

DOCUMENTARY FILM “LET THE CHURCH SAY” ADDRESSES KEEPING THE BLACK CHURCH RELEVANT

BY NANCY B. HOWARD

As a marketing and communications professional, I learned to use the transformative power of storytelling to weave narratives and information into impactful content and messaging for a living. As a Christian filmmaker, I wanted my work to allow people to experience the power of visual media to not only inform, but also transform, heal, and inspire — making compelling stories come to life.

I talked with rising director Rafiq Jordan Nabali about his experience as an Adventist filmmaker and the making of his documentary, “Let the Church Say,” which I also had the honor of producing. The movie was filmed in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The film’s premise explores the question, “Is the Black Church dead?” and provides a unique voice and presentation to the discussion of modern-day social justice and the role the Black church has and continues to play.

Howard: What led you to filmmaking as a career?

Nabali: Growing up, I used to play with toys and action figures and would make complex, elaborate back stories for them. Storytelling was a core part of how I played and expressed myself. I also enjoyed creative writing, music, and other arts in school, and began to think about what I could do for a career that encompassed all the arts in which I was interested. And, filmmaking was the answer.

Howard: Did you study film production in college?

Nabali: Yes. I graduated from SCAD (Savannah College of Art & Design) in 2021. I had previously been rejected when I applied to Florida State University (FSU), which was my first-choice school and one of the top 15 film schools in the country. I did not get in on my first or second try. Though I was disappointed, I do not think it was an acci-

dent at all; God had a plan. Right after receiving that second rejection from FSU, I learned that SCAD had a highly regarded film program in Atlanta. I figured it might be important for me to go to a place where filmmaking is booming and graduate from there. I remember the first verse that came to mind when I got my acceptance letter to SCAD in 2017. I often repeated Psalms 37:4-5: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this.” God’s word came alive for me that day. Going to SCAD was something I really wanted after being denied going to FSU twice; it just meant so much to finally get a yes.

Howard: How did “Let the Church Say” come about?

Nabali: It started as my short student thesis film at SCAD. I had a strong interest in learning more about the Black

“LET THE CHURCH SAY” WAS WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY RAFIQ JORDAN NABALI, AND PRODUCED BY JOE HOWELL AND NANCY B. HOWARD, MEMBERS OF CHURCHES IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC CONFERENCE. TO VIEW THE TRAILER AND FOLLOW PROGRESS OF THE FILM, VISIT LETTHECHURCH.COM. #KEEPCHURCHRELEVANT



Rafiq Jordan Nabali



Joe Howell



Nancy B. Howard

church of the past and comparing it with the institutions of the present. As a result, we created this film that takes the audience on a journey through the history of the Black church and uncovers answers to critical questions surrounding the church’s impact on social justice today. The purpose is to provide a unique exploration of the vital connections between race, religion, and activism.

Howard: Tell me more about your story in the film. I know your grandmother was an influence that you referred to.

Nabali: My grandmother was very important to me. I grew up in a really religious family. As the matriarch of our family, she was a traditional, praying grandmother and a great example for me of what a Christian is. Her significance

is interwoven within the story. I wanted to provide that connection between the loss of a spiritual head and the potential loss of a spiritual institution. The loss of that leadership is necessary for spiritual growth. This film can be seen as an opportunity to point out the need to rebuild that connection, but also to inspire church leadership to be more active in the lives of youth, in the lives of people in the community.

Howard: How has promotion of the film been going?

Nabali: We were prayerful every step of the way, and we saw the Lord work out miracles to get the film made, and raise funding and support we needed for early post-production. We submitted to a few film festivals and were honored that

the Lord saw fit to allow us to not only be accepted as an official selection for four festivals so far, but to win an Audience Choice Award in the Documentary category at the International Christian Film Festival in Orlando, Florida. People have been moved by this film. The feedback has been phenomenal.

Howard: How is this film different from other projects about the Black church?

Nabali: Filmmaking is a community effort, even when all the cameras are off. Early 2021, when we discovered Henry Louis Gates Jr. had released a docuseries focused on the Black church, it was a little discouraging for all of us. It felt like our film was somehow less important or would not make the impact we hoped it

would. But, a candid conversation with a filmmaker friend of mine helped put things back into perspective for me. He reminded me that my story was unique and that no one else could tell it. I believe God used my filmmaker community and that conversation with my friend to encourage me in that moment, and perhaps if he hadn't, this now award-winning film would have stayed on the shelf.

Howard: Share some of your challenges as an Adventist filmmaker.

Nabali: One of my biggest challenges is keeping the Sabbath while also being an active filmmaker. I've had conversations with industry professionals who told me it wouldn't work, that nobody is going to want to work with or hire someone who can't be available at all times. I refuse to believe that. I believe that God is in control and that even in this industry, which is primarily secular, He can open doors for me to still succeed. And He has. It's also challenging trying to find my boundaries around what projects I will and won't work on.

It's very difficult going to a film school like SCAD, which is not Christian by any means, although there were other Christians there. We even had Adventists that I connected with there. Sometimes you

build strong friendships with people that don't have the same world view as you, and you want to support them creatively in their endeavors. Unfortunately, there may come a time when their worldview conflicts with yours — and I never want to place my career above God.

There was also the difficulty of working with a six-day work week instead of seven. I think the industry definitely makes it seem like there's just so much to do that you need to be working all seven days. But I'm giving God praise because, throughout my career, I've tried my best to be consistent with keeping the Sabbath, and I have not lost anything. In fact, in a lot of ways, I have gained more than some people I know who have always worked all seven days.

Howard: Any last words?

Nabali: I think that filmmaking is an incredible way to spread the gospel. I'm very excited about the future of my career and the opportunities that God will open up for me. And, for filmmakers or creatives who feel like it would be too difficult to do what God is calling them to do, I would say trust God and move forward in faith. Your story is important. Who you are and the experiences that God has given you are important to share for the

benefit of other people and for the growth of the Kingdom. I know we're in a saturated market right now with social media; everybody's saying something. But, the gospel is always going to be relevant. It's always most impactful when we share it personally in our own creative way that God gives us to share. 📌

Nancy B. Howard is a marketing and communications professional in Atlanta, Georgia.

Film and television industry professionals such as Jennifer Hyde of Savannah College of Art & Design (SCAD) in Atlanta, Georgia, called it "Gorgeous, smart, and emotional, with terrific writing and an authentic and intimate presence." Author and speaker Lorna Blake said, "The showcase of academics alongside recording artists, pastors, spoken word artists, and activists sharing their stories makes for a truly powerful film..." Nichole R. Phillips, Ph.D., associate professor of black studies at Emory University, called it "Refreshing, unique, exquisite, and beautifully done."

