

Christianity, the Brand

HOW **LARRY ROSS**
TOOK 'A BUNGEE JUMP FOR GOD' AND HELPED TURN RELIGIOUS
PUBLIC RELATIONS INTO BIG BUSINESS.

By Strawberry Saroyan

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN WINTERS





It was around noon on a sunny Tuesday last winter at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., and Larry Ross, arguably the top public relations man for Christian clients in America, was presiding over a media briefing on behalf of the church, its pastor, Rick Warren, and his wife, Kay. The occasion was the Warrens' three-day H.I.V./AIDS conference, "Disturbing Voices." When Jim Towey, the director of the Bush administration's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, walked in, Ross acknowledged him and noted that Towey had been the longtime lawyer for Mother Teresa. Then Ross opened the floor to questions.

"Yeah," Warren said into his mike. "I'd like to know why Mother Teresa needed a lawyer." The crowd cracked up. No one answered, but it was the kind of question that might have been asked about Warren himself: Why does Rick Warren need a public relations man?

Of course, in his case, there's an easy explanation. Warren's book "The Purpose-Driven Life" has sold more than 25 million copies, making it the best-selling hardcover book of nonfiction ever published in the United States, and some say Saddleback has more in common with Google or Starbucks, at least in scope, than the typical church. Warren has a public and a brand to manage.

But when you speak to Ross for even a short length of time, it becomes clear that he sees himself as serving more than Rick Warren — or Billy Graham, or the men's ministry Promise Keepers, or films like "The Passion of the Christ" (he has represented them all). The Kingdom of God itself is a client of sorts. Publicity, marketing and branding are his ministry. So the real question becomes, Why does God need someone to sell him?

It is a query Ross has spent the last 25 years answering. In 1981, Ross began working with the evangelist Billy Graham and trailblazing the new world of Christian P.R. Ross has counseled Graham through the Nixon-tapes crisis (Graham was heard voicing anti-Semitic sentiments to the president) and helped keep him squeaky clean during the televangelist scandals of the 80's. And earlier this month, when Graham made the New York Times extended best-seller list with his book "The Journey," Ross could be heard pitching him as the oldest author ever on the list. Ross has also represented T. D. Jakes, the African-American pastor whom Ross says he signed when he was "Bishop Who," and films like the prophetic end-times "Left Behind" series and "The Prince of Egypt." For the latter, an animated movie that came out in 1998, he helped pioneer some of the contemporary church-marketing techniques that were used later to promote Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ." Ross has largely stayed out of politics, but he did sign up Rod Parsley's Center for Moral Clarity in 2004; Parsley, a rising evangelical, is not publicly aligned with a political party, but he worked to mobilize voters in the swing state of Ohio, which went for George Bush in the last election.

Ross is not the sole powerful figure in Christian P.R., but only Mark DeMoss, who worked with Jerry Falwell for eight years before starting the DeMoss Group in Atlanta in 1991, enjoys comparable status. Ross, who is 52, has witnessed — and most likely contributed to — the increased attention to Christianity in the wider culture. He notes that some of the biggest national stories since 9/11 have touched on faith, including Gibson's film, the "values voters" and even Hurricane Katrina ("We're the good news behind the bad news," Ross says, referring to the consolations of faith in the wake of natural disasters, as well as the welcome that religious voices often receive in the press in such situations). And Christian-product markets are expanding rapidly. "The Chronicles of Narnia" took in more than \$290 million at the box office domestically last winter. ("The Passion" grossed \$370 million.) 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, predicts that Christian products will generate \$9.5 billion in sales by 2010. Then there's the Bush factor. "Any time religion is linked to power, attention to religious news increases," says Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association.

In Hollywood, there is Paul Lauer's Motive Entertainment (Lauer orchestrated the marketing of "The Passion" by enlisting 15 firms, including Ross's, to handle different tasks) and Jonathan Bock's Grace Hill Media, whose projects have included "Narnia." Other marketing firms include the Internet-focused BuzzPlant, based in Tennessee, and Renegade Idea Group, out of Texas. 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). Ross works with many of them and acts as a sort of Vernon Jordan of the Bible Belt, making introductions and forging strategic alliances.

