

When Church Becomes a Theater

A few religious voices still criticize the use of drama in the church, but many congregations have brought it center stage.

Almost 100 singers, actors, dancers and instrumentalists begin arriving early on Palm Sunday for the special production at Hillcrest Church in Dallas. They have rehearsed for countless hours and are ready to perform *Jesus, We Crown You With Praise*—an Easter celebration that combines several art forms.

With state-of-the-art lighting, a large stage and theater-style seating, the recently built sanctuary at Hillcrest resembles a performing arts hall. According to Susie Wilson, director of worship and fine arts at Hillcrest, the vision for drama and fine arts has existed since the church was founded 18 years ago. “It’s in the DNA of Hillcrest,” she says.

After a brief welcome, the curtain rises on a 60-voice choir and 20-person orchestra. Each member is dressed in black. Wilson, who is pursuing a doctorate in choral conducting, takes her appropriate place on stage to lead the musicians.

Dancers dressed in white, adults and kids waving palm branches, and men and women carrying colorful banners emerge from the back of the sanctuary as the choir sings a medley of Easter hymns. The upbeat opener sets the tone for worship.

Philip Nelson, who studied theater in college and is a manager at a Dallas-area performing arts center, narrates the production, which includes songs and drama about Christ’s betrayal, crucifixion, death on the cross and resurrection. Vocalists portray Bible characters who knew Jesus personally: the woman who touched the hem of His garment; the Roman

centurion who recognized there was something different about Him; Barabbas, the thief who believed He was innocent.

The finale ties everything together. Nelson tells the audience that although Jesus is the King of kings, the only crown He ever wore was a crown of thorns, presented in mockery and worn in agony.

“The crown we adorn Him with is still not made of diamonds and rubies and sapphires and pearls—it is woven from the hearts of men and women whose lives He’s changed,” Nelson says. “We long for that day when we can cast our crowns at Your feet. We crown You with honor. We crown You with glory. We crown You with praise.”

The character playing Jesus takes center stage as men, women and children come forward to lay their crowns at His feet. Pamela Rutherford, Hillcrest’s director of dance, performs a majestic dance of praise. The dramatic ending reminds the audience that Jesus is worthy of all our praise and adoration—not just at Easter, but every day of the year.

A New Standard of Excellence

Although Easter is one of the most popular occasions for church productions, drama and similar art forms are being used throughout the year to powerfully communicate a message or illustrate a sermon. Many forward-thinking churches and gifted drama directors have helped raise the bar and demonstrated that drama can touch people deeply and make an impact.

Molly Venzke is making a difference as creative arts pastor at Christian Faith Center in Seattle. When the Venzkes were

approached seven years ago about using their talents to help the fledgling drama program at the church, Venzke admits that they were not immediately enthused about the church's proposition.

"What we had seen in the church was cheesy," she says. "Our eyes were used to excellent theater."

Venzke had been involved in professional theater for 10 years, working with the St. Louis Repertoire Theater, the Seattle Children's Theater and other companies in Seattle. Her husband, Jay, had earned his master's degree in theater and worked on the technical side with prestigious theater companies.

After praying about it, the Venzkes decided to accept the challenge. Molly discovered that she had a knack for writing and began to pen all the scripts for Christian Faith Center's productions, as well as the material for the youth program.

"We don't have a great option to be able to purchase outside material," she says of the limitation that spurred her to do the writing herself. Scripts that churches use in the South or the Midwest, for example, often don't go over well in the liberal Northwest.

Although it takes many years to build a successful drama ministry, Venzke says she is proud of the level of excellence they have achieved. One of the most fulfilling aspects about her role is helping the church's 60 to 75 volunteer actors discover a gift they never knew they had.

Rutherford, who was hired at Hillcrest four years ago, has

taught worship dancing internationally for 13 years—quite a change from her professional dance background. After earning her master's in dance at Southern Methodist University in Dallas in 1983, Rutherford landed a job in the Broadway musical 42nd Street.

