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Moviegoers are reaching out to try to touch God with calls

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GOD ALONE knows his heavenly telephone number, but this much is certain: All those people trying to reach him in Missouri, and in North Carolina and Florida, are wasting their time with direct-dial. They should contact Mare Cromwell, who lives in Baltimore. At least she's halfway into a divine dialogue.

Cromwell's book, *If I Gave You God's Phone Number: Searching for Spirituality in America*, arrives after she spent seven years touring the country and giving individuals -- Christians, Jews, Muslims, a Cherokee shaman, a death row inmate, among others -- the chance to tell what they would do if they had a direct line to God.

All those other long-distance dialers out there will have to suffer with their wrong numbers and blame the producers of a movie called *Bruce Almighty*, which has managed to earn \$135.7 million and rouse the eternal question: "What, in God's name, is going on here?"

In the movie, God endows a TV newsman, actor Jim Carrey, with divine powers. God's phone number pops up repeatedly on the newsman's pager whenever God tries to summon Carrey's character. The movie uses the very real phone exchange of 776, instead of the conventional film digits of 555 -- a number selected, according to Universal Pictures, because no such exchange exists around Buffalo, N.Y., where the movie is set.

But the exchange does exist in such places as Richmond, Mo., where a woman named Wanda Walker says she's gotten "a million" calls asking if she is God since the movie premiered 1 1/2 weeks ago. ("What do you think?" Walker growls at callers.) In Pinellas Park, Fla., a woman has threatened to sue Universal Pictures because calls for God are clogging her cell phone. And in Sanford, N.C., the number connects to Turner's Chapel Church, and the minister's name is Bruce. But it's the Rev. Bruce MacInnes, and he is furious and calls the intrusions "blasphemy." (All this comes according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.)

Mare Cromwell disagrees. She thinks people are reaching for a heavenly connection, which is why her book, *If I Gave You God's Phone Number*, strikes such a resonant chord. In fact, it's part of her own lifetime of searching.

Cromwell, 43, of West Baltimore calls herself "a writer, poet, gardener and environmentalist -- and a spiritual seeker." When friends told her about the *Bruce Almighty* telephone call fiasco, they immediately connected the instinct to her book. (More information on the book is available at www.tocallgod.net.)

"People want to talk to God," Cromwell was saying yesterday. "Always have, always will. The really interesting phenomenon is what they want to talk about."

In extended interviews with 49 people -- 21 of whom are in the book -- she says, "Every single person surprised me. People assume there's a religious party line that everyone's going to parrot. But it doesn't happen. Everybody has a really unique take on God, and everybody has a unique relationship."

And everyone, she says, has different questions for God.

"They want to find out why God allows evil -- or does he?" she says. "Does God really love them? Or why is their life ruled by money instead of love? I love that Bruce Almighty has coincidentally brought these questions out, although I feel sorry for those people whose phones are ringing off the hook."

Cromwell says the inspiration for her book came on a Father's Day when she was living in the Butler area of Baltimore County and a friend reminded her to call her father. Cromwell thought, "Wouldn't it be great to call God the father?"

The notion eventually became the book. It is an attempt to define a concept of God and spirituality, and figure out The Meaning of it All. It is, in fact, a journey that mirrors Cromwell's own.

"My concept of God?" she says. "Not an old man with a beard. The creator is a very powerful universal force that's behind everything and within everything, a powerful consciousness." Is she, in fact, describing nature?

"No," Cromwell says, "I believe God wants us to overcome our shadow self -- our anger, our sense of vengeance, where all our negative actions are based -- and live in our higher self, our more essential self, which is more connected to the divine."

Not everyone likes her definition -- or even her questions. At book signings, she says, a few people have yelled at her. "Usually," she says, "narrow-minded fundamentalists. But most people think it's cool."

They understand it's a book about a God for whom no one knows the real story. We only have heavenly hunches. We have faith, or we don't. But, always, we have questions. It's why Cromwell's book, *If I Gave You God's Phone Number*, is such a delight. And it's why all those folks come out of Bruce Almighty and head straight for a telephone, imagining they've finally got a direct line to God's answering service.

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