ROSS OPENED HIS COMPANY, A. Larry Ross Communications (his first name is Arthur), in 1994, after a 13-year stay at Walter Bennett Communications, where he first began working with Billy Graham. When the agency urged him to focus on expanding a P.R. base that included secular clients because Graham wasn't "the future," Ross and his wife, Autumn, took what was supposed to be a down payment on a house and started a business instead; she calls the step "a bungee jump for God." (Autumn is not involved in the firm's day-to-day business.) Today the Dallas-based firm has 13 staff members and roughly 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. (DeMoss claims to work this way, too, and the two say they are not competitive with each other, although they have represented half a dozen of the same clients at different times.) 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." When asked if a client like Rick Warren helps to underwrite the cost of a client with fewer financial resources, Ross replies, "That's not the way it works." He says the firm bills according to time, with rates varying according to the experience of those assigned to a client.

I visited Ross in Dallas over several days in November. At our first meeting there, he rolled up in a giant black Chevy Avalanche. He is 6-foot-8, and as I took him in, perhaps wide-eyed, he laughed. "I don't do medium," he said in his Texas twang. "Everything is Paul Bunyan-size to me." It was a Sunday, and we were off to his church, Bent Tree Bible Fellowship. Autumn and their oldest son, Harrison, then 17, were appearing in a musical skit during each of Bent's Tree's services that day. Ross, perhaps feeling guilty for being on the road so often, was planning to attend three of them. Later he would tell me that his battle with workaholicism was one of the defining issues of his personal life: "If I was a vacuum-cleaner salesman working 100 hours a week, people would say: 'You're an idiot. You're crazy.' When you're in ministry, they say, 'Praise God.'"

When we arrived, I met Autumn, a big-haired brunette dressed in an emerald green suit, and her and Ross's three sons: Harrison, Richard, then 15, and Cameron, 10. Ross, who is gregarious and jokey — at the Saddleback press conference, he looked at Warren's Hawaiian shirt and remarked, apropos his own, more formal attire, "Out of deference to our hosts, I do have pineapple boxers on" — sang along enthusiastically and took notes when the service hit full swing. Afterward we went backstage, where Autumn was conversing with her fellow volunteers, and the talk turned to what attracted her to Bent Tree. "It allows me to be contemporary, but it's not watered down," she said. "I feel like I'm eating steak every Sunday."

Ross's religion is conspicuously central to his work and life — our second meeting, with his entire staff, started with a prayer — and that is one of the things that draw clients to him. "We're church guys, O.K.?" David Chrzan, Rick Warren's chief of staff, told me. "Media is a totally different animal to us." Chrzan says that Ross has been able to help Warren by providing access to and connections within the world of mainstream media — and also

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through his ability to spin various situations into, well, Christian parables. Take the case of Ashley Smith, the Atlanta woman who became famous last year for reading passages from “The Purpose-Driven Life” to her captor, an escaped murder suspect named Brian Nichols. A problem arose when it came out that Smith had given Nichols crystal methamphetamine. “What did everyone talk about?” Chrzan said. “They talked about her drug use and her giving drugs” to Nichols. Ross helped Warren respond to this mainstream reaction by emphasizing *their* story, which was, in Chrzan’s words: “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 characterizes part of his job as finding the sweet spot where faith and the culture intersect, because religion on its own often isn’t enough, as he sees it, to generate mainstream press. He offers his handling of T. D. Jakes as a typical example. Today Jakes is the pastor of the Potter’s House in South Dallas, one of the fastest-growing churches in the country, with 30,000 members; he is also behind the “Woman, Thou Art Loosed” novel, film and gatherings, and he 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 the pastor’s sermons, Ross realized that what might appeal to a broader audience were Jakes’s efforts to economically empower African-American youth — Jakes was a business story, in other words. Not long after that, Jakes landed a Page 1 profile in *The Wall Street Journal*. It was the preacher’s first major national exposure.