She began attending a church in New York City named The Unbroken Chain, which attracted other actors, musicians and dancers. There, she gave her life to Christ.

Gina Nelson, director of drama at Hillcrest, also spent time in New York in the 1980s to work on her acting. She and Rutherford met at The Unbroken Chain and reconnected 10 years later at Hillcrest Church. Today they work closely together.

"I know I am walking in what God called me to do," says Rutherford, who trains with about 10 adult praise dancers at Hillcrest each week.

Nelson echoes her sentiments. "I enjoy being able to coach people who have a love for drama but don't have the skills," she says. "That is very rewarding."

Ministry or Entertainment?

In some Pentecostal and charismatic circles, there is still a stigma associated with the art form. Drama enthusiasts, however, believe the church should reclaim what rightfully belongs to it.

"I think people are afraid that drama is secular, and they need to be taught that it started in the church," says Angela

Coon, creative arts ministries director at Calvary Assembly of God in Dover, Delaware. "Look at the tabernacle. It is a drama in itself, and God was the first drama director."

Kim Messer, product-line manager for Lillenas Drama in Kansas City, Missouri, says the church performed parts of the Bible many years ago to help educate people. "As the art form became adulterated when it was picked up by the secular community, the church became fearful of using that art form," she explains.

Some churches simply think drama is inappropriate in the sanctuary. "It's kind of like using drums or dance in the church, and probably a lot of the concern is generational or cultural," Messer says. "What is appropriate in worship will always be debated."

Ken Lee, an actor who plays characters from the Bible, became an ordained Assemblies of God minister years ago. One reason he sought ordination was to assure people that he wasn't strictly "an actor performing in the church, but a minister of the gospel who uses theater as a way of ministering."

"Many Pentecostal churches are still uncomfortable bringing in something just for entertainment value," says Lee, who has ministered in 30 denominations in 40 states. "More and more churches are understanding that theater doesn't just entertain. It also opens up the Word of God."

The fact is, drama can be a very powerful ministry tool—whether performed for a "dramatic" nondenominational group or a subdued mainline congregation. "If you see a movie that impacts you, you will never forget that," Venzke says.

"When you put on a drama, people relate with the characters. They relax in their seats and get into it."

Steve Pederson, director of drama at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, agrees.

"Drama has the power to make us laugh, move us emotionally or change us," he says. "We know that the ultimate work in a person's heart is the work of the Holy Spirit, but we like to think that we're trying to create soil that is receptive. We're trying to be partnered with the Holy Spirit so He can be alive and working."

Willow Creek began incorporating drama into its services almost 28 years ago and today has one of the most celebrated drama programs in the country. Pederson, who earned a doctorate in theater, taught for 15 years at a Christian college in Iowa. Sixteen years ago he became Willow Creek's drama director and has developed a program that has been mimicked by countless churches.

Unlike most churches Charisma contacted, Willow Creek prepares seven- to eight-minute sketches for every weekend service. The sketches don't always mention God or Christ, Pederson says. Rather, the purpose is to "craft a moment" that will open people to the gospel.

Pederson believes the approach is sometimes misunderstood and that people think Willow Creek is doing secular entertainment to draw the masses. In reality, his goal is to get the audience to see themselves reflected in the characters. "We raise questions but don't give answers," he says. "It's the preacher's job later in the

service to address from a biblical perspective whatever that issue is.”

The Role of Church Drama

The experts continue to debate whether or not drama is an effective evangelistic tool. Dale Savidge, executive director of Christians in Theater Arts (CTA), believes drama asks questions very well, but he isn’t sure that it answers them well.

“Sermons answer questions much better than plays do,” Savidge says. “Plays allow us to dig into questions and can demonstrate conflict ... but they often don’t resolve it as well as a sermon would.”

