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## **Mini-Actors, Mega-Stages: Examining the Use of Theatre among Children and Youth in U.S. Evangelical Megachurches**

Carla Elisha Lahey

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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**MINI-ACTORS, MEGA-STAGES: EXAMINING THE USE OF THEATRE  
AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN U.S. EVANGELICAL  
MEGACHURCHES**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by  
Carla Elisha Lahey  
B.A., Samford University, 2000  
M.S., Florida State University, 2012  
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## **Abstract**

How do children and youth first encounter the performing arts? While schools may stand out as an obvious answer, a recent study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education shows that the percentage of public schools offering theatre classes dropped at both the primary and secondary level from 2000-2010 (Brenchley). Yet, even as arts offerings experience a decline in some public schools, many students are being introduced to performance through another venue – the evangelical megachurch.

Since the birth of the church growth movement in the 1970s, megachurches (defined as Protestant congregations that average at least 2,000 weekly attendees) have integrated drama and stage technology into worship services as a way to maintain cultural relevance in their target communities. These tools have also impacted the way megachurches approach their ministry to children and teens.

In this dissertation, I seek to integrate research from the fields of evangelical performance and Theatre for Young Audiences to examine the way churches use theatre as a tool for discipleship and evangelism among their youngest attendees. By visiting evangelical megachurches, observing performances, and meeting with ministerial staff and arts educators from Christian arts programs around the U.S., I examine the way children function as both actors and audience members in weekly educational meetings, large-scale theatrical spectacles, children and youth drama teams, as well as church-based performing arts academies. Through these programs, children not only learn theology but also become active evangelists in spreading the message of faith to others.

## Introduction

In many ways, the theatre housed inside “Topher’s Place” in Riverside, California, resembles any other American community theatre space. Rows of lighting instruments illuminate the large acting area on stage. A large projection screen, accompanied by some cut-out Christmas trees and a working streetlight, create a snowy holiday backdrop for the day’s production. Hundreds of empty chairs fill the house, waiting to be occupied by audience members.

But Topher’s Place isn’t your typical community theatre building. It’s the children’s ministry space at Harvest Christian Fellowship, an evangelical megachurch about fifty miles east of Los Angeles. Each week, teen and adult volunteers take the stage to lead “Rock the World,” a children’s worship experience that incorporates live theatre, music, and puppets to share Biblical messages with children. Although it might seem strange to attend a theatrical production as part of a Sunday morning church visit, Harvest is not the only church using theatrical elements as a key component of religious education programs. Thousands of churches around the country incorporate scripts, storytellers, puppetry, and pageants as regular facets of their ministry programming.<sup>1</sup>

Sunday morning experiences, like the one at Harvest Christian Fellowship, serve as a catalyst for thinking about the diverse ways U.S. evangelical megachurches use the performing arts on a weekly basis to teach, evangelize, and empower children and youth as future leaders of the Christian church. These experiences hold important implications on two distinct fronts. In terms of theatre, these church performances likely constitute the first live theatrical experience of many churchgoing young people, shaping their early impressions of the nature and purposes of

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<sup>1</sup> As just one example of the widespread use of theatrical elements in churches, Orange – a major provider of church educational resources for students – claims that ten thousand churches now use its curriculum. This curriculum regularly includes scripts for communicating Bible stories as part of the Sunday morning experience (“A New Kind of Leader”).



the performing arts. For churches, these performances aim to inspire a new generation of youth to embrace faith at a time of declining religiosity among U.S. young people.<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, I study Sunday morning educational performances, as well as large-scale theatrical spectacles, child and youth drama teams, and performing arts academies created by some of America's largest congregations. As a result, I address several key questions regarding church-based theatre for youth:

- 1) In what specific ways are twenty-first century churches employing theatre in their ministry to children and teenagers?
- 2) How do churches aim to shape the burgeoning faith of young churchgoers through these performances?
- 3) Conversely, in what theoretical ways might these early evangelical performance experiences shape the way a child views the purpose and conventions of theatre?
- 4) How are church-based youth theatre programs extending beyond the church walls into schools and other public spaces?
- 5) What role might these church-based arts entities play in the future of the arts and arts education?

By visiting evangelical megachurches, observing performances, and meeting with ministerial staff and arts educators from a range of evangelical churches and arts programs around the U.S., I document and analyze the various ways theatre and the performing arts serve as ministry tools both for youth and by youth within these church settings. Through these productions, I argue,

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<sup>2</sup> For statistics regarding the state of religious decline among Americans, see Pew Research Center's "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (2015) and Jeffrey M. Jones's analysis of Gallup's recent U.S. church membership data (2019).

children not only learn theology but also become active evangelists in spreading the gospel message to others.

But why should secular theatre artists and scholars pay attention to the performances and programs created within religious communities? After all, the artistic merit of many religious theatrical endeavors is often called into question. Christian films, which became a cinematic mainstay after the lucrative success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, find themselves the most visible targets, even among Christians.<sup>3</sup> For example, Midwestern Seminary staff member and Spurgeon College Professor Jared C. Wilson wrote a 2019 blog post titled "Why Christian Movies are So Terrible." In it, Wilson criticized Christian films for their sentimentalism, clichés, and general "tidiness," noting that the plot lines and characters in Christian films rarely resemble real life. According to Wilson, "Delving into the depths of human character and motivation is subservient to getting the message across." Subsequently, good storytelling and artistic craftsmanship can suffer for the sake of communicating a sermonizing theme.

Similar criticisms often plague church drama productions. In my own experience, I recall watching earnest Easter productions filled with robed men sporting not-quite-right facial hair, glued rather unceremoniously to their faces as they assumed the roles of Jesus and his disciples. Other times, I sat through productions with volunteer actors who demonstrated loads of sincerity but little acting training. Often, this is explicitly encouraged by church drama enthusiasts. In the book *Church and Stage*, Dean J. Seal writes, "Don't let inexperience prevent you from doing a show. No one knows how to do something until they do it. Make use of the materials at hand,

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the success of *The Passion of the Christ* and its residual effects, see Jill Stevenson's *Sensation Devotion*, pp. 87-97; Timothy Beal and Tod Linafelt's *Mel Gibson's Bible*, pp. 1-4; and Jonathan Merritt's "Hollywood's Big Bet on Christian Movies" (2018).

including the people. Everyone begins with little experience and grows from there” (67). Church drama leaders falling into this camp often tout the community-building and faith-bolstering benefits acquired by those who participate in church performances, even though participants may lack theatrical experience (Seal 48).

Other Christian theatre practitioners, however, advocate for a higher level of artistic excellence in church drama. In *Performing the Sacred*, Dale Savidge writes:

Those of us who integrate theatre in worship settings should acknowledge that sincerity is no substitute for accountability to the standards of the art and ultimately to the excellence epitomized by God, the Creator. Any artistic attempt by fallen people is imperfect, so we shouldn’t shrink from offering our imperfect work to God. But we should cultivate dissatisfaction with even our best efforts and make it our constant desire to offer to God a better artistic sacrifice. (135)

Consequently, while acknowledging that no piece of art is ever “perfect,” Christian theatre artists in this camp encourage artists of faith to strive for the excellence worthy of a perfect Creator.

Some churches, however, take this pursuit of artistic excellence to new heights as they attempt to transcend the Church’s reputation as subpar community theatre and seek to compete directly with major secular forms of entertainment. For example, First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, gained national attention in 2007 for its annual Christmas production, which ABC News reported was choreographed by Broadway producers and carried a \$1.3 million price tag. In the ABC interview, Minister of Creative Arts Jeff Crevier said, “We’re having to compete with many theatrical things around the country, whether its MTV or the Rockettes or any show you might see on Broadway. We have made a conscious decision to pull out all the stops” (“Commercialization of Christ?”). Churches like FBC, Fort Lauderdale are allotting time, energy, and finances toward staging elaborate productions, not merely for their entertainment value, but with the hope that these productions will serve as a catalyst for conversion experiences

among non-believing attendees. Essentially, these churches are demonstrating a belief in the life-changing potential of theatre that rivals that of many theatre practitioners.

This focus on theatre's potential for life change also links church theatre to current discussions among Theatre for Young Audiences researchers and practitioners. For instance, at the end of the 2019 Theatre Communications Group National Conference in Miami, three leading arts organizations – TCG, The National Endowment for the Arts, and Theatre for Young Audience/USA – partnered for a post-conference event to discuss current issues and strategies in the field of TYA (Considine and Halpern). Two themes reemerged throughout the conference: the push for greater diversity and inclusion in the TYA field, as well as the need to assess the impact of theatergoing on young audience members. During that event, Lindsey Buller Maliekel, director of education/public engagement at New York City's New Victory Theatre, revealed preliminary results from a not-yet-published five-year study on the impact of theatre experiences on young people. The research provides quantitative data showing that theatre attendance helps students with processing and expressing emotion, empathizing with others, and maintaining an optimistic outlook on life (Considine and Halpern). According to conference attendee and *American Theatre* columnist Emma Halpern, the study revealed "if you haven't seen a show by the time you turn 8, your interest in theatre, or your belief that theatre could be 'for you,' starts to go down, and that can affect whether or not you'll *ever* want to go to the theatre as an adult." I argue that church performances geared toward young audiences, often overlooked by theatre researchers, can serve as that needed early entry point to engage students in the arts.

Likewise, this anxiety over the importance of reaching children at an early age is echoed in evangelical circles, as research shows a stark decline in religiosity among younger generations. Recent studies show that an increasing number of young people claim to be

religious “nones,” or people without any specific religious affiliation. In a 2014 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 36% of young Millennials (those born from 1990-1996) consider themselves to be religiously unaffiliated – considerably higher than unaffiliated Gen-Xers (23%) or Baby Boomers (17%) (“America’s Changing Religious Landscape”). Furthermore, in the book *unChristian*, David Kinnaman, president of the faith-centered research organization The Barna Group, writes:

Based on extensive research on this topic, our data points out clearly that the faith trajectory of the vast majority of Americans is mapped out before they become adults, often before they even reach adolescents. In fact, for every one hundred who are not born again by the time they reach age eighteen, only six of those individuals will commit their lives to Christ for the first time as an adult. (72-3)

As one strategy for teaching and reaching this coveted under-eighteen crowd, some evangelical churches are responding with creative methods, including performance, in hopes of inspiring youth with the message of the gospel. This means that some students’ first experience as a theatre audience member is coming, not from a theatre building or school theatre program, but from within the walls of a local church. Conversely, as young people participate as actors in Bible-based performances, the repetition of the rehearsal process and the frequent use of audience participation solidify personal and corporate theology in ways that a sermon or traditional Bible lesson may not. As a theatre artist and scholar, I’m interested in how these performances might have an impact on the way this generation of youth understand both theology and theatre, as well as the way it might alter their “horizons of expectation” for later theatrical encounters.

Additionally, the demand for performers often means a demand for theatrical training. In response, some churches are using their campuses as performing arts training centers for youth, employing trained artists to teach students and often preparing them for a chance to perform for

the congregation. These performing arts centers thrive even as state and federal governments argue over the place arts education should occupy in mandated school curriculum, and fine arts classes are being cut in public schools throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> Some of these faith-based training centers are reaching out into the community and forming partnerships with local schools, especially schools that lack any theatre education classes.<sup>5</sup> For many children, the church now serves as their first point-of-contact with the performing arts, potentially functioning as an untraditional means of creating a new generation of artists and audience members. These new avenues of theatre education and performance opportunities could impact the way the next generation understands theatrical performance, making it worthy of consideration by theatre scholars and educators who could be welcoming these students to our university classrooms and professional stages in the upcoming years.

### **The Christian Church and Theatre: A Historical Overview**

Before considering the ways that contemporary churches use theatrical performance as an educational and evangelistic tool, it's helpful to consider the complicated historical relationship between theatre and religion, particularly within the Christian Church. By exploring the way church leaders both embraced and eschewed theatre at various points in history, we can gain insight into the root of contemporary attitudes toward the use of theatre as a tool for evangelism and education.

The practice of integrating theatrical performance and religious worship predates the rise of Christianity. Centuries before the birth of Jesus, ancient Greeks performed plays in honor of

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the decreasing availability of theatre classes in public schools, see Basmat Parsad, et al. *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools 1999-2000 and 2009-2010*.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Christian Youth Theatre's "CYT@School" program provides afterschool theatre programs and in-school artist residencies to schools, partly in response to school budget cuts for the arts ("CTY@School").

the Olympic gods. Likewise, Indian Sanskrit performance traditions date back over 2,000 years and incorporate elements of Hinduism as they are enacted within religious temples. But the birth of Christianity in the first century C.E. ushered in a complex new relationship between the altar and the stage that has continued to impact both for nearly two millennia.

Christianity emerged in the Roman Empire as an off-shoot of Judaism in the mid-first century C.E. During this time, the form of theatre made popular by the Greeks had faded, and citizens of Rome were more inclined to entertain themselves with gladiatorial battles, bearbaiting, circuses, and mime.<sup>6</sup> However, the emergence of the Christian church during the period of the Roman Empire brought challenges to the Roman tradition of spectacular entertainment. Early Church fathers, such as Tertullian and Augustine, saw these pastimes as a threat to the burgeoning Christian faith community, citing issues such as immorality in theatre spaces and theatre's idolatrous roots.<sup>7</sup> By the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, formal play productions, such as the once-popular works of Greek and Roman playwrights, had largely faded from the European cultural landscape.

During the Middle Ages, however, the once-shunned theatrical medium reemerged within the walls of convents and churches, serving as a way for religious leaders to communicate Biblical stories and Christian principles to illiterate masses. These religious dramas eventually moved into the city streets, as local guilds took various roles in bringing cycle plays to life. In

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<sup>6</sup> See Johnson and Savidge 31-35 and Beachum 138-139 for further insight into Roman entertainments and the Christian response.

<sup>7</sup> Both Tertullian's *On the Spectacles* and Augustine's *Confessions* provide insight into the Church Fathers' ideas about the theatre. For additional insight into early Christian beliefs about the nature of theatre, see Donnalee Dox's *The Idea of the Theatre in Latin Christian Thought*.

towns such as York and Wakefield, these cycle plays told stories from the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, on a series of pageant wagons as local townspeople watched.<sup>8</sup>

During this period children began taking on roles within religious productions. In medieval Corpus Christi processions, “student clerics and children, often costumed as angels, might participate as assistants [sic] bell-ringers, petal-strewers, canopy bearers, musicians and choristers” (Reynolds 141). In 1551, the Jesuits performed their first Latin tragedy for educational purposes, a tradition they continued in schools for over two hundred years. According to Jonathan Levy, the Jesuits viewed theatre as “a most effective method of propaganda – *propaganda fidei* (the propagation of the faith) – which is what the order was founded to do” (65).

By the mid-1500s, the changing demographics in English society meant that children took on an even more pronounced role in English drama. Paul Whitfield White notes that “the Reformation rode the crest of a population explosion” which explains why so much of the era’s dramatic work was targeted at and performed by England’s youth population (White, “Theatre and Religious Culture,” 137).<sup>9</sup> At a time of bitter conflict between Catholics and the newly established Protestants, some of the youth productions took sides in the battle between the faiths as young people took to the stage in an attempt “to convert their parents to Protestantism” (White, “Theatre and Religious Culture,” 137). In this way, youth-based theatre acted as a religious and political tool for conversion at a religiously volatile point in England’s history.

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview and examples of medieval theatre practices, see John Gassner’s *Medieval and Tudor Drama* and Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge’s *Performing the Sacred*, pp. 35-40.

<sup>9</sup> In “Theatre and Religious Culture,” White claims that perhaps half of England’s three million inhabitants were under age 20 in 1550 (137). White draws on the research of Susan Brigden for some of this statistical insight. For further study, see Susan Brigden’s “Youth and English Reformation,” pp. 37-67.



Still, some Protestants of the era took umbrage with theatre on moral grounds, which led to intense debates among adversaries and advocates of the stage.<sup>10</sup> Even among some Puritan leaders, however, youth proved the lone exception to their opposition against theatre. Citing the writings of antitheatrical leaders like John Northbrooke, Edmund S. Morgan acknowledged that some English Puritans “thought it lawful for students to enact plays, especially in Latin, but for anyone to be an actor or playwright by trade was no better than idleness” (341).

Still, as the Puritans made their way across the Atlantic, they brought many of their traditional antitheatrical attitudes with them. The American colonists were largely resistant to the theatre, especially in the Puritan and Quaker settlements to the north. For example, in 1687, when discussions of staging plays in Massachusetts surfaced, Harvard University Rector Increase Mather answered by writing *A Testimony Against Several Prophane and Superstitious Customs Now Practiced by Some in New England*. Citing the writings of anti-theatrical advocates in England, Mather argued that “stage-plays had their original from those devil-gods who the Gentiles worshiped,” and as such, they were “displeasing to God and dangerous to the souls of men” (A2).<sup>11</sup> In 1750, Massachusetts reinforced a previous law against theatrical performances, and the city of Philadelphia denied a theatre troupe permission to performance within the city (McConachie 120-121).<sup>12</sup> Even after the colonies united to form a new country, early legislation

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<sup>10</sup> For one of the most cited examples of moral debates over English theatre, see the writings of Jeremy Collier (*A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, 1698) and William Congreve (*Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations*, 1698).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on early anti-theatrical sentiment in the American Colonies, see Theresa Saxon's *American Theatre* (2011).

<sup>12</sup> It's important to note that mid-Atlantic and Southern colonies, with fewer groups of religious dissenters, did not have the same level of reticence toward the theatre. According to McConachie, Virginia and Maryland never enacted the same antitheatrical laws as their neighbors to the north (121).

outlawed theatrical works, although most scholars see this as an attempt to mitigate the English cultural and moral corruption, rather than as a response to religious conviction (McConachie 126).<sup>13</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Christian opinion about the theatre's merits wavered. In the nineteenth century, Morgan notes "some Christians were arguing that since it was impossible to suppress the theatre, the best thing was to accept it, reform it, and make it truly a school of virtue," a notion that was met with a skeptical eye by some church leaders (346-7). The skepticism continued throughout the century, even (perhaps especially) in the production of religious-themed work.<sup>14</sup> In a discussion of historical antitheatrical prejudice, Sinead Crowe says:

It seemed that some Christians viewed the theater as a competitor, not just because of the alternative realities it presents on stage but also, perhaps, because of its potential to offer an alternative outlet for human desires for the transcendental. This sense of competition suggests that, for some, the similarities between theater and church were a little too close for comfort. (19)

Soren Kierkegaard noted some of these similarities in his oft-quoted analogy found in *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (1846). Here, Kierkegaard compares a Protestant church service to a theatre performance.<sup>15</sup> After describing the relationship shared between the nineteenth-century actor, prompter, and the audience in theatrical productions, the philosopher argues that a similar relationship exists during the devotional address in a church service – although relationship is often misunderstood.