Ross also has an eye for the odd coupling. He booked Rod Parsley, a flamboyant Charismatic Pentecostal and a staple of Christian television, including the Trinity Broadcasting Network (the world’s largest Christian network), on “Dennis Miller” and “Larry King Live.” A client known as Dino, a sort of Liberace in Christian circles who plays a crystal-covered piano, told me that Ross tried to get him onto “Jimmy Kimmel Live,” the late-night talk show, during the holiday season (the two sides couldn’t settle on a date). “Larry thought I might be off the wall enough,” Dino said.

Perhaps the most intensive training that Ross offers is his “media and spokesperson” sessions. These can last as long as two days and usually include several mock interviews, which are taped. Ross encourages his clients to engage the media, but he wants to prepare them for worst-case encounters, so he administers tough questioning. To loosen clients up, he shows them an old “Bob Newhart” episode in which a talk-show host suddenly turns on Newhart. “It’s one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen,” Ross says. He advises clients to avoid ecclesiastical language when addressing the mainstream (“Somebody talks about the Holy Ghost or the Army of God — that sounds like a revolution and it’s coming out of Iran,” says Lawrence Swicegood, who has worked for Ross and DeMoss) and to use metaphors because they stick in people’s minds. Toward the end of a session, Ross looses a “bulldog” interrogator, a role played these days by Giles Hudson, a former writer for the Associated Press, who poses questions ranging from financial queries to “Do homosexuals go to hell?” “Obviously not,” Hudson says is a good response to this challenge. “Each person has their own relationship to Christ. People don’t just go to hell because you’re an alcoholic.” Sometimes Ross and Hudson add a separate, ambush interview. After taking a “break” from a session with Promise Keepers, Ross’s team confronted its president in the reception area, camera crew in tow.

ON A MONDAY MORNING last November, Ross gathered his staff for a devotional around a rectangular table in the firm’s conference room. Ross read a passage about the battle of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, who drew on God’s strength to do battle. “How many times do we, even in our work on behalf of clients, feel like it’s on us to go out there and slay a few dragons or whatever?” he asked. “There’s a difference between doing God’s will and doing our will in God’s name.” A woman in a dark blazer, Roe Ann Estevez, whose clients include Promise Keepers, nodded. After praying, the group broke up for coffee and bagels, laid out in gingham-

lined baskets. I took the opportunity to check out the offices, which occupy a suite on the second floor of a low gray building in a North Dallas office park. Beside the desk of the receptionist, Susan Gromatzky, there was a plaque: “‘When God is your client, eternity is in each account’ — Proverb 16:3.” A nearly footlong brass key rested on a side table; Gromatzky said it was part of Autumn Ross’s collection of keys. Did it refer obliquely to the Kingdom? Gromatzky nodded yes.

Ross’s first meeting that day was at the Dallas Theological Seminary. Ross and Hudson were upbeat when we arrived at the school’s leafy 17-acre campus. A seminary staff member named Robert Riggs greeted us. As we followed him, the subject of press releases came up. “I love the headline that we’ve got for ‘Left Behind,’” Hudson said, referring to the third and most recent in a series of movies based on the popular books about the Second Coming; “Left Behind: World at War” had come out a few weeks earlier. “It talks about ‘The End of America Coming to a Church Near You.’” He and Ross looked amused. (The film’s marketing included having it open in churches instead of theaters last fall.)

Once we were settled in our second conference room of the day, I asked Riggs what his role was. Ross interrupted: “Wait, I thought you were Giles’s parole officer. Isn’t that why we’re here?” The three bantered and waited several minutes for the school’s president, Mark Bailey, to arrive but soon gave up and turned to the first item on the agenda. The seminary was introducing podcasts that would address pop-culture phenomena like “The Da

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Vinci Code” from a Christian point of view, and Ross’s team had put together a press release. “Putting God in the Pod” was its headline.

There was a moment of silence after Riggs read it. He grimaced. “The title of putting God somewhere — it implies that he’s not everywhere,” he said. “Can we do something else?”