Coon says that at Calvary Assembly of God one of the primary goals is evangelism. “We’ve had hundreds of people saved through drama,” she says. The church uses drama occasionally to illustrate sermons, but most of their creative energy goes toward larger-scale productions each year.

Caron Loveless, creative director of Discovery Church’s arts ministry in Orlando, Florida, believes it is difficult to pinpoint the “single factor that affects someone’s salvation experience.”

“Usually, it’s a process. We see our drama ministry as one of the tools God uses to nudge them closer,” she says.

Discovery Church targets seekers on Sundays and uses drama once about every four to six weeks to illustrate a sermon.

"We're praying for seekers and hoping they will come," Loveless says. "We believe in all the gifts of the Spirit and have places where all of them can be manifest, but we don't have a typical charismatic weekend service."

Messer of Lillenas Drama says some churches use drama simply as an outreach tool. A dinner theater held on a Friday night, for example, may attract people who would never step into a church for a Sunday service. "You may not even mention God in the play, and people in the community will come and get a new perspective on Christians wanting to have fun."

In addition to being an outreach, drama is also an "inreach," Messer says. It unites churches by bringing people together and "enables them to give back to God and other people."

As churches become known for excellent drama, they will attract people who appreciate the art form—including artists who desire to use their gifts in the church. Bryan Coley, who attends Northpoint Community Church in Atlanta and is artistic director of Art Within (an Atlanta-based theater company), says excellence breeds more artists who want to be part of that environment. "The result is that the church becomes a magnet rather than a place that has no relevance to the artist."

A Heart for Ministry

Churches that either don't have a drama program or have one that isn't well-developed should keep in mind that it takes a number of years to build a successful ministry.

"I think people want to go from nothing to something huge

overnight,” says Coon, who started small with a children’s musical and grew a program slowly over the years. Today at Calvary Assembly there are at least two major productions a year, at Christmas and Easter, and the church’s performers do special events such as couples’ retreats.

Venzke suggests that if members of a church want a drama ministry, they should talk with their pastor about it. The important thing to remember is, drama may not align with a church’s mission.

“If your church does not have the talent needed to develop a program, ask God to send the right person to your church to start it,” she adds.

Pederson believes the senior pastor must have a passion for the use of creative arts in order for it to thrive. “Bill Hybels [senior pastor of Willow Creek] is one of the biggest cheerleaders we have,” he says. “That doesn’t mean we always see eye to eye, but he greatly embraces the arts and wants us to be a church where artists are encouraged and art can really flourish.”

Can art flourish in a church where the drama director doesn’t have professional training? Clearly not every church has a drama director with extensive theater background. Some community colleges offer courses that can help a person learn the techniques that theater artists use to create their art, Pederson suggests.

“The larger the church, I think the more sophisticated the actors need to be,” Loveless says. “People at larger churches tend to expect a higher level of excellence. The smaller the

church, I think people are happy to be led by people with less experience.”

Venzke believes it is far more important to have a person who is enthusiastic about and committed to ministry than simply to have a gifted director.

Coon agrees. “The anointing makes all the difference,” she says. “While I strive for excellence, the anointing and flowing in unity are extremely important to me.”

Is the effort and commitment of time worth it? “I’ve often thought, Lord, what could You do if we spent as many hours praying as we do painting sets, sewing costumes, practicing the music and drama, and putting this together?” Coon says. “It is time-consuming and takes so much energy, but God has never released me from it. He has called me to do this.”

Without God’s calling, most drama directors would be apprehensive about using their skills in the church. When God opens the door, however, they discover that the rewards are immeasurable.

“When I left the academic world, I thought, Can I be fulfilled in a church where I can’t do classic plays like I had been doing?” Pederson says. “I’ve come to realize that the sketches we do are being used to impact lives for eternity. For me, Shakespeare’s great, but I feel very fulfilled doing the things we’re doing because I know the impact it is having on people’s lives.”