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<sup>13</sup> For further reading on this anti-British resistance to theatre, see Odai Johnson's *London in a Box* (2017).

<sup>14</sup> For example, two groups of Protestant leaders in San Francisco spearheaded an effort to ban the production of a Passion Play in 1879, which led to the arrest of James O'Neill (father of playwright Eugene O'Neill) for attempting to impersonate Jesus (Bial 1).

<sup>15</sup> Much of Kierkegaard's writing was influenced by his own Lutheran training, indicating that his analysis of the church-going experience was likely from a Protestant point of view (McDonald).

According to Kierkegaard, most people foolishly viewed church the same way they viewed theatre. In the chapter entitled “What Then Must I Do? The Listener’s Role in a Devotional Address,” he wrote:

Alas, in regard to things spiritual, the foolishness of many is this, that they in the secular sense look upon the speaker as the actor, and the listeners as theatregoers who are to pass judgement upon the artist. But the speaker is not the actor – not in the remotest sense. No, the speaker is the prompter. There are no mere theatregoers present, for each listener will be looking into his own heart. The stage is eternity, and the listener, if he is the true listener ... stands before God during the talk. (“What Then Must I Do? The Listener’s Role in a Devotional Address”)

In Kierkegaard’s view, the clergy leader served as prompter, guiding the actor-congregant in what he or she should say before the audience-God. Kierkegaard stated that in this scenario, “God is the critical theatregoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to,” essentially testing the earnestness and sincerity of the actor. Yet, this much-referenced theatrical metaphor becomes increasingly debatable if we transfer it from its nineteenth-century mainline Christian setting and consider it in light of the new theatrical evangelical churches that emerged a century later.

During the early 1900s, two developments impacted the way many Christians worshipped across the United States. First, a new movement, known as Pentecostalism, took root within U.S. Christianity. Although there is some disagreement about the origins of the Pentecostal movement, most scholars agree the Asuza Street Revival in Los Angeles, which started in 1906 and was led by African-American pastor William Seymour, played a pivotal role in its development (Senapatiratne 91-92, Walsh 12-13). Over time, the Pentecostals became known for “their religious fervor in worship, their high-spirited singing, and their enticing instrumental

music,” which influenced worship services across U.S. Christianity, as emotional praise choruses began replacing traditional hymns (Booker 31).<sup>16</sup>

In addition, more U.S. Christian churches began utilizing theatre as a tool for religious education and worship. According to Chicago Theological Seminary Professor Fred Eastman, churches began using theatre around the turn of the twentieth century to teach Bible stories to children, mirroring the way churches integrated theatre in previous historical periods (124). During his 1949 address to the American Educational Theatre Association, Eastman cited survey data about the widespread use of theatre in Chicago-area churches. His study found that eighty percent of the 276 churches surveyed had produced plays in the past year, primarily “to develop the spiritual and creative life of the players and the congregations” (123). Thus, by mid-century, church theatre had morphed from its domain as a children’s educational tool to a church-wide spiritual endeavor.

As evangelical churches in the United States began to change throughout the twentieth century, so did a form of theatre directed toward a new demographic – Theatre for Young Audiences. Broadly defined, Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) “includes any performance taking place in the presence of young audiences – consisting of by not limited to – theatre, dance, music, puppetry, circus and physical theatre” (The New Victory Theatre Staff). In the United States, Theatre for Young Audiences began in 1903 at a Manhattan settlement house through the work of social worker Alice Minnie Herts, who possessed “a background in theatre and a strong belief in its educational and socializing powers” (McCaslin 2). Her Children’s Educational Theatre sought to bring a higher caliber of entertainment to poor communities, teach English to immigrant children, and meet the social needs of community members (McCaslin 2).

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on the impact of Pentecostal on music and worship, see Ingalls and Yong’s *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*.

By the mid-1900s, TYA began moving from the hands of social workers to those of educators (McCaslin 3). Articles on the use of creative dramatics – an informal form of theatre that focuses on the process of creating dramatic works rather than the final product – appeared in numerous journals throughout the mid-twentieth century, including the newly formed *Educational Theatre Journal* (1949).<sup>17</sup>

Religious institutions also found themselves in the middle of the new youth theatre movement. For example, Barbara Jean Wallarab outlined the various ways religious institutions could use theatre to help children develop spiritually in her 1960 thesis, “Creative Dramatics in Religious Education.” Through her work, Wallarab outlined the benefits of using dramatic exercises to aid in a child’s spiritual development and provided examples of practical activities to use during each developmental phase.

### **The Rise of the Megachurch**

This renewed interest in theatricality within the church found its perfect match in the 1970s and 1980s, as a new church model began taking root within the American religious landscape – the aptly-named “megachurch.” Scholars often align the rise of the American megachurch with the success of the “church growth movement,” led by pastors such as Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Southern California. The church growth movement revolutionized the way some evangelical leaders approached the concept of church by incorporating elements of the business model into religious life: measuring church success through quantitative means,

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<sup>17</sup> Examples of titles that appeared in mid-century academic journals include Jean De Sales Bertram’s “Creative Dramatics in the Schools” (1958), Geraldine Brain Siks “An Appraisal of Creative Dramatics” (1965), and Kolczynski and Cepelka’s “Creative Dramatics: Process or Product?” (1977).

adapting attributes of the surrounding culture, using marketing techniques to reach potential “customers,” and forming networking communities among church leaders (Watson and Scalen 172).

According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, a megachurch is defined as “any Protestant Christian congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services, counting all adults and children at all its worship locations.” As of 2015, there are approximately 1,650 megachurches in the U.S. Seventy-one percent of megachurches are evangelical, and over seventy percent are located in the U.S. Sunbelt, especially in Florida, Georgia, Texas, and California. Most of these churches stood in suburban areas, and most are led by a long-tenured pastor (“Megachurch Definition”).

One trademark of these megachurch spaces is the inclusion of theatrical elements, including large video screens, moveable scenery, props, projections, and theatrical lighting to enhance elements of the service (Kilde 218). In some megachurches, leaders strive to create “seeker sensitive” environments by establishing an atmosphere that would be less intimidating and more familiar to people who had never been to church. Their services often resembled rock concerts and other popular performance spaces.<sup>18</sup>

Given the use of theatrical technology, such as lighting and projection, within the worship service, it’s no surprise that many of these churches incorporated drama itself into Sunday morning worship. Although U.S. churches have been performing plays for decades, most sources credit Willow Creek Community Church, a megachurch located in the Chicago suburbs,

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the seeker-sensitive church model, see Kimon Howland Sargeant’s *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (Rutgers University Press, 2000) and Thumma and Travis’s *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (Jossey-Bass, 2007): 39-40.

for the emergence of drama as a regular facet in some weekly church worship services.<sup>19</sup> In a 2000 issue of *American Theatre*, Celia Wren noted, “The past 25 years have seen an explosion in the use of theatre as a spiritual tool in evangelical Protestant circles. Largely responsible was the groundbreaking work of South Barrington, Ill.’s nontraditional, and hugely successful, Willow Creek Community Church--where, in the words of drama-ministry director Steve Pederson, ‘When [theatre] isn’t part of the service, people wonder what happened!’” (22).

Books on how to create a church-based drama ministry abound, usually written by church leaders or those employed in full-time ministry. Many books, such as The Skits Guys’ *Skits that Teach* (2006), serve as sourcebooks for scripts that can be used by churches, royalty-free.<sup>20</sup> Still others serve as more detailed instruction manuals, complete with a defense for the use of drama as part of religious worship, including the 1999 book, *Drama Ministry*, by Willow Creek’s Pederson. In some cases, drama leaders try to avoid the stereotypical preachy, moralizing skits by using theatre as a means to raise questions rather than answer them. In the 2012 book *Theater for Church: 24 Quality Sketches for Adult and Youth Drama Teams*, author David J. Swanson explains that his scripts are meant to be used, not as stand-alone events, but as a tool that “brings the audience in, asks questions, and sets the expectation that the questions will be answered directly by the Word of God” in the sermon that follows (7). Still, after completing a research project with the Christians in the Theatre Arts organization, Todd E. Johnson notes that incorporating drama into worship services “can be a difficult task because by nature it draws

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the rich dramatic history of U.S. churches in the twentieth century, see Fred Eastman’s “Drama in the Church, 1949.”

<sup>20</sup> Youth ministers Eddie James and Tommy Woodard officially became “The Skit Guys” in 1995, years after the two high school friends began performing skits together in church. Over the past twenty years, the two have performed at churches and special events across the country, while also making skits available to churches through their books and website (Fields). The duo continues to create new material, including a movie slated to begin filming in Spring 2020 (“Family Camp”).

attention to itself.” Johnson believes drama can be a powerfully effective tool for sharing the gospel if churches prayerfully consider “how to introduce drama in a way that allows people to focus their attention on God” (Johnson, “A Tale of Three Churches”).

As a result of the addition of theatre and theatrical technology in churches, employing theatre practitioners as full-time staff members is becoming commonplace, especially in megachurch environments. In a 2018 *Southern Theatre* article, Bert Wallace examines churches who employ full-time theatre artists as technicians, designers, and creative arts directors. He invites aspiring theatre practitioners to consider church opportunities when looking at career options, further demonstrating the increased co-mingling of religion and theatre in contemporary American churches.

### **Megachurches, Performance, and Generation Z**

As churches continue to integrate theatrical elements into contemporary church services and programming, some scholars have turned their attention to the many intersections between theatre and Christianity. Three current areas of research provided particularly valuable insight as I began shaping this study: the use of theatre technology in church worship, the development of church-based performing arts training programs, and cross-disciplinary perspectives on church drama program for youth.

First, there is excellent scholarship on the spectacular nature of megachurch worship services, as they integrate elements of theatre and theatrical technology into the Sunday morning experience. In *Sensational Devotion*, Jill Stevenson examines the way elements like projected song lyrics, camera work, and music amplification during a megachurch service function as “dramaturgical devices that reshape the worship service into a synaesthetically rich attraction” (190). By analyzing service structure and technical elements during the worship services of



lesser known megachurches like Immanuel Baptist Church in Virginia, as well as powerhouse churches like Joel Osteen's massive Lakewood Church in Texas, Stevenson shows how these elements work together to generate affect among worshippers.

Sociologist George Sanders examines the subject of megachurch spectacle from an economic lens, using the theory of Debord to argue that megachurch spectacles contribute to a consumerist mindset within the church. According to Sanders, "The engagement of consumers along multiple sensorial dimensions resonates across varied settings to valorize (and thus create an implicit desire for) excitement, amusement or otherwise heightened affective or emotional states" (3). Thus, while approaching the subject from different disciplinary lenses, both scholars note the power of lighting and other visual and aural effects in generating a specific response from churchgoers. These studies serve as a helpful resource for thinking about the strong emotional impact that can result from watching large-scale megachurch Christmas performances, which usher in the holiday season with expensive theatre technology and sensational special effects.

Secondly, recent emerging scholars also focus on the intersection between performing arts and evangelical churches, showing the ways churches can play a role in performing arts education. For example, in her 2014 dissertation, Hae Eun Kim analyzes Bellevue Baptist Church's Performing Arts Academy as a model music education program. She traces the history of the program from its beginnings as a training ground for church musicians to its expansion into a full-fledged performing arts academy. She then extends her findings to suggest how such programs might be used in a Korean context. Although she studies Bellevue's performance arts program from a musician's perspective, her study provides a thorough account of an arts

program that has served as a model for other churches, including First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL – a church I visited for my study.

In a 2016 master's thesis, Brandon Michael Cox creates a curriculum outline for a course designed to help music-centered worship leaders incorporate drama into their worship ministries. The course uses Steve Pederson's *Drama Ministry*, as well as traditional acting textbooks and methodology, to give music leaders a foundation in theatrical terminology and techniques, essentially providing them with the basic tools needed for directing church theatrical productions. This study highlights the fact that overseeing a church's drama ministry often falls under the purview of a church's music minister, who might not have extensive theatrical training.

Additionally, scholars in disciplines such as religious studies and sociology have studied the way churches use drama in their youth outreach efforts, particularly among U.S. minority groups. For example, religious studies professor Arlene M. Sanchez-Walsh detailed the way street drama has played a pivotal role in evangelism among Latino youth at Victory Outreach, a Pentecostal ministry based in California, since the 1960s (141). Sociologist Sandra L. Barnes conducted a study of youth outreach initiatives, including drama ministries, among the Black Church by analyzing data from seven historically black denominations. Citing numerous books on church youth ministry, Barnes notes the way church drama teams "encourage teamwork, require persons to learn biblical tenets, promote church allegiance, provide persons with wholesome activities, and serve to proselytize other young persons" (101). These studies, while not written from the perspective of a theatre scholar, provide strong qualitative and quantitative evidence for the way church theatre programs positively impact the lives of young people.

This focus on theatre's positive impact on youth serves as one of the ways church productions cross paths with the secular theatre arena. In some ways, the history of Theatre for

Young Audiences (TYA) is the history of artists who believe in the power of theatre to positively change and affect lives – a trait it shares with many contemporary church-based performers. And there has been a renewed focus on research in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences as Children’s Literature scholars set their sights on children’s drama after years of neglect. In a 2012 essay, Marah Gubar argues that “we have arrived at an exciting moment when a critical mass of scholars interested in children’s literature and childhood studies are turning to theatre history and performance studies in ways that can and should transform ... how we historicize and theorize about children’s literature and indeed childhood itself” (v). She argues that children’s literature scholars who were once only interested in writing aimed at children’s leisure time are now expanding their definition of children’s literature to include works written for educational purposes (vi). This opens new doors into the field for theatre history scholars, since many plays written for children across the ages were written with didactic aims.

Yet, some theatre artists and scholars have recently criticized these lesson-heavy, issues-based forms of TYA. For decades, Nellie McCaslin stood as the most prominent voice in TYA scholarship. Along with an arsenal of plays and writings on Creative Dramatics, the theatre historian and TYA practitioner wrote the seminal history of the Theatre for Youth movement in two books: *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History* (1971) and *Historical Guide to Children’s Theatre in America* (1987). Through her writing, she sought to draw attention to the history and work of the Theatre for Young Audience world – a valuable field that “remains a second-class citizen and lacks sufficient financial support and overall professional competence” (McCaslin, *Historical Guide*, xiv). In a 2005 article, published just months after her death at age ninety, McCaslin discussed aesthetics in children’s theatre. Tracing her decades-long journey in the field, she argued that aesthetics is “too often marginalized by practitioners today in their

pursuit of practical ends and contemporary issues-oriented scripts” (McCaslin, “Seeking the Aesthetic,” 12). Instead, she advocated for a children’s theatre that focused on developing the imagination and theme, rather than theatre promoting a “hidden agenda” (McCaslin, “Seeking the Aesthetic,” 18-19).

At the 2014 SETC Theatre Symposium, Ashley Lavery raised a similar concern in her paper, “Suzan Zeder versus *Pinkalicious*: Today’s Theatre for Young Audiences.” Suzan Zeder stands out as one of the most prominent voices on today’s Theatre for Young Audiences stage, as both a playwright and TYA advocate. Lavery notes that Zeder’s original works, despite their award-winning status, receive far less stage time at children’s theatres across the country than commercial blockbusters based on literature like *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Cat in the Hat*, and *Pinkalicious* (Lavery 9). After analyzing the theatre seasons of some of the nation’s theatres for young audiences, Lavery notes that most TYA offerings are “dominated by educational lessons” and “moralistic in nature” (Lavery 117).

The critiques put forth by both McCaslin and Lavery regarding TYA’s “amateur” reputation for producing less-than-stellar plays containing a “hidden agenda” and repressive “moralism” mirror critiques lodged at religious theatre. But both fields also share an unshakeable optimism regarding theatre’s potential for good. According to leading TYA playwright Suzan Zeder, “[T]he field of TYA still bears both the stigma of its amateur roots and the inspiration optimism of its founders’ belief in the power of the arts to change lives” (Zeder 9). This study allows me to examine the overlapping issues shared by church-based theatre and Theatre for Young Audiences in a new way, as I explore some of the strategies employed in these fields to focus on improved artistic values, while still seeking to positively impact lives of young audience members.

But what exactly constitutes a “young audience?” TYA artists debate a wide range of issues including the “age grouping of the audience” (McCaslin 4). Even today, in the mission statements of most TYA programs and agencies, there is no clear definition of what age range constitutes a young audience. For the purpose of this study, I rely on definitions from the church ministry world. While the terms “children” and “youth” are often used interchangeably in many contexts, in a church setting, those terms often suggest specific age groups. According to Jeff Land, editor-in-chief of preteen resources at Lifeway Christian Resources, the traditional model of church-based youth ministry includes students in seventh grade and above. I use this delineation as a guide, using the term “children’s ministry” to refer to church programming and outreach aimed at elementary-aged students in Kindergarten through fifth grade (usually ages 5-11). Youth ministry refers to programming and educational opportunities that target middle and high school students (ages 12-18).<sup>21</sup> At times, I also refer to both groups collectively as members of “Generation Z,” using the generational divide recently set forth by the Pew Research Center. According to Pew Research, Generation Z refers to person born from 1997 onward, which includes both the children and youth referenced in my study (Dimock).

The term “evangelical” can be even more complex to define. In the current political climate, the word evangelical is often linked to a political stance – usually aligned with conservative, right-wing politics. The Barna group, a Christian research organization, uses a definition that classifies people based on a detailed set of criteria based on personal theological beliefs.<sup>22</sup> In the book *Preaching to Convert*, John Fletcher refers to the term “evangelical” as an

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<sup>21</sup> Sixth grade provides a small conundrum, as some school districts still include sixth graders in elementary schools, while others move them up using a middle school model. In addition, some churches create special pre-teen ministries for students in fifth and sixth grades (Land). Because most of the churches include sixth graders in their youth (teen) ministries rather than children’s ministries, I categorize sixth graders as “youth,” rather than “children.”