Hudson thought about it. “Can we take out ‘putting’? And then it’s just God in the Pod, and it acknowledges he’s already there?”

Ross said he believed that would take care of the problem. Riggs concurred. “That would cover me.”

When Bailey showed up, he seconded the original concern (“That, I think, is a little over the top,” he said), but he agreed it was catchy. The final decision was to headline the release “Putting the Message of God in the Pod.”

IN SOME WAYS, Ross finds it easy to reconcile the sacred and the profane. Part of the evangelical approach is to be “in the culture but not of it,” and it has been argued that Ross’s profession has its antecedents in the work of Jesus himself. “You talk about a show stopper,” Jerry Beavan, who organized Graham’s crusades from 1950 to 1962, told me, referring to Jesus and making the point that there’s nothing wrong with promoting the Gospel. “He raised people from the dead.” In 1925, a best seller, “The Man Nobody Knows,” written by Bruce Barton, a founder of what became the BBDO advertising agency, portrayed Jesus as the original businessman.

Ross takes pains to distance himself from the more unsavory associations with publicists. Once he playfully asked me, “So, where would a P.R. man fit on the social scale between used-car salesmen, lepers and incurable

Godspin Some of Ross's clients, from left: Rev. Rod Parsley (center) and another preacher on "Larry King Live"; Dino, a popular Christian pianist; a poster for "Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie"; Ross with Rev. Billy Graham at the Greater New York Crusade, 2005; with Rev. Rick Warren at Saddleback Church, 2005; at a Promise Keepers rally with Steve Chavis, the organization's director of communications, 2005.



lepers?" But he also tries to serve his two masters fairly. When he was working with "The Early Show" at CBS during a Graham crusade in 2005, he was approached by "Good Morning America." He recapped the incident for me: "Their ratings are significantly higher, but I said, 'I have to tell you, we're here with CBS, and we have to honor the fact.' I feel duty-bound. It's not enough to do things right — we have to do the right thing." Ross also said he is attuned to the spiritual needs of his colleagues in the media. On one occasion he spoke to a producer from a network newsmagazine for six hours, answering her personal questions about Christ. "We have people who come to the crusades to report the story and put down their pens and microphones and commit to God," he said.

Still, there's no evading all of the incongruities of combining P.R. and the Lord's work. One publicist's disaster can be another's divine intervention. Consider the example of Billy Graham's scheduled appearance on the Terry Wogan talk show in London in 1984. At the last minute, it was canceled, initially a cause for dismay. But here's how Ross described the rescheduled appearance, which took place several weeks later: "I'll never for-

'I can't

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get it. It's an overcast day, O.K.? And they say, 'And now we're going to Billy Graham—'" Graham was appearing via satellite from Bristol, outdoors, where he was about to begin a crusade. "Well, as soon as he started, the sky opened up. It was like, if you had the soundtrack for it, it would have been a choir going, 'Aaahh-haaa!' Terry Wogan went: 'Whoa! What just happened?' The skies opened up, and this beam of light came down on Billy." Ross concluded, "I praise God for that."

Ross also says he believes he is helping to fight forces of evil and compares the unseen world in which he does battle with that in the "Matrix" films. "I can't tell you how many times I've had a press conference at a crusade and the copier doesn't work" — a small example of what, he says, is "spiritual warfare." A more striking instance took place when he was approached by a prostitute in the parking lot of his office while he was on his cellphone discussing AIDS programs for Africa with Rick Warren's wife, Kay. "Is that coincidental?" he said. "Why is that?"

ROSS WAS RAISED by Christian parents mostly in Wheaton, Ill., where his father, Arthur, was a Greek New Testament scholar at Wheaton College's graduate school. His mother, Ruth, was a second-grade teacher. Ross says he "accepted Christ into his heart" at 5, after hearing the story of a little boy who froze to death but had, luckily, been "saved" beforehand. "I remember being impressed with the upside of it," he says. He describes his adolescence as free of rebellion. "I was the prodigal son's older brother — you know, loyal in the field," he says. He does admit, though, to having attended 25 Grateful Dead concerts. Without drugs? "I would go in an

Army jacket with a couple of apples, and I would eat the apples," he told me. "I just liked the music, you know?"