Likewise, Venzke is thankful she is able to combine her passion for art with her love for ministry. “Everything we do

is centered on the character of God—learning who He is, who we are in Him, the life He has for us,” she says. “To be able to do that with drama is completely everlasting.”

God’s Curtain Call

These Christian performing-arts ministries can help you develop an evangelistic drama team.

Drama groups that present Christian productions across the country use different techniques and styles to communicate the gospel message. Here’s an overview of several.

Sidewalk Productions. Peace Child—a production developed by Sidewalk Productions, a division of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) Montana—was launched in 2002. It is adapted from missionary Don Richardson’s true-life story of his family’s adventure into the jungles of New Guinea in 1962. The couple wonders how God will demonstrate His love for these tribal people, who revere Judas over Jesus. In the end, God provides the perfect analogy.

Cara Campbell, whose father was active in YWAM and participated in one of its popular productions, Toymaker & Son, about 12 years ago, is the director and producer of Peace Child.

She believes one quality of drama that makes it effective as an evangelistic tool is its capability to speak everyone’s language. YWAM may take Peace Child to South Africa this year.

Campbell's vision for Peace Child is threefold: to testify of the love found in Jesus Christ; to reflect the glory of God through artistic excellence (the production meshes live music, multimedia, and high-energy stunts that include rock climbing, martial arts and gymnastics); to promote unity and relationships among the churches of each community.

Peace Child, Campbell believes, will attract those who don't regularly attend church. With elaborate props and a cast of 17 dancers, the production is best suited for an actual performance venue, such as a theater, YWAM has found. Churches can partner to sponsor the team. For more information, call (406) 844-2669 or log on at .

Forecast Productions. Minnesota-based Forecast Productions is performing a family program this year called Get Back Up Again. The powerful program contains skits dealing with real-life issues that families in the church confront but often hide. Next year's program will portray how TV families have influenced society over the years.

"Drama brings the audience in—they don't feel like they are being 'preached at.' Before they know it, they are seeing themselves in a scene," notes Stacey Delp, director of Forecast Productions. "By the end of the program, it has opened them up to receive ministry and to be challenged to take their family to greater depths."

After a recent performance at Dominion Church in Arlington, Texas, many individuals and families went forward for prayer.

Delp grew up in an acting environment. She attended a

performing arts high school in Toronto and as a teen pursued work in commercials. After a trip to Europe, God got her attention.

She heard about Christ for the Nations in Dallas and decided to enroll. She initially thought she would have to lay down her acting aspirations—she had no idea that God could use those skills.

She met Kevin Delp at Christ for the Nations, and eventually the couple got engaged. They decided during their engagement that they would start a cutting-edge drama company to minister to youth. In 1994 they incorporated the company, originally called In Sync, and began touring.

Today, Kevin pastors Life Church in the Minneapolis area, and Stacey trains students involved in the on-site internship program offered by Forecast Productions. For the first six months, the students learn how to become effective ministers. She also teaches them how to act, and they practice the skits for the program they will soon take on the road.

At the end of six months, the students tour. Typically, the group consists of four to six students and a team leader. They go into public high schools, as well as churches, where their message deals with character issues.

“It’s an intense internship because they have such a responsibility when they go on tour,” Delp says. “The students come in as young kids and leave incredibly mature and having changed for the better. I tell them all the time, ‘You have to realize there are families getting divorced, there are young kids getting beaten, and they need to hear our message.’”

In addition to performances, Forecast Productions also offers drama workshops so that “any size church can have an effective drama ministry and utilize it if they want to do illustrated sermons or do evangelism,” Delp says.

To contact Forecast Productions about being an intern or inviting the group to your area, call (952) 934-6533 or log on at .

Ken Lee Ministries. For the last 23 years, Ken Lee has presented one-man dramas geared toward winning the lost and edifying the saints. His portrayals bring the Bible to life.