<sup>22</sup> For Barna to classify a person as evangelical, they must meet all the criteria to be classified as “born again,” then meet an additional seven criteria. According to Barna, born again Christians are “people who said they have made a

example of an essentially contested concept, citing the work of W.B. Gallie. Gallie noted that some words “seemed to lack a consensus definition” and “proposed installing ongoing dissention about their meaning as part of their essential definition (Fletcher 51). Attempting to understand the term means navigating a complex set of historical and theological factors that have shifted (and continue to shift) over the last several centuries.<sup>23</sup> For this paper, I will be relying heavily on the understanding of “evangelicalism” offered by Mark A. Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Basing his definition on the work of historian David Bebbington, Noll states that evangelical churches and individuals “stress the need for a supernatural new birth, profess faith in the Bible as a revelation from God, encourage spreading the gospel through missions and personal evangelism, and emphasize the saving character of Jesus’ death and resurrection” (Noll 9). This aligns with Bebbington’s idea that evangelicals adhere to conversionism, Biblicism, activism, and crucicentricism (Noll 8). I chose to limit my study to evangelical Christian churches, rather than their mainline or Catholic counterparts, because of the evangelical emphasis on conversion as a specific event, rather than an ongoing spiritual process (Green). I am interested in the way some evangelical churches use theatre to present the gospel message,

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personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today, and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior” (Kinnaman and Lyons 249-250). The additional seven criteria for being evangelical include: “(1) saying their faith is very important in their life today; (2) believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; (3) believing that Satan exists; (4) believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; (5) believing that Jesus Christ led a sinless life on earth; (6) asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and (7) describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today” (Kinnaman and Lyons 249-50).

<sup>23</sup> In *Preaching to Convert*, John Fletcher discusses the “triangulation between theology, history, and sociology” that fosters a more comprehensive understanding of present-day U.S. evangelicalism (72). In chapter two, he offers a detailed look at the historical factors (such as the Great Awakening and other revival movements) and basic theological ideas that mark much of evangelical thought, while also outlining the factors (such as the lack of a central authority proscribing what constitutes evangelical doctrine and its complicated and contested ties to the religious right) that make evangelicalism an “essentially contested concept” (51).

believing that the performance can serve as a potential catalyst toward that instantaneous life-changing conversion experience.

While research exists regarding church-based theatre programs for youth, most of the work I found was not written from a theatre perspective, but rather from the lens of religious studies, sociology, or music studies. Through my research, I want to extend these previous scholarly conversations by studying evangelical church-based youth drama initiatives from a theatrical lens.

By limiting my research to performances for youth at U.S. evangelical megachurches, I realize that there are many groups that will be excluded – namely mainline churches, Catholic congregations, and other faith groups that make up the vastly diverse religious landscape of our country. And while church researchers such as Scott Thumma argue that “megachurches as a whole are significantly better than other congregations at holding together multiracial, multiethnic congregations,” the fact remains that ethnic minority groups make up only a small percentage of many megachurch congregations (Zoll). My hope is that this study serves as a starting point for larger conversations on the way various faith communities use youth-based performance in different worship environments.

Through this project, I examine four types of church-based theatre for youth found in U.S. megachurches, analyzing the structure and function of each performance type within the church’s ministry. Throughout my research, I use performance analysis, site visits, and interviews as the primary research methods. Because there is currently little theatre scholarship that specifically examines youth-centered church performance, I wanted this study to serve as a broad overview of the different types of youth theatre created by evangelical churches. In order to accomplish this, I chose churches based on several characteristics. First, I wanted to include

representation across evangelicalism's denominational lines, which allowed me to gain a broader understanding of different evangelical performance forms. (For example, The Singing Christmas Tree was a recurring theme among Southern Baptist congregations, while human videos were a distinct facet of Assemblies of God youth ministry.) Secondly, I sought out churches from multiple U.S. geographical areas to gain a broader sense of the way evangelical performance is used throughout the country. In this study, I visited churches in the South, Midwest, and West Coast. Lastly, I looked to include churches – like Saddleback and Bellevue Baptist – that served as models for other likeminded churches. (Does the church serve as a model that other churches follow? Or does the church embody a widespread trend among evangelical churches?) The chapters move in progression based on the level of youth involvement in the performance: from audience member to supporting cast to principal player, which allowed me to examine the way performances involve children and youth on both sides of the stage.

Chapter 1 focuses on performance used in weekly children's worship services. In many evangelical megachurches, children do not regularly attend the worship services with their parents. Instead, children participate in separate age-specific worship services that utilize elements like music, games, video, and interactive lessons to teach biblical principles. These children's large group meetings usually incorporate scripts created and enacted by adults for young audiences. Some church leaders write their own scripts to use each week, custom tailored to their specific church's resources and requirements. Others depend on pre-existing children's curriculum, such as Orange by ReThink and KidsOwn Worship by Group Publishing, which regularly incorporate live storytelling scripts and creative media into their weekly lessons. For this chapter, I visited Harvest Christian Fellowship in California, which uses original skits to bring each week's lesson to life. I also went to Pathway Church in Kansas, which uses storyteller



scripts and media created by Orange, a popular religious education program among U.S. megachurches. Examining the unique way each children's ministry uses scripts to teach biblical lessons, I analyze the strengths and challenges of using live performance as a religious education tool in the digital age.

In Chapter 2, performance values are taken to a whole new level, as the focus turns to family-focused, full-scale theatrical spectacles performed outside of the normal Sunday morning timeslot. The stage lighting, sound technology, and projection systems ushered into twenty-first century worship spaces for weekly services have radically modified the theatrical capabilities of megachurches. Instead of traditional ragtag Christmas pageants, contemporary productions at churches such as Prestonwood Church in Texas, First Baptist Church, Orlando, Celebration Church in Florida, and First Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale feature elements like spectacular light shows, professional aerialists, and elaborate set designs to attract an audience beyond the traditional church-goer. And unlike most Sunday morning children's worship services, these church-based spectacles feature both adult and juvenile actors performing side-by-side in million-dollar extravaganzas that target a multi-generational audience. By studying this form of performance, I examine the role spectacle plays as an evangelical tool in the contemporary megachurch.

Chapter 3 focuses on children and youth drama teams present in some evangelical churches. In this chapter, the roles reverse as children and youth perform for a largely adult audience. For this chapter, I visited Saddleback Church in California, which uses an annual Christmas musical to teach students about sharing their faith with others. In addition, I attended the Florida Fine Arts Festival sponsored by the Assemblies of God denomination. Each year, approximately 65,000 middle and high schoolers compete in district and regional festivals for a

chance to advance to Nationals. Performing for more than just bragging rights, the festival aims to encourage students to use their artistic gifts in ministry. In this chapter, I show how church leaders use performance as an evangelism tool; as they teach students the gospel through song and scripted dialogue, they also empower the younger generation to share that message as evangelists through their performance.

Finally, in chapter 4, I examine church-based performing arts academies across the U.S. As more churches incorporate the performing arts into the worship service, there is an increasing need for artistic training. As a result, some churches have instituted performing arts academies that meet at the church building throughout the week. These academies offer courses in music, dance, and theatre for both church members and non-churchgoing community members. For this paper, I focus on the performing arts academies at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, and Calvary Chapel in West Lake Village, California. In conclusion, I look at the rise of Christian Youth Theatre, a nationwide, nonprofit theatre education program that meets in churches across the country. I argue this organization provides a model of the way churches and schools may work together to provide arts education at a time of precarity.

Given the Christian Church's long history of anti-theatrical prejudice, it might be easy for some theatre scholars to dismiss these current theatrical impulses within U.S. megachurches. Yet, I believe the way performance factors into the regular church experience of an entire generation of megachurch-going young people could hold significant implications for the way they conceptualize both worship and theatre as they mature into adulthood. In term of worship, incorporating theatre into the church service challenges the order in the metaphor offered by Kierkegaard. As theatrical lights move across a fog-tinged stage during a worship song, or

congregants laugh along to a comical sketch before the sermon, who is the real audience during the worship service? How do church leaders walk the fine line between God-centered worship and entertainment? Likewise, when sitting in the audience watching skits and short plays becomes part of a child's weekly routine, how might this shape the way they approach theatrical performances outside of the church? Through my project, I will examine some of these questions and work to bridge the gap between religious and secular theatre artists as they seek to reach a new generation with the power of performance.

## **Chapter 1. Sunday Morning Stages: Incorporating Performance into Children’s Worship Services**

Growing up in an evangelical church, I remember my Sunday morning church experiences as a child. Some Sundays, it meant sitting on a cushioned church pew with my family, singing traditional hymns from the Baptist Hymnal, and writing notes on the back of the little envelopes intended for the weekly offering. Other times, it meant heading over the bottom floor of the educational building, with its linoleum floor and partitions designed to section the space into separate “rooms” as needed. There, I spent Sunday mornings moving my arms and legs along to songs about “Father Abraham” and listening to Bible stories using pictures from the Sunday School curriculum taught by parent volunteers.

Decades later, when I volunteered to serve on the drama team for my megachurch’s children’s ministry, I quickly learned that times had changed. Each week, we met over a hundred elementary school kids in a designated children’s worship space featuring a beach-themed set complete with a surfboard and other brightly colored props. Worship time incorporated high-energy songs with lyrics conveniently projected on a large screen. A designated “host” presented the scripted weekly lesson in a high-energy, interactive way. The drama team, a rotating cast of teens and adults, reinforced the lesson through a new skit each week. Since rehearsal time was limited, the tech team projected each week’s script on monitors located on the front of the stage (for which I was immensely grateful on more than one Sunday morning.)

In the introduction, I noted the tension that can exist between worship and entertainment, especially in the megachurch environment. The way that churches structure the Sunday worship service – whether for children or adults – provides insight into the church’s beliefs about the purpose of weekend services. Should Sunday morning services be seeker-focused – designed as a fun and familiar introduction to faith for the spiritually curious – complete with live bands,

theatrical lighting, skits, and videos? Or are Sunday morning services for the believers, who assemble together to practice their faith corporately? Can worship services possibly function as both? These aren't just questions for those leading the megachurch's main worship service. They also apply to the children's ministers who carefully plan weekly worship experiences for the congregation's youngest churchgoers.

In this chapter, I focus on the way two megachurches employ theatrical elements as they seek to balance the responsibilities of both discipleship and evangelism in children's worship services.<sup>1</sup> I visited two churches that create special children's worship services each week with the goal of developing a solid faith foundation in their young attendees. In December 2016, I traveled to Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California, where leaders created their own scripts and material for "Rock the World," the weekly large group time for kids.<sup>2</sup> Then, I conducted a weekday visit to Pathway Church in Wichita, Kansas, one of the many U.S. churches using "Orange," a popular provider of Christian curriculum, as the basis for "The Neighborhood," their children's ministry program. Like many churches with separate worship services for kids, scripts and other forms of performance play a strong supporting role in teaching the fundamentals of the faith at both churches, although these performance aspects are incorporated in different ways. In this chapter, I analyze the strengths and challenges of these Sunday morning worship experiences as leaders strive to create fun, engaging environments to present the gospel message while also attempting to lay a lifelong foundation of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the exact definitions of evangelism and discipleship are sometimes debated in Christian circles, evangelism normally focuses on the non-believer; it's the act of sharing the gospel for the purpose of conversion. Discipleship, on the other hand, focuses on the believer; it's the process of a convert becoming "the kind of person who naturally does what Jesus did" by learning and following the teachings of Jesus (Hull 20-31).

<sup>2</sup> Since this initial visit, the church began a new Sunday morning large group experience for kids known as "Big Time" For more information on "Big Time," see [harvest.church/kids/big-time/](http://harvest.church/kids/big-time/).

Before examining these case studies, I want to provide some background into the historical context of religious education in U.S. Christian churches, as well as some insight into contemporary debates regarding a child's place in church worship. Clearly, children's programming in U.S. Christianity has evolved over time, but the idea of church-based religious education began centuries ago.<sup>3</sup> The modern Sunday School movement emerged in Britain in the 1780s and made its way to the nascent United States shortly thereafter. The movement targeted illiteracy and a general lack of educational opportunities for children at a time when youth spent long hours working in factories in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Since children routinely worked six days a week, Sundays became the day for children to receive an education. Early Sunday School teachers used the Bible as the reading textbook and encouraged literacy by having students write Scripture passages (Larsen). According to Timothy Larsen, "by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Sunday School attendance was a near universal aspect of childhood." This push toward children and youth-centered programming reached new heights in the wake of the post-World War II baby boom when Vacation Bible School, youth camps, youth-centered parachurch organizations, and other religious educational opportunities exploded in evangelical life (Sharp 52). Gretchen Buggeln states that, by the mid-twentieth century, even church architecture pointed to the primary role children played in church considerations. "Consisting typically of a sanctuary for worship, a small administration area, and a large education wing focused on classroom instruction for the primary grades, the sprawling postwar church plant reflects an emphasis on family worship and the education of young children" (Buggeln 227).

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the history of Sunday school in the United States, see K. Elise Deal's "All Our Children May be Taught of God: Sunday Schools and the Role of Childhood in Creating Evangelical Benevolence" (2018); Timothy Larsen's "Where Did Sunday School Start?" (2008); and Sally G. McMillen's *To Raise up the South: Sunday Schools in Black and White Churches, 1865-1915* (2001).

But today, churches hold very different ideas of how “family worship” and “the education of young children” should be implemented in an evangelical context. My own experience as a children’s ministry volunteer opened my eyes to the vastly different ways churches approach ministry to their youngest Sunday morning attendees. In some churches, the younger generation are treated like mini-congregants. They attend the church’s worship services with their parents and participate in all elements of the main worship service. Many evangelical megachurches, like the one I described, take a different approach. In these churches, children’s programming isn’t relegated to a Sunday School class. Instead, children and teens participate in separate worship services, usually housed in their own wing or building of the church. These kid-focused services often incorporate elements such as live music, skits, games, and a speaker who presents a sermon geared especially for each age group. While these choices are designed to encourage spiritual growth through age-appropriate activities, this makes it entirely possible that a child raised in a megachurch that follows this model will not regularly attend “big church” (a worship service with adults) until they graduate from high school.

In recent years, some evangelical church leaders have pushed back against the trend toward separate worship experiences for children. In fact, *Children’s Ministry Magazine* conducted a 2014 poll on the issue of children and worship, noting that “of all the issues that’ll get children’s ministers debating, this one has to be the hottest” (Children’s Ministry Magazine Staff). The close split in their survey results supported their claim: Of the 2,032 respondents, 48% believed children should worship in a corporate, intergenerational setting, while 52% preferred a separate church worship experience geared especially for children (Children’s Ministry Magazine Staff).

Evangelical megachurch pastors leading the charge for intergenerational worship include prolific Christian author John Piper and Southern Baptist Convention president and author J.D. Greear, who have both spoken publicly about the value of children attending worship services with their parents (Showalter). Addressing the topic in a 2016 episode of his podcast, Piper said the conundrum of what to do with children on Sunday mornings was one of the first issues he confronted when he began pastoring Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1980.<sup>4</sup> Although readily acknowledging that his church's worship services were over the heads of younger congregants, Piper argues that children still absorb the songs and content of the church services in a way that can make a lasting impression, even when they claim to be bored. In addition, Piper said that "the aim is that the children catch the passion for worshiping God by watching mom and dad enjoy God week after week," although he notes this only happens when parents attend church out of love for God and not out of duty or obligation. According to Piper, "The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with mom and dad in authentic communion with God and his people between the ages of four and seventeen is utterly incalculable."

On the other end of the spectrum, supporters of separate church worship services designed specifically for children argue these spaces allow kids to become active participants in worship with songs and activities designed to help them learn about God at their developmental level. Advocates for these child-friendly services, such as children's ministry leader Debbie Rowley, claim these services can better serve students by providing a less-constrictive physical space while customizing lessons that meet the requirements of children with different learning

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<sup>4</sup> Under Piper's over thirty-year tenure, Bethlehem Baptist Church grew from 300 members to approximately 5,000. A 2010 survey conducted by Lifeway Research named Piper one of "the ten most influential living preachers – alongside Billy Graham, Rick Warren and Max Lucado" (French).



needs and attention spans. In a recent article, Rowley noted that parents can unintentionally communicate negative messages about God and church when children attend worship in an intergenerational setting:

Most adult worship services feature a sermon that can vary in length from 20 to 60 minutes – far longer than the attention span of young children. Most kids find a sermon an exercise in endurance and will find other ways to occupy their time. Parents often reinforce this habit of “turning off” Bible teaching by bringing things such as coloring books and crayons to keep the children busy. Parents don’t realize they’re training their kids to see church as irrelevant and Bible teaching as something to ignore. (Children’s Ministry Magazine Staff)

Other poll respondents found children’s presence in intergenerational services to be mutually ineffective, arguing that adults also suffered because they were distracted or otherwise forced to split their attention between the service elements and disciplining bored children (Children’s Ministry Magazine Staff).

While church leaders continue to discuss the best place for students to be on Sunday mornings, a bigger question lies behind this debate: How can churches best reach children and teenagers with the gospel message, while empowering them as the future leaders of the church? Even as children are often physically separated from central worship spaces in evangelical megachurches, developing future leaders of the faith still exists as a central mission of the church. And for evangelical leaders, the debate over the best way to reach children with the message of the gospel is anything but trivial.

Research shows religious beliefs held during childhood (or a lack thereof) can hold long-term implications about the way people think about faith well into adulthood. In the book *unChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons use Barna research data to explore common perceptions of Christianity among the younger generation. The authors write:

Based on extensive research on this topic, our data points out clearly that the faith trajectory of the vast majority of Americans is mapped out before they become adults,

often before they even reach adolescents. In fact, for every one hundred who are not born again by the time they reach age eighteen, only six of those individuals will commit their lives to Christ for the first time as an adult. (72-73)

These statistics can create a sense of urgency among church leaders, especially among evangelicals who – unlike many of their mainline Christian counterparts – view children as potential converts in need of salvation.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, many evangelical church leaders invest time and resources into children and youth ministries because they believe those are the key years for making an evangelistic impact and planting seeds of faith.

These early years become increasingly important when examining data about Americans' changing religiosity. According to Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape study, the percentage of Americans categorizes as "religious nones" grew significantly from 2007 (16%) to 2014 (23%). This group includes those who consider themselves atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular" when it comes to religious beliefs (Lipka). The likelihood of someone claiming no religion increases with each new generation. Approximately 35% of millennials now consider themselves as religiously unaffiliated (Lipka).