One of Ross's first P.R. jobs, after he graduated from Wheaton, a private interdenominational Christian college, was at General Motors. He was hired in 1978 to travel the country in a blue van with 2,000 pounds of electronic and scientific equipment and to perform the company's long-running stage show, "Previews of Progress," at junior-high and high schools. Ross says he had a blast performing tricks like the one in which a kid pushed him 50 feet across a stage using just a hair dryer. The students were wowed. But what may have been more important was that this was his first encounter with what you might call dual — or at least multilayered — marketing. "If you're a reporter from The New York Times Magazine, I'd say, 'Oh, this is a noncommercial program for G.M. to get out into the community,'" he told me. "But in my heart of hearts . . . I knew, the real impact was when it came time for Mom and Dad to buy a car, Junior's at the table saying: 'Hey, let's go look at a G.M. car. I remember the car the G.M. man was in. It was really cool!'"

When Ross talks today of operating on two tracks, it's not children's science and grown-up car sales he has in mind. What he means is mainstream and Christian. Take what he calls "faith and family" films. "The average teenager sees 50 movies a year — about one a week," he says. "That makes Mel Gibson one of the high priests of our culture. We're forming values, and to be able to do that through entertainment, which is further upstream from politics, is huge." Ross's most high-profile job in this vein has been his work on "The Passion." Initially he was brought in to help quell the controversy surrounding the film, and to that end he was instrumental in prompting the publication of several high-profile mainstream-media articles. Ross was also in charge of securing coverage in Christian print and online media. And he acted as facilitator too, introducing Gibson to Graham and dozens of other mover-and-shaker pastors, who got to see the film at previews Ross helped organize. He even hooked Gibson up with a clever telemarketing agency, the Broadcast Team, which had Gibson tape a message directed at pastors when they were likely to be out. "They want an answering machine because then the pastor says, 'I just got a call from Mel Gibson!'" Ross told me. "He plays it for his staff, he keeps it, he records it. It's viral. And it's less than 10 cents per call."

With "Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie," Ross and his former employee Lawrence Swicegood also applied two-track marketing techniques. Swicegood says they pitched "Jonah" to the mainstream as an all-stops-out special-effects extravaganza. "But," he says, "it was also 'Let's go to churches and influential religious leaders and have them preview it so they can recommend it to followers.'" So Ross created a marketing kit for the film that he distributed to about 10,000 churches, which was a practice he first employed on behalf of Graham in 1986, when he mailed out "church communications packets" to encourage prayers for an international evangelist conference. The free "Veggie Tales" packets included inserts for church bulletins and Sunday-school guides, a poster, a DVD of the trailer and a script for a pulpit announcement introducing the picture to churchgoers. Swicegood and Ross sent materials to specific members of congregations



who were considered, in Swicegood's words, "low-hanging fruit," like the pastors and teachers in charge of the church curriculums for elementary-age children. "It's easy for them to embrace it, so you give them tools for them to e-mail to their constituents or families," Swicegood says. "You can do an Evite — 'Click here and see the trailer' and all that stuff."

Given his embrace of these tactics, it may seem surprising that Ross's work for the secular Creamer Dickson Basford P.R. agency in the early 80's — which directly followed his job at G.M. — ever came into conflict with his Christian principles. But he says the final straw was a four-hour meeting with Seagram's executives in which he and his colleagues were reprimanded for not doing enough to create "franchise" drinkers. The Creamer crew tried having cocktail waitresses bring out tumblers of VO whiskey and V8 as a new way to serve the product. But several of the six Seagram's executives didn't drink. "I'm not talking about they didn't want to have a drink," Ross says. "They were smart enough that they didn't drink." Disillusioned, Ross left Manhattan and moved into the nearly nonexistent profession of Christian P.R. On his way out the door, he says, his boss told him he was "committing career suicide."