“We’re losing the art of reading and using our own imaginations,” says Lee, who lives in St. Charles, Missouri. “I think my ministry opens up the Word for people and makes them want to get into the Word. After seeing a play like mine, it’s like reading about somebody you know.”

Lee believes there is a balance between media and the message. “A lot of publishing houses are scared to death to have too strong a message for fear it will limit the number of denominational groups willing to use the material,” he says. “They try to zero in on material that says little spiritually.”

Lee’s scripts have a direct spiritual impact. They are 30 minutes to 45 minutes long and can be ordered online at . To schedule, contact (636) 949-9099.

Let's Get Dramatic!

Plenty of resources are available for churches that want to develop their own drama ministries.

Church drama ministries require continual training and education. In addition to training from within, which consists of regularly scheduled group meetings, resources are available outside the four walls of the church. Many churches take advantage of conferences and specialties offered by several organizations in order to keep their drama ministries sharp. Here is a sampling of some of these resources:

Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA). Begun in 1987, CITA is a networking organization that helps connect its members with others who write scripts, author books about the philosophy of drama in the church or are involved in other aspects of theater arts. It has 1,000 members, about 70 percent of whom are involved in some type of theater ministry (church or parachurch).

CITA holds an annual conference each summer during which it offers classes related to church drama ministries. (This year's conference was held June 18-21.)

CITA's purpose is to encourage and equip. "Those who attend will walk away with a lot of practical material," says Dale Savidge, executive director. For information about membership, log on at .

Lillenas Drama. Every February, Lillenas puts on a music and drama conference with numerous classes offered for beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. About 1,000 people attended

in 2003.

Lillenas provides the widest range of resources of any publishing company that produces drama resources, says Kim Messer, products manager. Products include sketches, plays, readers' theater, drama-topic series, how-to books and more. More than 500 downloadable scripts are available on the company's Web site, .

Also available is a free subscription to a drama newsletter that includes instructional articles, product information and mentions from people who send photos from their productions and tell what they did with a particular play. For customer service, call (800) 877-0700.

Willow Creek Church. In June, Willow Creek drew more than 4,000 people who serve in all areas of the arts to one of its conferences. Drama ministry will also be highlighted at the Chicago-area church's Prevailing Church conference October 22-24.

There are numerous drama resources for different levels available from . In addition, this Web site has an extensive selection of scripts that can be downloaded.

Drama director Steve Pederson has written a book titled Drama Ministry: Practical Help for Making Drama a Vital Part of Your Church (available online) that provides information about how to build a drama team for the long haul, how to keep the team motivated, a realistic appraisal of what drama does well and should not be trying to do, and more. The book also includes practical instruction about staging techniques, training techniques, acting exercises and other elements needed for a

performance.

Christian Faith Center. Create 03, a seminar track filled with classes on drama, dance, music and television, was part of Christian Faith Center's larger Vision Conference held in March that attracted about 2,000 business leaders and pastors. A bigger and better conference scheduled for March 9-15, 2004, is in the works. (Casey and Wendy Treat pastor the 6,000-member Christian Faith Center in Seattle.)

Molly Venzke, creative arts pastor with the church, and her husband, Jay, who is involved with the technical aspects of drama ministry, provide consulting for churches interested in starting creative arts ministries or wanting to take their programs to the next level. For information or to inquire about purchasing scripts, send an e-mail to creativearts@.

International Christian Dance Fellowship. For the first time in its 15-year history, this organization will hold its annual meeting in the United States. The event will take place at Hillcrest Church in Dallas, July 6-12. Pamela Rutherford, director of dance at Hillcrest, serves as co-chair for the U.S. office. For information, visit or call Rutherford at (214) 402-9647.

. Web sites that offer scripts have been springing up in the last few years. One of these is . A \$ subscription buys eight issues of a newsletter that contains helpful articles, three scripts and seven more that are accessible online from Drama Ministry. To order, visit the company's Web site at , or call toll-free (866) 859-7622.

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