Lifeway Research found a similar shift in church attendance, even among formerly churched teens. According to their findings, "two-thirds (66%) of American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they also dropped out for a year between the ages of 18 and 22." Even more troubling for church leaders, only 31% of those than drop out for at least a year make an eventual return to regular attendance (Earls). Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, said "What this research tells us may be even more concerning for Protestant churches: there was nothing about the church experience or

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the differences between mainline and evangelical Christianity and their views of salvation, see Richard Peace's "Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge" (2004) and Corwin E. Smidt's "Evangelical and Mainline Protestants at the Turn of the Millennium: Taking Stock and Looking Forward" (2007): pp. 32-34.

faith foundation of those teenagers that caused them to seek out a connection to a local church once they entered a new phase of life” (Earls).

Others challenge these statistics, noting trends of slowing church attendance among early adults has existed since the 1950s without long-term effects, as they claim these adults often return to the church when raising their own families (Stanton). Others argue that most religious “nones” are not leaving a “meaningful faith,” but were likely cultural Christians who “are just no longer using an identity which meant little to them anyway” (Stanton). For many church leaders, however, these downward trends are still disturbing, even if they have existed for decades or stem from large-scale casual Christianity.

So how can children and youth leaders help students develop a meaningful, long-lasting faith during their early, church-going years? This question continues to motivate church leaders across the globe. A study of children’s ministries in South Africa, for example, uncovered many of the same issues mentioned by U.S. church leaders – namely, that church services and children’s programming can be less-than-stimulating for the children they seek to reach. The South Africa-based researchers concluded that “children and youth expressed a need to develop spiritually and be engaged in Biblical teachings by means of creative, interactive and stimulating activities” (124). The study further suggested that church-based music, drama, and dance groups “be used as a way of Biblical teaching to engage children and youth in the learning experience and provide them with ways to express their spirituality” (Beukes and Van der Westhuizen 124).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the definitions of children and youth used by Beukes and Van de Westhuizen differ from the definitions used throughout my project. For the South African study, the age bracket used for children was 10-15, and the age bracket for youth was 18-35 (Beukes and Van der Westhuizen 112-113).

In the 1980s, theologian and psychologist James Fowler drew upon psychological research of human development to create his theory of “the five stages of faith.” Some church-based leaders are drawing from these ideas to promote faith formation in ways that correspond to a children’s developmental level. “Christian educators realized that learning could be enhanced by appropriate attention to the different ways in which persons learn at different ages or levels of maturation, and it is their task, at least in part, to help facilitate growth in faith in age-appropriate ways” (Cooper-White and Cooper-White 99). For many U.S. megachurches, including Harvest Christian Fellowship in California and Pathway Church in Kansas, children’s ministry leaders implement a wide variety of teaching methods – including scripts, sets, and other theatrical elements – to engage a new generation with an ancient faith.

### **Harvest Christian Fellowship: “Rockin’ the World” in Southern California**

As a California teen in the 1970s, Greg Laurie likely never imagined how a grassroots spiritual movement in his home state of California would radically transform his life. But in 1973, 19-year-old Laurie started a home-based Bible study – a direct result of his conversion to Christianity during the “Jesus Movement” (Murashko, Laurie).<sup>7</sup>

That Bible study became Harvest Christian Fellowship, a 15,000-person congregation in Riverside, California, a city of over 300,000 residents situated roughly fifty miles east of Los Angeles. The independent church started as a product of the Calvary Chapel movement, but it officially joined the Southern Baptist Convention in 2017 (Laurie).<sup>8</sup> Laurie continues to lead the

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<sup>7</sup> The Jesus Movement was a loosely organized hybrid of Pentecostal Christianity and the hippie movement that started in San Francisco and spread across the country throughout the late 1960s and 1970s (Eskridge 1-2). For more information on the Jesus Movement, see Richard A. Bustraan’s *The Jesus People Movement: A Story of Spiritual Revolution Among the Hippies* (2014) and Larry Eskridge’s *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention currently stands as the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, with 14.8 million members as of 2018. The denomination differs from Catholic churches and most mainline

church, along with a series of revivals known as the Harvest Crusades, which have been attended by 4.5 million people across the world (Murashko).

I arrived at Harvest Community Fellowship on Sunday, December 11, 2016, just before the 12:00 p.m. service. As with many megachurches, trying to navigate the large, unfamiliar campus for the first time felt intimidating, but a team of volunteers worked to make the experience easier. As I turned into the church parking lot, I was greeted by signs telling me to turn on my emergency lights if I was a first-time visitor; the lights alert parking attendants to wave newcomers toward the designated visitor parking area. Once I made my way toward the building, volunteer staff members at the outdoor welcome center pointed me in the direction of Topher's Place.

Situated on a small hill to the right of the main worship center, Topher's Place houses the children's ministry at Harvest Christian Fellowship's Riverside campus. A large theater sits just beyond the main lobby doors where each Sunday morning, hundreds of kids fill rows of lime-green chairs for a special large group worship time known as "Rock the World." This children's church experience includes music, drama, puppets, and the occasional video in a combination described as part Nickelodeon, part *Sesame Street*, part *The Muppets*, and part *Saturday Night Live* (Spurr, "Kids Praise Club").

When church staffers first directed me toward the theater, they assured me I would have no trouble identifying the person in charge. Sure enough, when Cathy Spurr appeared in front of the stage giving last-minute instructions to a team of performers, there was no doubt who was directing the show. A red-haired powerhouse of seemingly endless energy, Cathy Spurr has led Rock the World for over twenty years. She draws upon her own musical background in her

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denominations because of its decentralized structure; each individual church is considered autonomous over the affairs of its own congregation (Fahmy).

ministry; in the past, she's performed with evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham and Greg Laurie at various crusades and sang on albums by popular Christian recording label Maranatha (Spurr, Personal Interview). Most recently, she co-wrote a children's book and CD called *The Story of Love*, which I found on a featured table in the Harvest Christian Fellowship bookstore.

Spurr also writes much of the material used during Rock the World each week, and she believes that children's ministry leaders must be creative and innovative. She notes the way mainstream entertainment executives spent countless amounts of time and resources to reach the minds and hearts of kids through TV, comics, video games, and advertisements for the purpose of financial gain. In response, Spurr questions how much time Christian children's ministries spend doing the same:

As Children's Ministry Workers ... how much time do we spend praying for God to give us a new vision, a renewed passion to communicate His love to our children ... to HIS children? How much time do we spend researching and developing ways to reach His kids? How much time and money do we spend to make our moments with them creative and stimulating, memorable and fruitful?" At Rock the World, we have a message — it's God's Good News from His Holy Word. I'm not saying that the Rock the World method is the only or the best way to communicate to kids. I'm simply looking at what the kids seem to like... what grabs their attention, keeps it, and causes them to remember. (Spurr, "Kids Praise Club")

Each week, Spurr and her team strive to create fun and memorable experiences for children by using drama, puppets, music, and movement to teach biblical principles.

The Rock the World team, comprised of volunteers ages sixteen years old and up, generally receive a new script to review during the week, and they run through it the morning of the performance (Spurr, Personal Interview). On the Sunday morning I attended, the elementary-aged students attended Rock the World first, while the younger children came in afterwards for their own, age-appropriate programming. Each group was escorted into the theater by their teacher for approximately twenty minutes of songs, dance, and drama using a theme Bible verse.

A Rock the World volunteer served as a host, or “ringmaster,” guiding students through the large group time.

For the first performance, the Kids’ Praise Club, the church’s auditioned children’s music ensemble, joined the adult leaders/performers for a production called “The Heart and Soul of Christmas.” During the opening song, an upbeat version of “Joy to the World,” Spurr took on a dual role. While serving as the choir director, she frequently sang right along with the students, performing the choreography with energy. During the drama, Christmas-inspired songs were interspersed with the story of Heloise, a woman who doesn’t like Christmas. This “Rock the World” mini-musical felt like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* meets *A Christmas Carol* wrapped inside the structure of a classic melodrama. The main characters wore Victorian-era skirts and shawls, while the Kids’ Praise Club members donned flat “newsboy” hats, scarves, and vests that were reminiscent of a production of *Oliver!* Digital projections on a large screen on the back wall and two flat-screen monitors served as the primary backdrop, while a few key set pieces (such as a bench and streetlight) adorned the stage.

This morning’s host/ringmaster was a young woman in her twenties, who was also a former Kid’s Praise Clubber herself. The performance began by introducing each of the characters to the young audience members. The cast of characters included the typical good guys and bad guys presented in an over-the-top acting style that matched the classic melodramatic feel of the script.

Audience interaction serves as a central component of Rock the World. Spurr reiterated several times that Rock the World aimed at “keeping them [the audience] from being couch potatoes” (Spurr, Personal Interview). The actors broke the fourth wall and used the aisle to increase their interaction with the audience. Audience members also participated through

moments of repetition, corporate singing, and script involvement. For example, teenage volunteers stood stage right, holding cue cards with phrases such as “Boo Hiss” and “Awww.” The young audience members practiced responding as each card was held up in preparation for their big moments during the play.

The performance concluded with a cliff-hanger, encouraging students to come back next week for the conclusion of Heloise’s story. Following the drama, Rock the World ended with a time of call-and-response. The host encouraged students to “Repeat after me” to which the kids automatically responded with “after me!” – clearly a long-running joke between leaders and participants. The host then read parts of Luke 19:10 as the students repeated. The call-and-response continued for the closing prayer. Then, the first group of the students filed out.

After the first group left, I noticed the Rock the World volunteers making changes to the stage set-up. Soon afterwards, a second group of students – much younger than the first – entered the theater. To my surprise, the second group experienced an entirely different performance. The Kids’ Praise Club started the performance with the song “Extra, Extra,” one of the high-energy numbers from the mini-musical they had performed earlier. But there were noticeable changes from the previous performance. Two volunteers served as Rock the World hosts, instead of just one. The biggest change, however, was the addition of puppets.

In lieu of a live-action musical, the younger students watched a puppet show. In fact, the inclusion of puppetry in children’s ministry remained a recurring theme in some of the churches I visited throughout my research. Indeed, puppets have a long history as a pedagogical tool. Some trace Christianity’s use of the ancient art form to the church’s early days when puppets were used by “early Christians who wished to help each other to picture the story of Christ” (Trentelman 252). Noting the use of puppets in pantomimes throughout the seventh, eighth, and



ninth centuries, Trentelman claims “puppets lived in the churches and acted upon stages built for them in the walls of the Church buildings” (252). In recent years, some counselors and therapists make regular use of puppets in their work with children, observing that “children identify with puppets, project their own feelings and conflicts onto the figures, re-enact anxiety causing events, and try out new behaviors (Carter and Mason 50). In addition, educational journals in recent decades offer several examples of the value of puppets in teaching, noting that “puppets can be used to introduce touchy subjects like building self-confidence” (Kaufman 401). According to puppet ministry director and author Susan Parsons, the non-threatening and anthropomorphic nature of puppets lowers defenses of audience members, making them more receptive to the message presented (7-8).

The puppet show performed at Rock the World serves as a classic example of using non-human actors to discuss a sensitive issue with young audience members. The puppeteers told the story of the Jolly family – a mom, dad, and their son. During the puppet show, the young son talks to a snowman seated on a nearby bench about his problem; one of his friends won’t be friends with him anymore. Puppets sang along with the children’s choir as they performed songs related to the puppet show plot. One song taught students that a friend “loves at all times” while another invited the kids to “trust in the Lord” to help them with their problems. The performance ended with the same call-and-response pattern as the first group, but this time, their verse of the day was Matthew 28:20, which says that God will be with you always. The host reminded the students of the lessons from the puppet show – they should share their hurts with their parents, and God is always with them.

Overall, two distinct facets of Rock the World stood out from a performance perspective. First, the kid’s large group gathering uses performance elements to create opportunities for both

evangelism and discipleship in the worship setting. Like a seeker-friendly adult worship service, Rock the World incorporates upbeat music, theatre technology, and entertaining features (like skits and puppets) to create a safe and familiar environment for visitors. Yet, Rock the World also provided opportunities for young believers to grow in their developing faith. Students recited Bible verses and participated in prayer along with the worship leaders in a call-and-response style, with leaders modeling these spiritual disciplines for the children. In addition, students in the Kids' Praise Club took on worship leadership roles, allowing them to learn how to use their musical gifts in ministry from an early age.

Rock the World also demonstrated a unique blend of the megachurch worship style with TYA's amateur roots. Like many megachurches' adult worship teams, children who want to participate in the Kids' Praise Club audition to be in the group. Although the vocal group was markedly larger than the typical church Sunday morning praise team, having an auditioned vocal ensemble, combined with the video screens and other theatre technology in the kids' large group space, lent a sense of the megachurch's polish to the Sunday morning experience.

Yet, other aspects of the performance resembled many of the descriptions I read detailing the roots of secular Theatre for Young Audiences shows. Suzan Zeder recalls that TYA started with neighborhood-based, volunteer-led productions that sought to instill values in their young, diverse audience members (9). While these TYA performances were decidedly amateur endeavors, Zeder also notes that the performances were marked by "the inspiration optimism of its founders' belief in the power of the arts to change lives" (9). This largely defined the overall feeling of the December Rock the World performance I observed.

The performers I watched were volunteers, not professionals. The group performed original material with a clear message, reinforced through repetition and audience participation.

And Spurr strongly believes that ministries like Rock the World don't require professional talent or a large budget to be effective. According to Spurr, "It takes a calling, much prayer, a vision, a passion, a willing heart, patience, commitment, unity, your blood, sweat and tears, your time, (did I mention: "your time"?), a child-like joy, love for God, and for His Children" (Spurr, "Kids Praise Club"). And it was witnessing the passion and joy of those leading the kids' Sunday morning experience that I remembered most about my time at Rock the World.

### **Pathway Church and Orange: "reThinking" Traditional Religious Education**

Unlike the original performance I attended at Harvest, many children's ministries across the country rely on religious education curriculum created by one of the many Christian publishers available today. Some of those publishers offer skits, scripts, and other live performance options that children's ministry leaders can incorporate into their weekly worship and teaching time. Sometimes those scripts are enacted by the children themselves, which some ministry leaders see as an effective way to teach the Bible. "[Faith] formation occurs not only in the mind and in the heart, but in the body. As children work out the stories from the Bible by reenacting them and even making up new scenes ... there is a natural flowing together of learning, meaning making, and spiritual growth" (Cooper-White and Cooper-White 108). Yet other children's ministries use teen and adult leaders to bring the script to life in a way that reinforces the Bible lesson and illustrates how the lessons might apply in kids' day-to-day life.

Choosing children's ministry curriculum can be a daunting task; a simple internet search of kid's ministry programs produces a dizzying wealth of options, reviews, advertisements, and blog posts praising some programs while warning of the deficiencies of others. Among U.S. evangelical megachurches, however, Orange, a product of the nondenominational reThink Group, serves as a frequently selected curriculum option. This is not surprising considering

Orange was founded by Reggie Joiner, co-founder and former executive director of family ministries at North Point Community Church, the second largest church in the United States behind Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church ("Reggie Joiner," Gore).

So what should religious curriculum look like in the digital age? Pamela and Michael Cooper-White, both Protestant pastors and seminary leaders, argue that "authentic Christian education and formation today ... must be inclusive, intercultural, and designed to be available not just 'in church' but in multiple locales and venues, including in our homes, at our workplaces, and increasingly via the Internet and other emerging technological spaces" (103).

Orange makes this church-home connection the core of its curriculum. The Orange blog explains:

Orange is a path, a strategy that combines the strength of two – yellow and red – to create the brilliance of another – Orange. By combining the critical influences of the light of the church (yellow) with the love of the family (red), the Orange strategy synchronizes efforts and shows a generation who God is, more effectively than either could alone. (Orange Leaders, "What is Orange?")

This statement reveals Orange leaders' underlying belief that the church cannot be the sole purveyor of a child's spiritual training. If a child is going to develop a meaningful, lifelong faith that lasts into their adult years, that child must see faith as relevant to all parts of life – not just Sunday mornings at church. To aid in this home-church integration, Orange not only produces web-based, highly customizable curriculum for church use, they also provide supplementary material for parents to use with their kids at home throughout the week. This material enables parents to play an active role in their child's religious education by reinforcing and extending what was taught in church on Sunday.

Churches also choose Orange for its comprehensive educational options. Orange creates curriculum for a wide age range – from preschoolers to teenagers – in a way that allows

theological concepts to build upon each other as children grow and progress through a church's age-specific ministries. The Orange staff states that "part of the overall strategy is to synchronize the efforts of all leaders and establish consistency in the lives of kids and teenagers from preschool through high school" (Orange Leaders, "What is Orange?"). Indeed, one megachurch children's minister told me Orange gives all the leaders in his church a common vocabulary to use as they plan and talk with each other. Age-level ministers can also train together by attending the Orange Conference, an annual gathering for Orange church leaders to garner new ideas they can take back to their home churches.

Despite its popularity, critics – and even some proponents – argue the Orange philosophy contains some shortcomings. In his review of *Think Orange*, Joiner's 2009 book outlining the Orange strategy, Derek Brown offers a gentle critique of the way Joiner outlines the Orange philosophy, even while acknowledging *Think Orange* as a landmark work in the field of family ministry. Brown finds Orange lacking "theological and biblical nuance" pointing out that even Joiner himself acknowledges Orange sidesteps many controversial Protestant issues, like predestination and baptism (45-46). Instead, the children's "252 Kids" curriculum focuses on a monthly "Life App," or biblically-themed character trait like "compassion" or "perseverance" ("252 Kids 2018/2019 Scope and Cycle"). Brown also suggests that Joiner downplays the importance of teaching biblical truth in churches (47-48). Interestingly, these critiques of Orange's curriculum as "theology light" echo the criticisms frequently lodged at megachurches themselves.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For information on criticisms of megachurches, see John Fletcher's *Preaching to Convert*, University of Michigan Press, 2013, pp. 245-255.

