and he heads up the Dallas, Texas-based A. Larry Ross Communications (website). For more than 25 years, Ross has been marketing conservative evangelical Christianity.

"In 1981," the *New York Times* reported, "Ross began working with the evangelist Billy Graham and trailblazing the new world of Christian P.R." After a tape of anti-Semitic remarks Graham had made to then President Richard Nixon became public, Ross "counseled Graham through the...crisis."

Ross also made sure that Graham's name never surfaced during the assorted televangelism scandals of the 1980s that involved Jim Bakker and his wife Tammie Faye, the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart, and other lesser-known preachers.

Ross is still working with Graham: In early April, when the Reverend's book, "The Journey," made the New York Times extended best-seller list, "Ross could be heard pitching him as the oldest author ever on the list."

The twenty-first century is a golden age for Christian-based entertainment: "The Passion of the Christ," which took in over \$370 million at the box office, "The Chronicles of Narnia," which took in more than \$290 million domestically last winter, and Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" books, which have sold more than 50 million copies, are the most tangible examples of evangelical blockbusters.

In addition, according to the New York Times, "Christian music now racks up \$700 million in sales annually. In 2004, sales of religious books reached \$1.9 billion. Packaged Facts, a market-research firm, predicted that Christian products will generate \$9.5 billion in sales by 2010."

And now, there are Christian-oriented video games: In early May, at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, "Left Behind: Eternal Forces," made its video game debut. The game "features plenty of biblical smiting, albeit with high-tech weaponry as players battle the forces of the Antichrist in a smoldering world approaching Armageddon," the Los Angeles Times reported. The game is based on the best selling series of apocalyptic novels of the same name, written by Jerry Jenkins, and conceived of the Rev. Tim LaHaye, a longtime Religious right leader.

"'Left Behind' has the Antichrist, the end of the world, the apocalypse," said co-creator Jeffrey S. Frichner. "It's got all the Christian stuff, and it's still got all the cool stuff."

"The reason that I think this game has a chance is that it's not particularly preachy," said Michael Pachter, an analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities. "I will say some of the dialogue is pretty lame -- people saying, 'Praise the Lord' after they blow away the bad guys. I think they're overdoing it a bit. But the message is OK."

"We hope teenagers like the game," LaHaye commented. "Our real goal is to have no one left behind."

"There's an audience here," Larry Ross told the Los Angeles Times. "In addition to the youth audience -- that's the primary target -- there are parents who are concerned about what their children are exposed to and are encouraged by products that are biblically based," Ross said. "I would assume, if there is violence, it's the cosmic struggle of good versus evil, not gratuitous violence."

Founded to give the 'Christian message' a fair hearing in the 'mainstream media'

According to its website, A. Larry Ross Communications "is a full-service media and public relations agency founded in 1994 to 'restore faith in media,' provide 'value-added P.R. that defines values' and give Christian messages relevance and meaning in mainstream media.

"ALRC assists Christian-focused organizations, associations, ministries and churches in telling their stories through the Christian and secular media in the context of traditional news values.

"For more than a decade, ALRC has remained the nation's most-respected firm in Christian-focused communications. The Agency operates at the intersection of faith and culture, specializing in crossover communications projects and processes emanating from or targeted to the Christian market -- both Protestant and Catholic."

While Christian-based PR firms aren't new phenomena, Ross's group is among the few that are rising to the top in a very crowded field. Mark DeMoss, who worked with the Rev. Jerry Falwell for eight years before starting the DeMoss Group in Atlanta in 1991, also "enjoys comparable status," the New York Times noted.

And while the groups, campaigns and individuals represented by Ross' client list are prestigious, it is "the Kingdom of God itself [that] is a client of sorts," the New York Times pointed out. "Publicity, marketing and branding are his ministry. So the real question becomes, Why does God need someone to sell him?"

With the culture wars cutting a mighty swath through Hollywood these days, Ross is picking up a number of clients. Paul Lauer's Motive Entertainment, which "orchestrated the marketing" of "The Passion," enlisted 15 firms, including Ross's, to handle different tasks. Jonathan Bock's Grace Hill Media worked on developing the marketing strategy for "Narnia," and "other marketing firms include[ing] the Internet-focused BuzzPlant, based in Tennessee, and Renegade Idea Group, out of Texas.

According to the New York Times, Ross "claims that in the past decade smaller firms have emerged that handle Christian P.R., which he differentiates from marketing (his firm handles both)... [he also] works with many of them and acts as a sort of Vernon Jordan of the Bible Belt, making introductions and forging strategic alliances."

After working for 13-years at Walter Bennett Communications, where he first began working with Billy Graham, in 1994, Ross, and his wife Autumn, took what she characterized as a "bungee jump for God," and opened up its Dallas-based firm.

The company currently has 13 staff members and carries somewhere close to 20 to 30 clients at any given time. "Ross says that he rarely chases after a client and is able to operate on the principle of attraction, relying on good word of mouth and referrals to win clients," the New York Times pointed out. "Ross, quoting Autumn, characterizes his clients as 'anybody that we will be with in heaven someday.' While he declines to be specific, he does admit to annual billings 'in the seven figures.'"

During the past few years, Ross, whose "religion is conspicuously central to his work and life," has had an impressive run: When the story of Ashley Smith -- the Atlanta woman who had her 15 minutes of fame after reading passages from Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life" to her captor, an escaped murder suspect named Brian Nichols -- began to go south when it was revealed that Smith had also given Nichols crystal meth, "Ross helped Warren respond to this mainstream reaction by emphasizing their story, which, in the words of David Chrzan, Rick Warren's chief of staff was that "God can use anybody. Here, God used a tweaked-out speed freak to get a guy to realize he'd done something wrong and turn himself in."

Ross has successfully mainstreamed the image of Bishop T.D. Jakes, the pastor of the Potter's House in South

Dallas, one of the fastest-growing churches in the country, who is also behind the "Woman, Thou Art Loosed" novel, film and gatherings, and who created the Metroplex Economic Development Corporation, which sponsors homeownership conferences and organizes training sessions for would-be entrepreneurs.

"After listening to hours and hours" of Jakes' sermons, "Ross realized that what might appeal to a broader audience were Jakes' efforts to economically empower African-American youth -- Jakes was a business story, in other words, the New York Times reported. "Not long after that, Jakes landed a Page 1 profile in the Wall Street Journal. It was the preacher's first major national exposure."

Somehow, Ross is able to square his rationalizing of anti-semitic statements expressed by the Rev. Billy Graham's in his White House conversation with Richard Nixon, and being able to stay on message after the Ashley Smith kidnapping story broke down, with his deeply held religious beliefs. Although the New York Times pointed out that he "takes pains to distance himself from the more unsavory associations with publicists," it appears that he has mastered the art of all public relations professionals: crank out a good yarn for your clients, keep your clients out of harm's way from the media, apologize only when absolutely necessary and then, change the conversation.