One afternoon in a Dallas coffee shop, I asked Ross about mistakes he has made. His director of accounts, a man named Phillip Roth, was sitting with us, and neither one made a sound. The only other time I had seen them this quiet was when they were praying. (Roth left Ross's firm last month for a job in secular P.R.) Finally, Ross admitted that there must have been some, but that he was still drawing a blank. (Ross eventually came up with several mistakes, ranging from overworking his staff when he took on too many clients to being quoted in connection with a controversial client when he had agreed to stay below the radar.)

This struck me as a little odd — if ever there was a landscape rife with moral swamps and pitfalls, wouldn't it be public relations? Yet this near-refusal to acknowledge anything other than the glowingly positive was a reaction I encountered several times in talking with Ross. It wasn't until later that I heard a possible explanation: according to what several Christians told me, Christians sometimes don't want to let on to anything negative because they fear it will reflect badly on God.

It is these sorts of freighted complexities that Ross and his colleagues in the world of Christian P.R. grapple with. When I spoke with Mark DeMoss, he made it clear that it wasn't advisable to make oneself the story. "My style is very, very understated and straightforward," he said. "I'm not a big rah-rah kind of guy." He chuckled when asked if he meant to imply that Ross was more of a spinner than he. "I was going to refer to my e-mail address — I was going to refer to what it's not," he said.

DeMoss was clearly referring to "mrspinmeister," which several people had told me was Ross's online address. (When I asked Ross about it later, he said he stopped using the address last summer.)

Others, however, are willing to explain at some length why it's O.K. for Ross to do what he does. "He chooses his clients well," says Joe Battaglia, who has known Ross for 25 years and runs Renaissance Communications, a marketing firm for companies that want to reach the Christian market. "I've never known Larry to represent someone of questionable character. Of course, that may be subjective — I mean, it really isn't," he says and laughs. "It's always important to surround yourself with people you believe in." Someone like Ronn Torossian, whose 5W Public Relations has worked for Coca-Cola and McDonald's but who also represents the Trinity Broadcasting Network and Benny Hinn Ministries, is not so delicate, but he makes it clear that Ross and men like him are necessary in the current cultural climate. "Larry Ross, DeMoss — they're excellent communicators in terms of helping the media understand there really is a face to the person who votes Republican," Torossian says. "Yes, there really is a face — and he doesn't drool — for the guy who votes against abortion."

Ross and his staff seem alternately comfortable and uncomfortable with the roles they play. One evening, Hudson appeared to fear being too candid. "If 50 percent of America identifies itself as Christian, you'd think the dominant media of the day would reflect that," he said, but soon reprimanded himself. "I said I was going to shut up. I have to shut up." It turns out that Ross isn't necessarily above criticism. Though he has said he takes on only clients who will reflect well on Billy Graham, Ross's client Rod Parsley had his church governance and fund-raising practices questioned in an article last winter in the left-leaning American Prospect. (Ross says that much of what was reported occurred "way before our time" and is "not consistent with the man and the organization" he has been working with for the past 18 months.) When I returned from my time with Ross in Dallas, I found that he had also worked with Benny Hinn, who has been criticized for everything from preaching the prosperity gospel to making supposedly false claims of healing. Instead of admitting as much, Ross borrowed a page from the politician's playbook. He initially denied "representing" the pastor. Whoops, wrong word. Did he "work" with the pastor? Yes, he told me, on a consulting basis — but he kept his distance for Billy Graham's sake, using letterhead that didn't identify his firm and never letting himself be quoted in print in association with Hinn.

But Ross seems to be mostly at peace with his role and described it to me one afternoon this way: after invoking a biblical story about Moses' engagement in a lengthy battle for the children of Israel, he said: "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." But his eyes really lighted up when he moved onto another topic — the press reception Graham received during his New York crusade last June. "He ended up doing 15 interviews, including all the major talk shows," Ross told me. "At the press conference itself we had 250 journalists." ■