Regardless, Orange maintains a large presence in the evangelical world. According to the Orange blog, 7,150 people from 1,910 different churches attended the 2017 Orange Conference, held at the Infinite Energy Center in Atlanta, GA. Attendees came from forty-nine states, twenty-two different, and sixty-two different denominations (Orange Leaders, “Frequently Asked Questions”).<sup>10</sup>

Pathway Church in Wichita, Kansas, is one congregation using the Orange curriculum as a foundational tool for their children’s ministry. Pathway Church began as Westlink Christian Church nearly sixty years ago. Although it started as a church plant of the now-defunct Westside Christian Church, Pathway is currently a non-denominational Christian congregation (Heck). Located in the suburban Westlink neighborhood of Wichita, Pathway’s main location welcomes approximately 2,500 people each week (Wilson). Recently, the church opted to expand using a multi-site church model, creating new Pathway Church locations in the Goddard, Kansas area in 2012 before starting its most recent campus in Valley Center, Kansas (Heck)<sup>11</sup>. Led by Pastor Todd Carter, Pathway recently made national headlines when it put its church-wide strategy of “Following Jesus, In Community, For Others” into action. In 2019, *USA Today* reported that the church used money normally allocated for marketing their Easter service to pay off \$2.2 million in medical debt for 1,600 Kansans through the nonprofit agency, RIP Medical Debt (Hammill).

Pathway’s children’s ministry also echoes the church’s community-centered focus. Each week at Pathway’s Westlink campus, approximately 325 children enter “The Neighborhood,”

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<sup>10</sup> The Orange Conferences are elaborate productions, in and of themselves. The 2017 Conference in Atlanta included a set created by professional design firm Greene Staging in Atlanta, as well as rigging by Majestic Productions (Orange Leaders, “Frequently Asked Questions”).

<sup>11</sup> In the multi-site church model, one church meets in multiple locations, united under the same leadership and budget (Smith). For example, Pathway Church started in the Westlink neighborhood of Wichita but now offers meeting sites in two other Wichita neighborhoods. In the multi-site church model, each site has its own local leadership team, although some churches use technology to broadcast the weekly sermon from the lead pastor at the founding location to each satellite location.

Pathway's children's ministry program. The children's wing features colorful hallways decorated like city storefronts. Spacious themed rooms serve as the large group meeting spaces for each age level. Each week, approximately 175 lower elementary students meet in "The Farm," while another 150 upper elementary students participate in "The Ballpark" (Wilson). Each space features large, colorful murals on the walls, a themed stage, screens for displaying multi-media programming, and open floor space for students to sit on Sunday mornings.

Preparing for hundreds of children each week takes a large amount of planning, which I saw firsthand when I visited the church on July 2, 2019. At a desk lined with computer monitors, Children's Pastor Brandt Wilson walked me through preparation for an average week at Pathway. Wilson has served at the church for six years and currently oversees the weekly programming at all three church campuses. This multi-site structure presents a special planning challenge; the programming he creates must work at both Pathway's main megachurch site (with its vast children's wing and arsenal of volunteers) as well as its newest location in Valley Center, which meets in a rented school facility.

Using Planning Center, a church management program that can function like a digital stage manager, Wilson creates an outline for the large group time each week, inserts all the Orange videos and music files for the week directly into the computer program, and schedules volunteers to serve as leaders. These files can be shared with the children's directors at the other campus locations, so all church sites teach the same lesson and use the same enrichment activities.

The children's ministry team creates the beginning of each week's program themselves; the children's ministry leaders share writing duties by taking on one Sunday each month. When students arrive to their designated area of "The Neighborhood" on Sunday mornings, a host takes

the stage to guide students through the large group time. Each week opens with a stage game to encourage interaction and foster a sense of organized chaos, which lifts the energy level of the room. After the game, the host invites visitors (and the friends who brought them) to the “treasure chest” to receive a small prize. Worship music follows the visitor recognition time. Students sing along to karaoke-style videos of popular praise songs as leaders (often high school students) guide the kids in hand motions that accompany the song (Wilson).

The weekly offering collection follows the praise and worship time. Instead of taking up an offering that stays with the church, the children’s weekly offering goes to various community mission agencies. Before the offering, the host delivers talking points about the mission agency, helping students understand how their money will help others (Wilson). In this way, even the church’s youngest attendees engage in the church’s overall strategy of “Following Jesus, In Community, For Others.”

After another worship song, Wilson said the Orange curriculum really takes over. During the school year, a teacher (which Orange calls “the storyteller”) presents the Bible story or passage using a prepared script from the Orange curriculum. Orange uses storytellers to communicate the central Bible passage each week, which they claim makes the Bible more accessible to children. Writing for the Orange blog, one Orange leader said, “I’m a volunteer storyteller at my church, and Orange helps me tell the stories of the Bible at a level the kids can understand. If I told some stories the way they’re written in the Bible, they’d miss it. Orange is able to bring the story to life for these kids” (Rob T.).

Pathway Church’s storytellers are carefully chosen and usually teach on a monthly rotation. In the summers, however, the church forgoes live teaching and uses teaching videos provided by Orange instead; this allows the regular volunteers to take a break over the summer



months. According to Wilson, some of Pathway's children's ministry leaders would prefer to use Orange's teaching videos all year long, in lieu of live storytellers. Especially for the new Pathway Church locations with smaller volunteer pools, Orange's video teaching option eliminates some of the time-consuming weekly prep work while providing a well-packaged and engaging option for presenting the week's lesson (Wilson). For some megachurches using a multi-site church model, the use of video teaching for children's ministry serves as a natural extension of what happens in the main service, as many churches regularly livestream the lead pastor's sermon from the main campus to the smaller satellite campuses. On the other hand, Wilson notes using the teaching videos eliminates the personal interaction between the teacher and students inherent in the Orange storyteller scripts. Scripts frequently suggest storytellers bring students up on stage for interactive elements within the story, allowing for stronger connection between the teacher and students. While some claim that a lack of volunteers makes live teaching difficult on a weekly basis, Wilson pointed out the opposite scenario. He argues that video teaching can prevent church members from serving and using their gifts in ministry (Wilson).

Following the Bible story, Pathway incorporates other facets of the Orange curriculum that encourage students to apply the lesson to their daily life, including videos, a weekly memory verse, and the monthly "Life App," which is the particular value or character trait stressed in each monthly series, such as "compassion" or "perseverance" ("252 Kids 2018/2019 Scope and Cycle"). Cooper-White and Cooper-White note "good curricula makes links between these elements of the Christian story and the lives of children, youth, and adults today" (111). At Pathway, this also happens when students break into small groups to discuss the lesson with their

small group leaders. For Wilson, this small group time stands as the heart of the church's children's ministry program.

But this wasn't always the way children's ministry worked at Pathway. At one point, Sunday mornings more closely resembled the children's program at Harvest Christian Fellowship, complete with dramas and a puppet ministry. This format ended around 2010, due to the labor-intensive nature of preparing live performances each week. Noting the challenges of live performance in the digital age, Wilson said, "We just can't compete with Disney, Star Wars, Minecraft." Rather than using live performance to make connections with the audience, small groups became the primary point of contact between students and ministry leaders. According to Wilson, while it's important to be fun, relevant, and creative, what differentiates Pathway's "The Neighborhood" from other programs and activities kids experience during their week is the relationship children build with a small group leader.

Like Rock the World, the structure of the children's large group time at Pathway features elements of the seeker-sensitive worship service that focuses on the unchurched, while also incorporating discipleship opportunities for children who have already made professions of faith. Pathway uses video technology to project the lyrics to high-energy praise and worship songs on a TV screen, much like the music portion of many seeker services. As previously noted, the Orange curriculum also lends itself to a seeker-friendly environment. Although it clearly incorporates Bible stories and scripture passages, the Orange "Life Apps," or monthly themes, are usually based on developing positive character traits that are applicable to people from diverse backgrounds.

Yet, the Pathway service structure also includes elements of discipleship for young Christian believers. Students are encouraged to participate in a weekly offering. This teaches

students the importance of generosity, and because the money goes to non-profit organizations outside of the church, it raises awareness about the needs in their own community. In addition, students participate in spiritual disciplines, such as scripture memorization, that are mostly discipleship-driven, rather than evangelistic.

From a theatre perspective, the struggle between using live or mediated performance each week to present the lesson resonated with me. At Harvest's Rock the World, live performance served as a centerpiece of the performance I watched. Actors included the audience through participatory elements integrating into the skit. Although television screens and projections were present, they functioned as part of the set more than as a centerpiece of the production. Pathway, however, integrates video as a more fundamental feature of the large group time, especially during the summer months when video teaching replaces the live storyteller in presenting the Bible lesson (Wilson).

This question over whether to use live or video teaching isn't just an issue for children's leaders who use Orange or similar curriculum publishers that provide both live and recorded teaching options. It reflects some of the larger debates in the evangelical church world, especially as leaders discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the increasingly popular multi-site church model.<sup>12</sup> For decades, some megachurches have used video cameras during worship, projecting images of the pastor on the screen during the sermon. When visiting megachurches during research for *Sensational Devotion*, Jill Stevenson notes the way she found herself watching the projection screen during the sermon, even if the live pastor was preaching right in front of her (187-188). (I've noticed the same tendency to look toward the screen rather than the live pastor in my own churchgoing experiences.) Yet, some multi-site churches take that to the next level by

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of discussions about the benefits and drawbacks of the multi-site church model, see Randy Pope's "3 Reasons We Stopped Doing Multisite Church" (2015) and Ed Stetzer's "Multisite Evolution" (2013).

eliminating the element of the live pastor. Instead, the lead pastor preaches live at one church location, while other church sites watch the pastor on the video screens (Smith).

Performance scholars have spent decades debating the element of “liveness” in performance, and their debate speaks directly to some of the conversations in Christian circles over the use of satellite sermons. What makes a performance “live,” and why does it matter? In speaking about liveness in the age of digital technology, Philip Auslander writes, “In order for liveness to occur, we, the audience, must accept the claim as binding upon us, take it seriously, and hold onto the object in our consciousness of it in such a way that it becomes live for us ... liveness is an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept this claim” (9). In reading this, I think about an experience I had just this morning. Sitting in a multi-site church service in Kansas, I watched a giant video screen as the sermon was streamed from Oklahoma. The morning’s preacher, a fluent Spanish speaker, asked the congregation to repeat a word in Spanish (the Spanish pronunciation of “chocolate”). Very few people in my Wichita congregation responded to the on-screen request. Apparently, the audience response was also lackluster in Oklahoma because the speaker invited the audience to repeat the word again. This time, my Kansas congregation issued a much louder response, complete with a few laughs. In a way, the congregation, through hundreds of miles away from the speaker, accepted the pastor’s claim to liveness and responded – even though there was no one on stage to accept the response. Just as digital technology sparks debate in performance studies’ circles over the nature of “liveness,” the same technologies cause church leaders to ask similar questions about the nature of “church.” There is an oft-repeated phrase in Christian circles, “The church isn’t a building; it’s the people.” In the digital age, if the church is a gathering of God’s people, must those people be gathered in the same physical space? How does the role of the lead pastor

change if the person preaching rarely enters the physical space and presence of the majority of the congregants?<sup>13</sup> These questions don't have easy answers. But they will impact the way Generation Z – a generation shaped by ever-presence technology and growing religious apathy – thinks about church and other matters of faith.

During a facilities tour at the end of my visit, Wilson pointed out the space in the wall of “The Farm” that once housed a puppet stage. Today, that space features a colorful mural and a mounted television screen used during the Sunday morning large group time. It serves as a sign of a shift, as the “liveness” of the puppet shows and skits in the large group meeting time gave way to the human connections formed in the small group environment on Sunday mornings. And it's a reminder of the way churches constantly adapt to each new generation as they seek to share an ancient message of faith in an ever-changing world.

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<sup>13</sup> These questions are based on Randy Pope's “3 Reasons We Stopped Doing Multisite Church” (2015).

## **Chapter 2. Creating a Spectacle: Children, Teens, and Large-Scale Megachurch Productions**

On a December afternoon in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, tour buses lined the sidewalk outside of a large complex in the heart of downtown. Families took pictures next to the decorated Christmas trees that stood in the building's main lobby. The sound of pop holiday hits – running the gamut from “Santa Baby” to ‘N Sync’s “Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays” – filled the fog-tinged auditorium as audience members scrolled through their cell phones before the show started. But these people weren’t waiting to see the latest touring Broadway production or a star-studded holiday concert. They gathered for the Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant, an annual event produced by the city’s First Baptist Church.

Christmas productions, like the one at FBC Fort Lauderdale, are a far cry from the traditional church nativity drama with its bathrobed biblical actors and classic carols. Today’s large-scale productions often toe the line between sacred and secular while using state-of-the-art theatrical lighting and projections, live animals, and rigging systems that allow angels (and the occasional reindeer) to take flight. Granted, the use of theatrical spectacle in religious worship is nothing new. From the time of the ancient Greeks, special effects such as the *deus ex machina* were used to tell stories in honor of the gods. In the Middle Ages, European guilds used the smoke and flames of Hells Mouth to create a dramatic finale in the Revelation scenes of medieval cycle plays.<sup>1</sup> But given the extensive technical and financial resources of some U.S. evangelical megachurches, the familiar combination of sacred and secular are being used in striking ways to bring new people into the church.

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<sup>1</sup> For other examples of special effects in medieval drama, see Barbara D. Palmer’s “Staging Invisibility in English Early Modern Drama” (2008).

Emerging around the same time as the church growth movement, these mega-sized and mega-budgeted spectacles draw large crowds, even by megachurch attendance standards. Like the performances of Chapter 1, these performances raise questions about the relationship between entertainment and worship in a church context. At times, these church performances incorporate aspects of commercialized Christmas celebrations, with thousands of colorful lights, Christmas trees, and pop holiday hit songs. At other points, the Christmas performances switch gears to focus on the religious meaning of Christmas, namely the celebration of a baby whose birth signaled the beginning of God's redemptive plan for mankind (which most Christians would consider the true meaning of Christmas). But unlike the performances in the last chapter, these productions are not only for children. Instead, these spectacular events feature an intergenerational cast performing for church members and visitors of all ages in the church's main auditorium. Yet, within these productions, children and teenagers often receive special moments in the spotlight, offering a rare moment of visibility for the church's youngest attendees.

In this chapter, I examine the role these spectacular productions play in the overall mission of some evangelical megachurches, even as the commercial and Christian aspects of Christmas co-mingle on the church stage. These performances resemble the kind of large-scale evangelical productions discussed by scholars such as John Fletcher and Jill Stevenson, as church-based artists use theatre as an instrument for change in the lives of participants and ultimately in the world in which they live.<sup>2</sup> Through this chapter, I examine these performances from a different lens by focusing on the way young performers contribute to these spectacular shows.

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<sup>2</sup> See John Fletcher's *Preaching to Convert* (University of Michigan Press, 2013) and Jill Stevenson's *Sensational Devotion* (University of Michigan Press, 2013) for a wide range of examples of evangelical performances.

## Defining Spectacle

When thinking about spectacle in performance, we often imagine death-defying feats, Cirque du Soleil-style theatrics, and special effects. But what exactly makes a performance “spectacular?” And how does spectacle function within the scope of a performance?

In his influential work *Society and the Spectacle*, Guy Debord argues that the spectacle is more than a technological parade of awe-inspiring media (Debord 1.5). He states that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (1.4). Essentially, he sees the spectacle as a capitalistic instrument that contributes to the consumerist nature of modern society. In Debord’s view, the overall effect of the spectacle is separation and overall passivity among its consumers. Debord argues that while the spectacle masquerades as a form of unification, it actually works to divide people from each other. In the midst of the spectacle, “spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other” (1.29). For example, attending an action movie in the theater might bring people into a shared space for a shared experience, but the very nature of the event keeps those in attendance from interacting and relating to each other. “The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunited them only *in their separateness*” (Debord 1.29). For that reason, Debord contends that “the spectacle’s social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (1.32)

In “*Panem et Circenses: Worship and the Spectacle*,” sociologist George Sanders applies Debord’s theory directly to U.S. Christian worship services. Citing Debord’s idea that spectacle goes beyond flashy entertainment to play an economic role as a commodity in a consumption-driven culture, Sanders suggests “that the spectacle, an assemblage of people and technologies ... are not only proliferating in contemporary worship services but that they are also a vital



element to the perpetuation of late capitalism's consumer-centric focus" (2). Sanders further states the use of spectacle in megachurch worship services, especially the use of video screens, "is conducive to consumptive behaviours via bodily affect and emotion" (3). In sum, he argues that the spectacular elements used in worship service discourage cognitive contemplation, instead generating affect in a way that aligns with a capitalistic, consumer-driven society.

Yet, in her book, *Spectacles of Reform*, Amy Hughes takes a different approach to defining spectacle as she examines melodrama in the reform-minded era of the nineteenth century. First, Hughes notes that "*how* something is presented and perceived, rather than *what* is presented and perceived, constitutes spectacle" (14). Specifically, she cites scholars such as Bernard Beckerman and Baz Kershaw to identify the principle characteristics of spectacle – scale, intensity, and excess – as defined against concepts of "normal" that emerged in the nineteenth century (15-17). Yet, unlike Debord and Sanders, Hughes does not view spectacle as something that lulls. She argues that spectacle is "relational, working on scales both small and big" rather than "a voracious vacuum, robbing us of our ability to think, feel or act" (Hughes 166). She views the spectacle found within nineteenth-century activist plays, which touted the virtues of temperance and women's suffrage, as a key part of their success. This view speaks more directly to the versions of spectacle found in megachurch Christmas productions, as they also function as a form of activist performance.

In this chapter, I suggest that spectacle – with its grand scale, intensity, and excess – serves the overall evangelical mission of megachurches. I examine the various ways some of the country's largest churches use spectacular images, sounds, and special effects in their attempt to ignite both a sense of community and a desire for conversion within audience members. To do

so, I visited large-scale evangelical performances in December 2016 and December 2017 at four church sites: Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida; First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida; Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas; and First Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I chose to focus on these specific churches in part because of the differing performance genres (worship services, The Singing Christmas Tree, and Christmas pageants) they utilize to communicate the same central message. Despite their differences, each show included moments geared specifically for young audiences as well as spotlight moments featuring the church's youngest performers in a way that heightens the element of spectacle within the shows.

### **Celebration Church: “Rendering Visible the Invisible”**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the way children often remain an unseen element of the regular Sunday morning church experience for worshipping adults. Ordinarily, Celebration Church, a nondenominational megachurch in Jacksonville, Florida, falls into the category of congregations that offer separate worship services for children and adults. Celebration's main campus is situated in the Jacksonville suburbs, visible from the busy I-295 East Beltway and only a few exits away from the area's premier shopping district that boasts everything from Target to Tiffany's. Although the church originated in Jacksonville, Celebration now sponsors satellite campuses in Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, and Amelia Island, Florida, as well as international locations in Paris, France and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In addition, the church lists congregations in Washington D.C., Israel, and the Netherlands as members of the “Celebration Church Family” (“Celebration Church Locations”). Founded in 1998 by married co-pastors Stovall and Kerri Weems, Celebration now stands as the eighteenth largest church in the U.S. (and the tenth fastest growing church) with an average weekly attendance of 14,659 (“2018 Outreach 100”).

