

FILMS, FAITH, AND FELLOWSHIP

by Carolyn MacDonald, All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, Kansas City, MO

There are many quality documentaries available on significant issues. However, running a public film series has several challenging tasks, including how to handle screening rights and screening fees. It is very important to honor copyright laws. It is ethical, legal, and supports independent filmmakers who make the kinds of films we may not be able to see in commercial theaters.

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Kansas City, Missouri hosts a weekly documentary series with feature-length films followed by a facilitated discussion. Using a 9 ft by 12 ft screen with a digital projector connected to a DVD/VCR player with audio run through our sound system, we reach an audience of 25 to 75 people with a record of 275. More than half of the attendees usually are non-church members. The series is run by two volunteer co-facilitators and operates with no church budget, although we do accept donations. We almost always buy rather than rent the documentaries. The occasional blockbuster, generous donor, or help from another All Souls or community group has kept us going financially for four years.

If suitable equipment or space are unavailable or public screening rights and screening fees are not funded, consider asking an interested member to borrow a DVD from a library or rent or purchase a copy as an individual. Then the person can invite a few friends over for a small “house party” to watch and discuss the movie.

However, if your church wants to show documentaries more publicly, it is necessary to get screening rights. Some films are available for purchase with a two to four-tiered price structure, either from a distributor or sometimes from the filmmaker or producer. The least expensive rate is for home or individual use. In most cases a church can qualify for the grassroots organization rate, the cheapest organization rate. Usually this includes public screening rights at the church, but unless specifically stated otherwise, assume that no admission can be charged. Most agreements permit collecting donations and selling refreshments to help defray costs which typically range from \$35-\$80.

When a film is not carried by a distributor, it can be a challenge to track down how to get screening rights. Many films have an official site. A good place to start is with Internet Movie Data Base (www.imdb.com), which includes most of the films you will want to show, including a link to the official site. Another option is Google. Often when you reach a site, you will need to contact them for the public screening pricing. Most of the time there is contact information for the producer or the director. Send an email providing information about how you want to use the film. Occasionally you will be told to just buy the DVD and then show it with no additional fee. Or you may be asked to buy the DVD plus pay a screening fee in the \$35 - \$75 range, or much higher. You may be able to negotiate by offering, for example, to give the donations you receive at the screening, with a certain minimum guaranteed the filmmaker.

There are some church video licensing entities that provide rights for modest annual fees. And some companies rent films that have been shown theatrically for rather high rental fees but that include screening rights. However, neither of these usually works for a church documentary film series. They generally don't have rights for the kinds of films you will want to show, and their licensing agreements usually prohibit publicity about the name of the film, including even in the church newsletter or on the church website.

To illustrate here are some example of films you might want to show that deal with food-related topics:

- 1- Bullfrog Films (www.bullfrogfilms.com) carries many environmental films for educational use such as King Corn (\$79.00). Activist prices are not posted. Instead you must call 1-800-543-3764 and provide information about your church program.
- 2- California Newsreel (www.newsreel.org) distributes globalization films such as Black Gold about coffee (\$49.95). Their website lists a grassroots organization rate in their descriptions and will give that to a church after receiving some simple documentation.
- 3- Future of Food has its own website (www.thefutureoffood.com) and has different prices listed. It is \$100 for a grassroots organization
- 4- The Real Dirt on Farmer John is available at Angelic Organics (www.angelicorganics.com). The DVD is only \$17, but there is an additional fee of \$95 for one time screening rights, or up to \$295 for continuing screening rights.
- 5- How to Save the World: One Man, One Cow, One Planet is available in two versions from Cloud South Films in New Zealand (www.cloudsouthfilms.co.nz). It is \$95, which includes the rights for up to three screenings.

6- The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil, which includes information about small local gardening, is available through Community Solutions (www.communitysolution.org) for \$20. They encourage screenings and don't charge extra for screening rights when there isn't an admission charge.

7- The disc with 7 episodes of the first season of Sierra Club Chronicles is available for \$10 from the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org). Episode 7, Rats to Roses, is a short about small community parks/gardens in NYC. When I wrote and asked for permission to screen at church, they responded by sending us the DVD without charge. We did send a contribution later.

8- PBS Shop for teachers (www.teacher.shop.pbs.org) has many films for sale that are listed as AV items and allow public screening.

As these examples illustrate, each can be a new challenging but rewarding puzzle to solve. Enjoy your documentaries!

Questions? Contact Carolyn by emailing office@uuministryforearth.org with "Documentary Series" in the subject line. ♦