Sundays at Celebration feature separate spaces that split the worship experience generationally. Celebration Church's website notes that "while the main sanctuary experience is designed for adults, our state of the art Nursery, Preschool, and Elementary spaces ... have been carefully created with your children in mind" ("Celebration Kids"). Even families who want to attend church together have a designated space apart from the main sanctuary. The Family Lounge features a live feed of the main worship service and comfortable seating areas outside of the main worship center for parents and young children to worship together in a more flexible environment ("Family Lounge").

To learn more about the church, I attended the 7:00 p.m. Christmas service on December 23, 2016. In previous years, the church built a reputation in the community for their elaborately staged production of "The Grinch," offering thirteen free performances over a five-day period (Guest Blogger). The church ended that annual production in 2015 and replaced it with a Christmas worship service called "The Greatest Story Ever Told" offered over a four-day period leading up to Christmas. According to a post on the church's Facebook page, "THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD is our traditional family friendly Christmas experience that will feature your favorite music and the incredible Christmas story done Celebration style!" The new Christmas event felt more like a theatricalized worship service than the Broadway-style performance of previous years. Still, the church required attendees to obtain and present tickets for the night they wanted to attend. Tickets were available for free on the church website. Though the Christmas event was not technically a play or musical, it still managed to incorporate plenty of dancers, rhythmic ribbons, and light wands – albeit without the drama-driven storyline of the previous productions.

Approaching the building, the church felt reminiscent of other megachurches I had visited. It had a modern, “non-churchy” design with large glass window decorated with lighted Christmas wreaths, greeters ready to meet guests, and (as I noted later on their website) a coffeeshop/bookstore known as “The Loft” that offers specialty java creations. Yet, it was the tents set up outside of the building where volunteers sold glowing light wands before the service that really caught my attention; it reminded me of the way vendors might sell glowsticks for outdoor concerts or carnivals. A sign stood next to the tent that read, “Want to be part of the big show? Purchase now, bring into service, and wait for your cue.” Intrigued, especially knowing this was slated as more of a Christmas Eve worship service than theatrical production, I continued into the church and found a seat in the worship center – a large, slightly industrial-feeling space – just before the service began.

The Christmas service functioned like a heightened version of a typical megachurch worship experience. The service opened with loud music played by a live band and video projected onto a giant screen, although theatrical elements frequently weaved their way throughout the evening. Disco balls hung from the ceiling, which created a party-like atmosphere in the space. The service also incorporated dance; for example, one song featured dancers dressed in plaid who took the stage waving ribbons to accompany Christmas-themed music.

This led to a specific moment that highlighted the role of spectacle in the event. At this point in the service, in contrast to their usual invisibility in the main worship center, children were highly visible both on and off stage. After the ribbon dancers, the band played the classic carol, “Angels We Have Heard on High.” A slide appeared on the projection screen that said, “Kids, turn on your light wands now.” As the congregation sang the Christmas carol, children waved their glow sticks in the air, rendering the ordinarily unseen generation highly (and

humorously) visible. This became just one of the ways children engaged in a church service that used a format and space that they were likely unfamiliar with, even if they were regular attendees.

Immediately afterward the light wand song, a children's ensemble performed their rendition of "O Come All Ye Faithful" with adult worship leaders in the background. The children's choir, dressed in white and khaki, contrasted sharply with the all-black ensemble worn by the adults. The color choice underscored the sense of innocence evoked by the children as they invited the audience to "come, let us adore Him." After the service, I realized that the words to this particular song were also printed in a special children's program made available to kids before the service. Above the lyrics, the activity sheet offered a special invitation to the children in the audience to "Sing along to 'O Come All Ye Faithful' with the Kids Choir!" As a result, kids took over the role of lead worshippers both on and off stage during this moment of the service.

The presence of children, normally absent from the sanctuary, serves several purposes in this environment. Sociologist Sally K. Gallagher argues that including children in worship experiences can have a positive impact on the faith of adult congregants. During her study of U.S. Protestant churches, adults "noted how watching children did indeed help them remember and vicariously enjoy the mystery, openness, and joy associated with their faith" (172). In sum, by moving children from sequestered spaces to the stage in these productions, churches multiply the affective potential of these church-based experiences. In the Celebration Church service, inviting children to wave light wands added a moment of playfulness and jubilation to the event that would hard to replicate in an adult-centered service. Combined with the child-led Christmas

carol that followed, these elements could serve as a prompt for adults to connect with the child-like faith Gallagher describes.

### **First Baptist, Orlando: The Rise of the Singing Christmas Tree**

Some churches take the elaborate Christmas service to new heights through a performance known as the Singing Christmas Tree. This Christmas performance genre features a choir singing carols from tall, multi-leveled Christmas tree-shaped risers. The tradition most likely began in 1933 at Belhaven College, a Christian college in Mississippi. Its popularity spread as other schools and churches began adopting the tradition in their own cities throughout the twentieth century (Young).

First Baptist Church, Orlando brings the Christmas Trees to life each December. Affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, FBC Orlando started as a humble congregation of eighteen members in 1871; today, they average almost 8,000 in weekly worship services (“First Orlando Fast Facts,” “2018 Outreach 100”). Increasingly, those congregants are coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds; the church now offers eight language ministries and translates services into languages like Spanish and Portuguese through listening devices at the church each Sunday (Pinsky). Reflecting this shift, Pastor David Uth, who began his tenure at the church in 2006, received national attention in April 2013 when *The New York Times* featured him in a story on The Evangelical Immigration Table, a faith-based group that promotes immigration reform and a path to legalization for illegal immigrants (Pinsky).

FBC Orlando began their Singing Christmas Trees tradition about thirty-five years ago. Each year, the church’s creative team offers an entirely new take on the production, incorporating a new storyline or songs. The only constant from year to year are the trees themselves – two, 45-foot structures filled with choir members and covered in over 250,000

Christmas lights. The show incorporates music, acting, dance, and aerial arts to produce a frequently sold-out spectacle that now serves as a family holiday tradition for many community members (Woods). I attended the production in December 2016, a year that Creative Director Jonathan Hickey called “a very drama-driven show” unlike the music-driven production offered in some other years (Woods). Called *Bah Hum Bug*, the theatrical portion of the show resembled a modern-day Dickens tale as it followed the story of a pastor who failed to understand the true meaning of Christmas. Following the basic storyline of *A Christmas Carole*, the pastor saw the past, present, and future. The format allowed the cast to tell the story of the first Christmas, as the pastor saw Mary and Joseph with the Ghost of Christmas Past. By the end of the journey, the pastor experienced a change of heart and embraced the true spirit and message of Christmas.

At various points throughout the production – whether through the height of the tree platforms or the use of aerialists in the show – there was a sense of precariousness which some scholars view as a significant component of spectacle. When they first entered the auditorium, audience members only saw a giant curtain hung to hide the scenic elements. In the opening moments of the production, the curtain fell dramatically to unveil, not one, but two 45-foot Christmas tree-shaped towers filled with choir members and colorful Christmas lights. The choir sang Christmas songs throughout the evening from their perches atop the Christmas tree. Although clearly the choir members are in no imminent danger, there is still something unsettling and awe-inspiring about watching someone sing from a small riser at the top of the tree, some 45 feet in the air.

During one slow tempo number, aerial artists took center stage. Performers climbed and spun on aerial silks suspended from the top of the sanctuary in Cirque du Soleil fashion, seemingly lacking any sort of safety mechanism. These skilled artists (some in white bodysuits,

which gave them an angel-like appearance) only performed during slow, worshipful songs – creating a curious juxtaposition between the sights of the Las Vegas-style entertainment and the reverent sounds of hymns.

Baz Kershaw notes that “possibly there has always been a close connection between spectacle and disaster, because disaster unexpectedly unleashes extreme powers that rupture a world that we would prefer to leave wholly intact” (596). Amy Hughes applies this more closely to the human body:

... the body in extremity is the defining feature of the spectacle ... [it’s] what makes a scene spectacular. The dazzle of visual effects, the cacophony of crisis, and the chaos of movement all contribute to the scale and intensity of the spectacular instant, but impressive stage technology is not enough. To be unequivocally sensational, a scene requires a virtual/actual body experiencing fictional/factual peril. (32)

In “The Singing Christmas Trees,” this sense of the human body “experiencing fictional/factual peril” contributed to the sense of awe I experienced watching the production. Yet, reflecting on these spectacular moments raises several questions that exemplify the issues these church-based productions invoke. Does the dramatic unveiling of choir members standing in the towering “trees” and the aerialists performing on the silks direct the audience’s attention to the production values themselves rather the spiritual message behind the production? Or do these awe-inspiring elements make people more open to the spiritual messages due to the affective nature of these moments?

Although these performance dazzle through their perilous physical displays, there is also a less obvious form of “peril” when it comes to young performers. On one hand, the very nature of theatre makes it inherently precarious. There are no second chances and no opportunities to call “cut” if something goes wrong in front of a live audience. Yet, choosing to include young amateur performers on stage frequently comes with an additional element of risk. Countless viral



social media videos depict children who veer from carefully planned choreography in a dance recital or put their own pizzazz on a church choir performance.<sup>3</sup> In all honesty, growing up in church, I loved the Sundays when the children's choir performed because of the unpredictability of the performance. Invariably, there is always that one child who lays claim to his very own microphone during non-solo numbers or marches to her own beat as the children's choir director sits in the front row, trying desperately to get the children in sync with their much-rehearsed choreography. Yet, it's these instances of spontaneous individuality that often create the most memorable or endearing moments of the show for audience members.

Choosing to include young performers in church productions, however, often provides a powerful visual illustration of Christian theology. When children are mentioned in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, they are often praised for their faith. For example, in the gospel of Matthew, the author recounts a time that Jesus made a child the exemplar of faith. In Matthew 18:3-4, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 11:25, NIV). This verse typifies the role played by the young characters in *Bah Hum Bug*. In the musical, the children were the ones who first recognized the character flaws in the story's pastor/protagonist, which led to his eventual spiritual transformation. Here, the "wise and learned" pastor was schooled in faith by the little children; he only realizes spiritual truth when he adopts the faith of the children featured in the play.

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<sup>3</sup> As an example, the TV show *Inside Edition* aired a short segment about little girl's impromptu dancing at a church choir performance after her parents' video went viral of the concert went viral in November 2017. The clip received over two million views on their YouTube page at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcCo2N9Tkfs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcCo2N9Tkfs) (Inside Edition).

It's the desire for transformed lives, like the one experienced onstage by the drama's protagonist in *Bah Hum Bug*, that motivates the creative team at FBC Orlando. "The Trees is about life change. We want to share the gospel with Central Florida, and that's why we do the Trees. And we have lots of people who come who may not come otherwise to our church and we want to make sure ... that the gospel is present" (Woods). In FBC Orlando's production, the production values and flashy spectacle serve as an entry point for sharing the gospel message of Christmas.

### **Prestonwood Baptist Church and FBC, Fort Lauderdale: Million-Dollar Spectacles**

Consequently, some churches believe no cost is too high if it could change someone's eternal destiny. These churches create performances with production budgets or ticket revenue over the million-dollar mark. Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, and First Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida both fall into the category of churches annually creating lavish theatrical events with large budgets and so much spectacle that they garner national media attention.

On December 10, 2016, I traveled to Plano, Texas to attend the Christmas performance at Prestonwood Baptist Church. Currently the fifth largest Southern Baptist congregation in the United States, Prestonwood averaged 15,145 weekly attendees in 2014 (Rainer). Although the church was founded in 1977, it "experienced its most defining moment when Dr. Jack Graham accepted the call as pastor" in 1989 ("The Prestonwood Story"). Graham continues to serve as the pastor and leader of the 51-person ministry staff ("Our Leadership and Staff"). Over its forty-plus year history, Prestonwood has grown to three separate campuses across the Dallas area, including Lewisville's Prestonwood en Espanol, which focuses on reaching the area's Hispanic community ("The Prestonwood Story").

At first glance, the Prestonwood building blurs the line between traditional and modern. As I walked toward the church, chimes rang from the bell tower, which linked the monolithic building to the historic churches of centuries past. But upon entering the building, those traditional external elements give way to physical features common to many American megachurches. To the right of the entrance stood a “Kidz” area that featured moving red and green lights at the ceiling line and a large indoor playground. There were two bookstores off the lobby featuring the latest releases by Prestonwood pastor Jack Graham, as well as HGTV stars and Texas natives Chip and Joanna Gaines. The lobby itself featured Christmas decorations, including a large nativity scene, Christmas trees, and a tree made of poinsettias that served as the backdrop for pre-show family photos. As I made my way into the sanctuary, ushers in red jackets greeted people at the door and helped guests find their seats. The seats were pews (a more traditional choice) numbered with little plaques on the back – a vital element since seats were assigned for the performance. Yet, in stark contrast to the traditional seating arrangement in the sanctuary, my eyes focused on the sixteen floor-to-ceiling projection panels that announced the title of this year’s show – *The Gift of Christmas*.

Although the church began the Christmas pageant tradition three decades ago, *The Gift of Christmas* version is relatively new. According to an article in *Church Production* magazine, “The church's team develops a concept for its yearly event, and then runs the same basic show for several years, freshening and updating it each year, until they feel it's time for a complete change in format” (CP Staff). Standard tickets prices for *The Gift of Christmas* mirrored prices charged at many local community theatres around the country. The year I attended, most tickets ranged in price from \$16-\$29 before processing fees, although a limited number of premium ticket packages (which include preferred seating and reserved parking) were available for \$55

per person ( “The Gift of Christmas”). But having to pay for a ticketed church event does not deter the masses. In 2016, almost 70,000 people attended one of the show’s thirteen performances, most of which were completely sold out (Prestonwood – The Gift of Christmas).

The website for *The Gift of Christmas* promises an experience complete with “elaborate staging and lighting, state-of-the-art, high resolution technology with a massive LED video screen, live 50-piece orchestra and nearly 1,000-member cast and choir, brilliant musical scoring, [and] flying angels, live animals, the Living Nativity and much more!”<sup>4</sup> The church delivered on each of those promises. *The Gift of Christmas* is a three-act technical and artistic extravaganza. The first act uses a secular theme, complete with Santa Claus flying over the audience in his sleigh, Rockette-style dancers, and a group of singing reindeer performing Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas is You.” During this segment of the show, there was no real mention of “church-y” things or the inclusion of religious images. The first act was subdivided into five sections – each with its own theme or mini-story. The first was “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” This was one of the few sections with actual actors speaking dialogue, with Mrs. Claus taking the lead. This section was designed to dazzle – from Santa’s sleigh flying over the heads of the audience to indoor pyrotechnics. The second section, “Toy Medley,” featured a mini-story of dolls trying to hide from the pesky toy soldiers. Spectacle again played an important role. In addition to bright, colorful costumes, the soldiers rappelled down from the ceiling for the fight against the dolls. One of the highlights of this section included precision “Rockettes-style” dance team, kicking in front of a massive projection of a marquee reading “Prestonwood Theatre.” A live horse brought cast members to the stage, and it began “snowing” inside the Texas auditorium.

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<sup>4</sup> The cast and crew for *The Gift of Christmas* was so extensive that the complete program for the production was only available in digital form – a 27-page document found through a link on the church’s website.

It is also within this first act that children become a central facet of the show. According to a profile in *Church Production* magazine, the million-dollar production involves approximately six hundred children in multiple choirs (CP Staff). In “Christmas on the Polar Express,” many of the children arrived from the house, singing and dancing in the aisles dressed like giant cups of hot chocolate. The song “When Christmas Comes to Town” from *The Polar Express* featured a trio of children. It was a unique moment in the show because the three children were alone in front of the giant projection screens, instead of on the full stage backed by the adult choir like previous songs in the production. This pared-down moment and sweet, nostalgic song allowed for a brief tonal shift in the arc of the show. That break came to an end with the finale of the kids’ section of the show. The song “Rockin’ On Top of the World” included Santa playing guitar with a small group of children in a scene that felt reminiscent of the Broadway show *School of Rock*.

In section four of Act I, it was the teens’ time to shine. “All I Want for Christmas,” an upbeat holiday love song kicked off the section. In a move that downplayed the romantic aspects of the song, the scene was about a female reindeer who had a crush on Rudolph. (In another spectacular move, the actor playing Rudolph – sunglasses and all – was flown onto the stage.) In the final section of the act, the pace slowed down. Ballerinas and waltzing couples in flowing costumes danced to “Christmas Waltz” and “Waltz of the Flowers” from *The Nutcracker*. The section ended with a spectacle-filled finale.

The performance segues into a more worshipful mode in Act II, guided by a narrator in a series of professionally produced video segments. Entitled “The Worship of Christmas,” this section served as a transitional phase between the secular first act and the live nativity of the final act. In this section, a narrator projected on the giant screens explained, not just the

Christmas story itself, but its significance to the world (and the audience). After an energetic version of “The Little Drummer Boy” complete with glowing drummers suspended with their instruments above the heads of the audience, this section took a worshipful turn, featuring a trio of men singing “O Holy Night/Silent Night.” This was followed by the church’s lead worship pastor, Michael Neale, singing an original song that he co-wrote called “Come That Close Again.” (I received an email the next week thanking me for attending the performance and letting me know that the song was available for purchase on I-Tunes, with all proceeds going to the church’s World Missions Offering.) The song was unique because, for the first time, close-up shots of the pastor were projected on the screen in a way that reminded me more of a contemporary church service than the show-stopping theatrics that led up to this point. The section ended with a solo called “Heaven’s Light,” which, although slow and worshipful, was another instance of spectacle. The soloist was elevated and standing behind a giant piece of fabric that seemed to extend from her waist like a skirt/dress across a large portion of the stage. The fabric served as a projection screen, which made it appear as if images were moving across her costume.

The narrator, Alan Powell, was a recurring feature of the segment. Through a well-produced video, the pre-recorded Powell seemed to interact with live elements of the performance. For example, when Powell would say key words, lighting in the church facility would change to reflect the intent of the dialogue. From his position on one screen, he would turn his head to look at a different screen as images he was discussing would appear. He also signaled for the live choir to start humming/singing, and they followed his command. In an interesting twist, at one point in the segment, Powell came onstage and addressed the audience live, dressed identically to the projected image of himself. While I found it interesting that one

of the few speaking parts in the show was filmed, I was even more intrigued in the choice to bring the filmed actor on stage for one unmediated moment. Overall, this segment offered an introduction to the meaning and spiritual implications of the first Christmas for Christian believers.

The final act serves as the *pièce de résistance* of the performance, featuring the “Living Nativity” with elaborate costumes, flying angels, and a menagerie of live animals. A different narrator provided the gospel account of the Christmas story as actors representing the shepherds walked across the stage with their live sheep, and three wise men came one-by-one through the house, accompanied by a host of live animals, including camels and zebras. During the scene with the birth of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were placed upstage center at an elevated level. Until Joseph held the baby in the air at the key final moment, I did not even notice the baby in the scene. Instead, my attention was directed to all the people in biblical-era robes coming down the aisles. This was a notable departure from the Biblical narrative; in this production, crowds of common people came to the stable with candles to worship the newborn Jesus. This seemed to imply the Jesus came for everyone, in every station of life, and was worshipped by many. This is in line with the church’s mission statement, although it’s not included in stories of Jesus’s birth in the Gospels. It did, however, create one of the most beautiful stage pictures in the show.

After the production ended, the pastor gave a short talk, inviting people to respond to the message of the show. If people made a decision to become a Christian, they were invited to go to the tents – called Celebration Stations – to receive a free Bible. This was followed by the only confusing part of the production. After the invitation, the pastor led in a round of applause, and there was a standing ovation by the audience. The pastor thanked individuals who were involved

in the production, and people started to leave. Then the congregation was invited to sing “Joy to the World” as confetti rained down from the ceiling. Had everyone still been in their seats, this congregational singing would have been a powerful ending to the event. But because there was already a fairly large exodus, perhaps due to the theatrical convention of the standing ovation signaling the end of a production, it negatively impacted the effectiveness of the moment.

Despite this anticlimactic ending, I walked away from the performance admittedly awestruck. While I knew the church’s reputation for excellence and had seen trailers on the church’s website, I was still unprepared for the sheer magnitude of the performance, which in terms of spectacle, was bigger than most Broadway productions I have seen. And apparently, I was not alone. In a preshow announcement, one of the pastors encouraged audience members to use social media outlets to share their show experience through words, pictures, and video using the hashtag #PrestonwoodGOC. On one hand, this served as a brilliant marketing plan for the show, as numerous pictures of the production’s most breathtaking moments and glowing recommendations filled the Twitter feed. On the other hand, it also worked to create a makeshift virtual community among some of those in attendance. Alongside photos of the production, audience members tweeted their reaction to high-impact moments. In this way, audience members were able to connect with each other and communicate their reactions in real time, something that is often discouraged in live theatre. Using technology in this manner counteracts one of Debord’s critiques of the spectacle. While Debord argued that in the spectacle “spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other,” Prestonwood’s use of spectacle actually works to turn that relationship away from the center and toward connections with each other, although those virtual connections are still mediated through technology (Debord 1.29).



In a similar way, the Christmas performance at First Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale contained a strong focus on community, but it was expressed within the performance itself rather than in the virtual world. Located in the heart of downtown Fort Lauderdale, the Southern Baptist congregation possesses a century-old history. According to a 2014 survey, the church averages 2,012 weekly attendees (Rainer). While some megachurches receive criticism for their perceived homogeny, FBC Fort Lauderdale, located about thirty miles north of downtown Miami, claims to be a “city church, situated right at the intersection of diverse ethnicities, cultural expression and global commerce in the heart of downtown Fort Lauderdale” (“First Baptist FTL”). Today, people from over seventy countries call FBC Fort Lauderdale their church home (“Our Story”). In an article published in the local *Sun-Sentinel*, Associate Pastor Mike Jeffries claimed that much of the diversity can be attributed to former pastor Larry Thompson, who served as the church’s sixteenth pastor before retiring in 2016 after nearly twenty-two years of service (Clary). According to the article, “Jeffries said Thompson’s greatest legacy is the current diversity of the congregation, along with a reputation for drawing on experience in the theater to craft innovative ways to preach” (Clary).<sup>5</sup>

The first page of the pageant’s program outlines the history of the performance, which began in the 1980s at the city-owned War Memorial Auditorium. The architecture of First Baptist’s current building reveals the church’s theatrical bent; their current worship center opened in 1990 and was specifically designed to house the Christmas production. One of the first things I noticed after entering the church was the round, tiered Austrian curtain on stage bathed in red light. Reading the program, I learned the Austrian curtain, along with sets by California-based designers George and Goldberg, were added for the pageant’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Most

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<sup>5</sup> The article also claims that the church translates its Sunday services into multiple languages, including Creole, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian (Clary),

recently, the production team celebrated the production's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary by adding “new flying effects, more original music, and a cavalcade of new costumes” (“Our Story”).

In many ways, the format of the Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant resembled the program at Prestonwood. The show opened with secular themes, songs, and imagery, which later segued into Christmas worship music and the story of Jesus (although the religiously-focused portion of FBC Fort Lauderdale's performance covered the entire life of Christ, not just the nativity story). But for me, the most striking feature of the FBC Fort Lauderdale performance wasn't the grand sets or elaborate dance numbers; it was the way the church used the show to reflect and speak back to its specific community. While the program included worship and gospel presentations like the other shows I attended, the additional elements of this performance felt like a love letter to the city of Fort Lauderdale as well.

This city-specific focus began with the name of the performance: The Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant. By dropping any reference to the church in the name of the show, the performance feels like it was created for the entire community, rather than for the church's congregants alone. This city-centered theme continued in the show's new opening number, heavily touted in promotional material for the 2017 event. The opener featured two secular songs that celebrated, not the birth of a Savior, but the rebirth of downtown Fort Lauderdale. The show began with a soloist singing the 1964 Petula Clark hit, “Downtown.” In the context of the pageant, the lyrics took on a double meaning:

When you're alone and life is making you lonely  
You can always go  
Downtown  
When you've got worries, all the noise and the hurry  
Seems to help, I know  
Downtown

Resembling the way seeker-friendly worship services attempt to make church a familiar, unintimidating site for the unchurched, this opener eliminated “churchy” elements and presented something familiar for the unchurched attendee at the performance’s onset. Yet, because the church so heavily emphasizes its downtown location, the song lyrics also worked to subtly suggest that the downtown church itself serves as a comforting refuge from the loneliness and anxiety of the world. The opener continued with “Downtown Funk,” based on the popular 2014 hit song “Uptown Funk,” that served as a high-energy celebration of the city’s diversity with colorful costumes and modern dance.

Shortly after the opener, the production again reflected its diverse community by including a song entirely in Spanish. According to recent census data, nearly eighteen percent of Fort Lauderdale claims Hispanic or Latino heritage, and almost thirty percent of residents speak a language other than English at home (“QuickFacts”). The song “Donde Esta la Nieve en Navidad” (Where is the Snow at Christmas?), with its Spanish lyrics and Latin dancing, acknowledged the area’s ethnic diversity and made the show inclusive of the Spanish-speaking members of the community.

As with most of the Christmas productions, children and teens played an instrumental role. According to the program, “one of the most celebrated aspects of the Christmas Pageant is the role played by young people, featuring hundreds of children and students from weeks-old babies, in a particular starring role, to high school seniors who have been part of the annual production their whole lives” (“Our Story”). The middle section of Act I, “A Lauderdale Christmas” highlighted the children in a miniature Seussian-style “show-within-a-show.” Lauderdaleilly, the name of the fictional town in the Christmas story, was an obvious play on Fort Lauderdale and continued the community-based theme of the production.

But one of the most unique ways the church involved both youth and the community in the Christmas pageant came as the show shifted toward a more sacred focus. During “The Little Drummer Boy,” the drumline from the local high school marching band entered the church and performed their own spin on the Christmas classic. By including Fort Lauderdale High School band members, pageant leaders not only echoed the community-based theme that resonated throughout the show, but they also showed that the pageant was intended to be a city-wide celebration, not just a church-based effort.

I argue these performances, with their focus on community-building and spiritual hope, create the type of utopian performative discussed by Jill Dolan, albeit from an opposing ideological perspective. In *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan explains that “utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotional voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5). Specifically, Dolan examines progressive-oriented work with the hope that “seeing, through performance, more effective models of more radical democracy might reinvigorate a dissipated Left” (21). But church-based performances perform a similar function for evangelicals. These performances invite a sense of community and unity among members of the audience.

Yet, these performances extend that sense of community and hope beyond the pews as these performances often serve as one of the most unifying events in the church’s calendar year. In a megachurch, which often offers multiple worship services or even worship locations, engaging the entire congregation in a singular event is a rarity. In these performances, however, hundreds of people come together to work at the ticket booth, park cars, sew costumes, build

sets, or mostly noticeably, sing in the massive choir. These spectacular events bring together large cross-sections of the church to engage in this singular evangelical mission like few events in the life of the church can do.

Still, church performances differ from Dolan's utopian performatives in another key way: temporality. Dolan writes of the audience as a "temporary community" that can unite for a powerful, yet ephemeral moment (14-15). Dolan draws upon Victor Turner's idea of *communitas* to discuss the way that "utopian performatives let audiences experience a processual, momentary feeling of affinity, in which spectators experience themselves as part of a congenial public constituted by the performance's address" (14).<sup>6</sup> And while it's true that audiences at the Christmas performances are temporary communities, church leaders also provide audience members with practical ways for extending the feeling of *communitas* beyond the walls of the auditorium through the altar call.

The production leaders and cast members of these church-based shows deeply believe in the power of their performance to actually "do" something – in this case, to spark genuine life change in the hearts of audience members (with the prompting and involvement of the Holy Spirit).<sup>7</sup> They pray for it. They expect it. They prepare for it.<sup>8</sup> Citing the work of J.L. Austin, which details the way performative acts have the power to actual "do" something, Dolan states

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<sup>6</sup> As noted by Dolan, Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* "describes that moments in a theater event or a ritual in which audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way; spectators' individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience" (Dolan 11).

<sup>7</sup> It's important to note that evangelical leaders would not claim that the theatrical production itself was the reason for people responding to altar calls. Rather, they would be inclined to view the production as an instrument or tool God can use to generate a repentant heart, which leads to the response.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Jarrett Stephens, Prestonwood's teaching pastor, posted a picture of a New Testament Bible on Instagram with the following note: "We give every person who prays to receive Christ at #prestonwoodgoc this Bible as a gift. Please pray with us ... that many will hear & respond to the invitation that is offered at the end of each performance & START walking with Jesus in a personal way. #whywedowhatwedo" (jarrettstephens).

that “utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable the affective vision of how the world might be better” (6). A recurring feature of the Christmas performances I visited involved some version of an evangelical “altar call” or “invitation” at the end. Since most evangelical denominations place emphasis on a definitive conversion experience, the traditional “altar call” is an invitation for unconverted congregants to formally convert to the Christian faith and receive the Holy Spirit into their lives, which – from the evangelical perspective – would enable spectators to carry the feelings of peace, hope, and Christian community they experienced within the performance into their everyday lives. In this way, “the experience of performance, the pleasure of the utopian performative, even if it doesn’t change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it” (Dolan 19). And at Prestonwood, for example, there were numerous people walking down the aisle claiming life-changing conversion experiences.

### **Conclusion: Megachurches, Spectacles, and Efficacy**

Despite their popularity, some critics pan church-based holiday spectacles as an extreme version of the theological shallowness and entertainment-centered worship services that plague evangelical megachurches. In a *Chicago Tribune* article, University of Florida Professor of English and Advertising James Twitchell said, “It has nothing to do with the Christmas message. ... It's selling a sensation, an experience. When people go to church they ... want to know if there's a good show. And often that's not coming out of doctrine, it comes from music, theatrics and the sound system” (Glanton). Still others criticize the performances because of their lofty price tag, noting that the money could be better spent on social causes (Glanton).

But the church leaders who champion these megachurch performances disagree. For example, when Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburbs used to perform an annual Christmas spectacle that drew up to 95,000 in attendance, church leaders pointed to the

fact that they also set aside large amounts of their annual budget for outreach activities and community needs (Glanton). When FBC Fort Lauderdale's program received national attention from media outlets like ABC News and *The Huffington Post*, the media frequently mentioned the production's \$1.3 million-dollar price tag (Glanton). But in a news interview, staff member J.R. Longstaff reported that approximately 45,000 people see the production in a given year (Longstaff). Because tickets for the 2019 production range from \$16-\$52 before fees, it's likely that the production could sustain itself through community ticket sales alone without pulling from the church's financial resources. Regardless, for leaders of these church-based spectacular events, seeing even one person make a life-changing decision for Christ makes the investment of time, energy, and financial resources worthwhile. But how efficacious are these spectacular presentations in impacting the lives of audience members?

In the biography of her husband, late Bellevue Baptist pastor Adrian Rogers, Joyce Rogers outlined their many years of ministry, including the early days of their work at Bellevue. She speaks specifically of The Singing Christmas Tree, as well as the church's Easter production, The Memphis Passion Play. Rogers writes:

At the end of each pageant, the pastor will give an invitation to those who are not certain of their salvation to receive Christ into their hearts. They are then asked if they have done this to declare it by giving their name and checking the appropriate place on the registration form. Many of these are from different denominational persuasions and have never heard a clear gospel message, but will return to their churches having been truly saved. More than 95,000 people have prayed to receive Christ at these events (86).

At first glance, the thought of 95,000 conversions based on one church's biannual theatre productions seems improbable, if not impossible. Yet, other large-scale evangelistic events see hundreds, if not thousands, respond to gospel invitations. Videos of Billy Graham Crusades, for example, show constant streams of people walking down aisles of sport arenas and other massive venues to make professions of faith during altar calls. In 2007, Sevier Height Baptist Church in

East Tennessee had six hundred people respond to their Singing Christmas Tree gospel presentation with commitments of faith after watching the performance (Young).

And although it's highly unlikely that all 95,000 people experienced what evangelicals would consider a true, life-altering conversion experience, some personal testimonies given by performance attendees and church leaders suggest that church drama can serve as the impetus for genuine life change.<sup>9</sup> Prestonwood pastor Jack Graham relayed one such story in an interview with the Daystar Television Network. When asked about his favorite Christmas production testimony, Graham said:

A decade ago, a member invited a woman to our service. Earlier that day, that woman had filed for divorce from her husband. She had no faith whatsoever. She was broken. She had never attended church. But her desire to be with a friend and be entertained by a Christmas production brought her to us. That evening, at the end of the show, she accepted Christ as her Savior. She reconciled with her husband the same week. And to this day, she is a faithful member of our church who loved the Lord and her family. ("The Gift of Christmas with Pastor Jack Graham")

It's stories that this one that motivate churches to continue pouring countless hours and seemingly endless resources into their large-scale events, despite criticism. Yet, these performances continue to raise meaningful questions about the nature of entertainment within the worship environment. Does spectacle enhance or distract from the evangelical message of church performances? Is there a point where it becomes too much? How does a church create a Christmas celebration that functions as both an act of devotion for regular church members and an inclusive outreach event for the broader community?

Perhaps these questions are best illustrated by the online reactions to The Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant. While the majority of audience members who posted reviews on online sites like Facebook, TripAdvisor, and Yelp praised the show – especially its stellar production values

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the issues of conversion and evangelical altar calls, see Robert Hull's *Conversion and Discipleship*, pp. 27-32 and J.D. Greear's *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*.



– there were some dissenters. And ironically, criticism I read online featured complaints about both halves of the show – the secular segment and the religious one. Some contended that the show was too secular and strayed from the religious meaning of the holiday through its appeal to the commercial side of Christmas in act one. Yet, others were disappointed in the choice to present what equated to an entire Passion play in the second act, with one person claiming that it distracted from the joyful Christmas celebration while another claimed that the bloody scenes of the Passion were not appropriate for some of the young audience members (although children made up a sizable portion of the cast.)<sup>10</sup>

As a person interested in Theatre for Young Audiences, thinking about this show from the perspective of the young actors and audience members involved provides a unique lens from which to reflect on the performances. Young actors who participate in these shows perform on stages far larger than the stage in the average public school, with far greater technical capability. If these Christmas pageants serve as a child’s first introduction to theatrical performance, how does this experience shape their expectations in typical school venues? Does singing and acting in a megachurch show generate excitement about finding additional performance opportunities and watching more theatrical shows, or does it make participating in other shows – sans pyrotechnics and flying angels – somehow pale in comparison?

In sum, from my own perspective as an audience member and an evangelical theatre scholar, I left several of these Christmas performances feeling a bit perplexed. All of the shows I watched were so visually stunning, there were times when I almost forgot I was watching an

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<sup>10</sup> To read some of these online reviews of the Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant, see Yelp ([www.yelp.com/biz/fort-lauderdale-christmas-pageant-fort-lauderdale](http://www.yelp.com/biz/fort-lauderdale-christmas-pageant-fort-lauderdale)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/pg/christmastickets/reviews/?referrer=page\\_recommendations\\_see\\_all&ref=page\\_internal](http://www.facebook.com/pg/christmastickets/reviews/?referrer=page_recommendations_see_all&ref=page_internal)), and TripAdvisor ([www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g34227-d15579725-Reviews-First\\_Baptist\\_Church\\_of\\_Ft\\_Lauderdale-Fort\\_Lauderdale\\_Broward\\_County\\_Florida.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g34227-d15579725-Reviews-First_Baptist_Church_of_Ft_Lauderdale-Fort_Lauderdale_Broward_County_Florida.html)).

amateur church performance executed with an almost entirely volunteer cast. When I returned home, I couldn't stop talking about the special effects, the pyrotechnics, or those Bethlehem-bound zebras that came walking down the aisle in the middle of the Living Nativity at Prestonwood. It was joyful and exciting to watch. Still, something was unsettling when I realized how long it took me to notice the baby in the manger, laying unobtrusively upstage as throngs of people and a menagerie of animals moved throughout the space below. On one hand, that's how the Bible paints much of the story of the first Christmas – just a baby born in a stable to unassuming parents that only a few shepherds noticed. On the other hand, it makes me wonder how many others missed the small baby in the middle of the spectacle as well. Consequently, as churches pursue the admirable goal of creating beautiful and compelling art that captures the attention of the unchurched, they must also continue working to ensure the methods do not overshadow the message.

### **Chapter 3. Generation Z Takes Centerstage: Children and Youth Drama Teams**

On March 30, 2019, comedian John Crist posted a seven-second video on his Facebook page. In the video, one of the shortest ever posted on his account, Crist walked through a door dressed like a giant blue book, looked at the camera as calliope-like music played in the background, and walked out of the frame without saying a word. In less than twenty-four hours, the video garnered over six hundred thousand views, four thousand shares, and over five thousand comments (Crist). Why would this cryptic video solicit such a response?

It's because many of Crist's viewers recognized the blue character as Psalty, a singing songbook that served as the central character in a 1980s Christian media phenomenon. Developed by Ernie Rettino and his wife, Debbie Kerner Rettino in 1980, Psalty used music and dialogue to teach Biblical lessons to children. The Psalty albums were eventually translated into at least eleven languages and received a 1984 Grammy nomination for Best Recording for Children ("The People Behind Psalty"). In addition, the albums morphed into a series of successful children's videos, as well as musicals that could be performed live by church-based children's groups across the country. For many people responding to Crist's Facebook post nearly four decades later, the image of the childhood icon ushered in a wave of nostalgia, reminding them of their earliest childhood acting experiences performing alongside "Psalty" in church-based musical productions.

While the previous chapter focused on the supporting role children play within large-scale evangelistic church spectacles, this chapter places the children centerstage. Here, I examine church-based children and youth drama groups that often function like a school drama club; students attend regular rehearsals to order to perform a show for family, friends, and the broader church community. For some church-based drama groups, like those found in many Assemblies

of God congregations, youth take those performances out of individual churches to competitive festivals. By examining these theatrical events, I show how participation in children and youth performance groups can empower students as leaders in today's church while encouraging them to join in the church's evangelistic mission by sharing gospel presentations intertwined within the theatrical performances.

To aid in my research, I visited two performance sites: the children's choir at Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California in December 2016 and the Florida Fine Arts Festival held in Orlando in April 2018. Based on these visits, I examine the way children and youth drama teams can function as both internal (disciple-making) and external (evangelistic) instruments of the church. I also look at the way this internal/external dynamic is both sustained and challenged by the competitive nature of the youth festival format.

### **Saddleback Church: Children's Musicals with a Mission**

In some churches, children's drama and choral activity intertwine; children's dramatic productions are an off-shoot of the church's children's choir program. These performances, however, are more than just a chance for children to show off their music and theatre skills. They also allow children to engage in a greater mission of the church: evangelism. In a 1958 article on youth church choirs, William W. Lemonds cited four purposes of church music programs: worship, education, evangelism, and fellowship. Within the article, Lemonds makes a case for a music program's evangelical function:

The worthy music program will attract people to the church, it will increase attendance at the worship services, it is even a decided asset in public relations in a community. Moreover, it brings some Christmas-Easter Christians to church during the interim period; but all of these are only outgrowths of an integrated music program. When you have over 400 people involved in a church music program with thirty musical assistants, they make wonderful evangelists for the news of Christ, His Church, and good church music. (11)

The theatrical performances produced by the children's choral program at Saddleback Church in Southern California serve as an excellent example of this arts-meet-evangelism philosophy in action. With a sprawling main campus located in the Los Angeles suburb of Lake Forest, California, Saddleback Church, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, is currently the eleventh largest church in the United States (Gore). During its first public service on Easter Sunday 1980, 205 attendees met at a local high school. Today, approximately 30,000 people attend a Saddleback worship service each week, meeting in fourteen different Southern California locations and four additional international sites (Ritchie). Pastor Rick Warren has served as the church's leader from the beginning, building a reputation as one of the most influential evangelical ministers in the United States, due largely to his publishing endeavors and occasional political appearances.<sup>1</sup> According to an article in the *Orange County Register*, Warren has written eight books (including national bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold almost forty million copies) and was named one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World" by *Time* magazine in 2005 (Ritchie).

Saddleback Church produces an annual children's musical during the Christmas season. When I began researching children's drama performances in megachurches, one of the first articles I came across was a blog post by Rebekah Jones, children's choir director at Saddleback Church. Just before the church's 2015 children's Christmas production, Jones wrote about the reason why she spends months helping children memorize lines, prepare songs, and learn choreography:

For the children involved in the choirs, they are taught early on that what they are a part of is more than songs or a performance. Our team of volunteers has been preparing the

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being a *New York Times* bestselling author, Warren garnered national attention when he was tapped by Barack Obama to give the invocation at the January 2009 presidential inauguration. Some liberals, such as the Human Rights Campaign president, called on Obama to reconsider due to Warren's conservative stances on issues such as homosexuality and abortion (Mooney).

kids for the ministry of sharing the gospel. It's not about the music as much as it is about the invitation to Jesus Christ ... God uses the exuberance of these kids with their child-like faith, and their sweet abandon in true worship to minister to the lost. (Jones, "Saddleback Kids Worship")

Intrigued by the way Saddleback Church's leaders seek to empower students to share their burgeoning faith, I decided to attend the 2016 Christmas performance to watch the theatrical event firsthand. I arrived in California a few days before the children's Christmas performance, in part to attend a Sunday morning worship service at Saddleback. This provided me with a better understanding of the church culture before attending the performance later in the week.

I arrived at Saddleback Church's main Lake Forest campus on Sunday, December 11, 2016 for the 9:00 a.m. service. As I approached the expansive campus, there was the faint sense that I was arriving at Disneyland – primarily because of the long driveway, pronounced archway, and signs pointing the way to where I needed to go. The Saddleback campus is comprised of multiple buildings, so ensuring that I was in the right place took some time. Once outside of the main worship center, I noticed many features that highlighted the church's Orange County, California location – upscale, outdoor patio furniture complete with fire pits and outdoor heaters filled the vast patio space in front of the sanctuary doors.<sup>2</sup> Rows of outdoor seats look directly into the glass walls of the worship center, creating an overflow area where people can participate in the service while sitting outside. The church's baptistry, a centerpiece of many traditional Southern Baptist church interiors, was instead an outdoor pool surrounded by stone.

As I entered the worship center, I noticed that the room was smaller than I imagined for a church its size. As the service began, a live praise band played contemporary worship songs from

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<sup>2</sup> Orange County, California is widely known in popular culture as a home for the socially elite, most notably from TV shows like *The O.C.* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. As of 2017, the Lake Forest area itself had a population of 84,931 with a 2% unemployment rate and a median household income of \$102,213 ("City of Lake Forest 2017 Profile"). For comparison, the national unemployment rate was 4.1%, and the median income was \$61,372 for the same year (Fontenot et al).

the stage. As they sang, one thing that caught me off-guard was the use of video cameras. While stationary video cameras are fairly commonplace in megachurches, these cameras had moveable arms that swung over the heads of the worshippers during the service, projecting live video on giant projection screens in the front of the church. As the sermon began, I was also surprised when Pastor Rick Warren appeared on-screen rather than in person to deliver that week's message on prayer – part five of a series called “Seeking God for a Breakthrough.” After I diligently completed all the fill-in-the-blank spaces on the sermon outline provided in the church bulletin, the service ended, and I had the opportunity to greet Kids Choir Director Rebekah Jones.

Saddleback's Kids Choir serves as the heart of the performing arts ministry for the church's youngest attendees. There are three different choral groups divided by age: Little Lambs (preschool-kindergarten), Kids Celebration Choir (first-third grade), and Kids Worship Choir (fourth-sixth grade). Anyone can be in the choir; no audition is necessary. All three choirs rehearse on Thursdays from 4:30 p.m.-5:45 p.m., where they receive both music and ministry training (“About Choir Rehearsal”). According to the church's website, there is a fee for students to join the choir. Early registration (July-September 1) costs \$50 per child, and there is a \$10 fee added for registering after September 1 (“About Choir Rehearsal”).

While the children's Christmas musical serves as the capstone of the fall choir rehearsals, it's not the only evangelistic performance opportunity for Saddleback Kids. According to the group's website, “Kids Choir Ministry focuses on developing and equipping children to share the love of Jesus with our community and church through weekly training rehearsals and ministry performance opportunities” (“Welcome to Kids Choir!”) The Kids Choir periodically leads

worship alongside the church's worship team, performs at assisted living facilities, and participates in the church's breakfast ministry for the homeless ("Choir Ministry").

On Tuesday night, December 13, 2016, I returned to Saddleback Church to watch the Kids Choir perform in person. The evening's program opened with a choir performance by the Little Lambs; this operated as a sort-of opening act of the musical, *The Bright Light of Bethlehem*. When I arrived, the auditorium was about one-third filled on the bottom level. The atmosphere was even more laid-back than the California casual vibe of Sunday's worship service, as parents were coming and going throughout the auditorium with younger children during the actual performance.

*The Bright Light of Bethlehem* alternated between two different time periods: the night of Jesus's birth over 2,000 years ago and the present day. The set and costumes were relatively simple but effective. Most of the children wore biblical-era robes. The children's choir occupied one side of the stage, and a rather large stable with a manger stood on the other side where most of the student actors performed. The middle part of the stage was a contemporary set, which bridged the gap between present day and Biblical times. On the screen in the back, they projected a sky with a large star as a focal point. The video cameras that were used on Sunday morning were running during the performance as well. Throughout the musical, the cameras projected close-ups of the children. This mediated the performance in a way, as my eyes would tend to focus on the screen rather than the live performers.

Prior to attending the performance, I didn't know what to expect as far as the drama portion was concerned. I knew from personal experience that scripts written specifically for church have the reputation of being moralizing and mediocre. Despite this cause for skepticism, I found myself pleasantly surprised by the theatre elements of the production. The young actors



demonstrated a high level of vocal energy and stage presence, with varied gestures and vocal inflection. I was also impressed by the way one of the students was able to get a laugh from the audience through skilled line delivery and comic timing. In addition, the script lacked the “corniness” I usually think of when it comes to theatre written specifically for young performers.

The biblical part of the story focused on the Bethlehem innkeeper, who according to the Gospel story, allowed a very pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph to stay in the stable when the inn was full on the night of Jesus’s birth. The play took some creative liberty with the familiar biblical story, imagining what was going on in the innkeeper’s home on the night Jesus was born. In one of the key moments of the play, the script’s central theme was revealed through the role of the innkeeper’s young daughter. She pointed out that her dad was so focused on work and money that he was missing out on the point of Christmas – Jesus. Megachurches are frequently located in affluent areas, and with Saddleback being on the outskirts of Los Angeles – an area known for its materiality – this message seemed to be written specifically for the production’s target demographic, namely busy working parents. In this moment, the children took on the role of megachurch pastor by delivering biblical principles through life application scenarios.

Throughout the Kids Choir performance, there was a strong evidence that the church’s “every member’s a minister” philosophy applies just as much to children as adults. During one of the worship songs incorporated into the musical, the young soloist raised her arms in praise, looking like a miniature version of the worship leaders I saw on the same stage Sunday morning. In addition, the performance ended on an evangelistic note. At the end, the worship pastor I recognized from Sunday morning spoke about the performance and presented the gospel message, inviting people to say yes to the gift of Jesus.

Placing children in the forefront of a worship environment can impact adult churchgoers in ways that a regular adult-led worship experience may not. For example, sociologist Sally Gallagher studied the way children serve as religious resources for adult congregants in both mainline and evangelical Protestant congregations. She argues that the presence and involvement of children in the church positively impacts the religious experience and identity of adults. But Gallagher also noted children in the evangelical church she studied were largely invisible on Sunday mornings, taking part in separate “parallel programs” in another part of the church building, making it difficult for them to impact the religious experience of adult worshippers. For Gallagher, this Sunday morning separation revealed the church’s underlying belief that children are not full-fledged members of the church until they make a personal confession of faith when they are older (Gallagher 175).

The children’s program at Saddleback aligns some of Gallagher’s ideas about children in the evangelical worship environment. For instance, there is still an aspect of invisibility in the Saddleback Christmas production, even as children are placed in the forefront of evangelistic efforts. Most noticeably, the children’s program takes place on a Tuesday night, rather than during a more visible timeslot, such as the church’s regular Sunday schedule. In addition, the children’s musical was not mentioned in the weekly bulletin distributed in that week’s Sunday morning church service, although invitations to other Christmas-themed outreach events at the church, such as a kid’s snow play day and a singles’ Christmas party, were listed. For this reason, one might safely assume that the Christmas production isn’t targeted toward the broader Lake Forest community or even the general Saddleback congregation; its audience leans toward individuals with direct ties to the children in the choir.

Jones's blog post indicates that, indeed, many of the attendees are specifically invited by the children. She writes:

It is truly incredible to see the Worship Center fill up with our kid's friends, families, neighbors, teachers, the postman—you get the idea! Anyone can show up! It is thrilling to see the grandfather, who hasn't set foot in a church in more than 30 years, come to see his granddaughter perform. During these sweet productions he gets more than precious memories and photos to last a lifetime—he hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what makes these nights so special. The public school teacher, the unreached grandfather, and perhaps even the postman show up at church possibly for the first time because the kids have colored nearly a thousand invitations and passed them out inviting people to their Christmas production. (Jones, "Saddleback Kids Worship")

Here, choir leaders view the children musical as both as an opportunity to minister to parents who are likely already Saddleback members, as well as an outreach effort for the non-Saddleback attendee. More specifically, the process Jones describes in her blog post signals a type of faith-sharing known as relational evangelism. According to anthropologist James Bielo, relational evangelism can be defined as "a witnessing style that prioritizes one-on-one interactions with non-Christians and the sustained attempt to build meaningful relationships with 'the lost'" (116). Bielo points out that this form of witnessing, promoted in some megachurch environments, contrasts with more direct methods like door-to-door visits and distributing evangelistic tracts to strangers (116).<sup>3</sup> In the Saddleback Kids Choir, children not only learn about God through the songs they sing and lines they memorize. They also learn how to use the performance as an opportunity to share those biblical lessons with people they interact with on a regular basis.

On the other hand, the musical participants also exemplify Gallagher's idea that children in evangelical churches are seen "as objects of adult nurture, teaching, and mission," as some of them have yet to make the personal commitment to Jesus necessary for individual salvation,

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<sup>3</sup> Bielo points to the method advocated in the 1994 book *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, written by Willow Creek Community Church Bill Hybels, as an example of relational evangelism training (116).

according to dominant evangelical theology. Church-based children's musicals are a way for adult leaders to instill basic theology and church doctrine in the hearts and minds of young participants in a fun and memorable way. For example, when Crist posted his Psalty video on social media, adult viewers were quick to share ways the musical character impacted their lives. For some, participating in children's musicals engrained Biblical lessons and scripture passages they were able to recall decades later. Others claimed that the character was the reason for their own religious conversion experience.<sup>4</sup>

Gallagher's notion of children in the church as "objects of adult nurture, teaching, and mission" echoes a similar reflection made by TYA playwright and advocate Suzan Zeder in her 2015 article "Theatre *and* Youth: It's All in the Prepositions." Speaking from a theatre perspective, Zeder notes that adults working with children often act from an "'us and them' binary" as adults seek to help, mold, and impact students (8). Zeder, however, suggests reversing that formula and asking a different set of questions, namely how children might teach and inspire adults. Zeder asks:

How can a child's view and voice help us see or hear our world differently? How does a child's point of view inform our own perspective in ways that might radically shift not only a balance of power in our society, but inspire a new way of seeing, a shift in perception that might shake the foundations of our assumptions about our lives, our scholarship, and our art? (8)

I argue that church-based children and youth drama teams could be a pioneering TYA space to explore and experiment with the questions that Zeder asks, considering that the premise of her musings aligns so closely with Christian theology. In Luke 18:16-17, Jesus shifts the "balance of power" by exalting the faith and status of children, saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you,

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<sup>4</sup> To view the Crist video and comments, see [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=431062917639427](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=431062917639427).

anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (NIV). In essence, this passage teaches that adults should look to children as examples of faith. Placing children in the role of worship leader through their participation in these productions actually exemplifies this theological precept. Yet, this role reversal is even more prominent in the case of youth drama teams I visited, where youth not only perform, but also potentially play a role in shaping the content and message of the performance.

### **“Discover, Develop, Deploy:” Youth Drama Teams and the Assemblies of God**

Youth drama teams composed of middle and high school students are a regular fixture in some evangelical congregations. And perhaps none are so visible as the drama teams in the Assemblies of God Fine Arts program.

The Assemblies of God church traces its roots to the beginning of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century, making it a relatively new denomination in the historical scope of Christianity. The Assemblies of God, currently the largest Pentecostal denomination, emerged approximately a decade after the start of the Pentecostal movement (Senapatiratne 91). In the current landscape of shifting religiosity in the United States, the Assemblies of God denomination stands as one of the few Christian groups gaining new members, rather than losing them (“Fast Facts about American Religion”). According to their published, self-reported statistics for 2017, the Assemblies of God (USA) churches include 3.2 million adherents, with fifty-three percent of followers under the age of thirty-five (“2017 Full Statistical Report”).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This numbers vary from the statistics provided by the 2014 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study. The Pew Research study only takes into account people ages 18 and older, which likely accounts for differing numbers (“Members of the Assemblies of God”). It is also interesting to note that their total number of U.S. adherents (3.2 million) is only a fraction of their global following. The church claims that there are 69 million Assemblies of God adherents worldwide (“2017 Full Statistical Report”).

The denomination began hosting a national fine arts event for youth in the 1960s. Jesse R. Segrist traced the history of the event in “Fine Arts Festival: Fifty Years of the Arts in Ministry,” an article published in a denominational periodical for the festival’s anniversary. What started as a district Teen Talent competition at the 1955 Assemblies of God Northern California-Nevada District youth convention soon spread to other districts around the country. In August 1964, the first National Teen Talent Search competition took place at the Assemblies of God National Youth Conference, aligned with the fiftieth anniversary of the denomination. The first national competition included four categories: vocal solo, vocal ensemble, instrumental solo, and instrumental ensemble. Church leaders hoped that the new program would help the church identify gifted students, show youth how to use their talents in ministry, and train future musicians for a denomination in need of worship leaders (Segrist 47-50).

The event has evolved over the years. In 1986, Teen Talent merged with the Assemblies of God youth Bible Quiz event, as well as its music festival, to become the Fine Arts Festival. The following year, the competition expanded to include other arts such as drama, painting, and creative writing in the competition (Segrist 52). Some Fine Arts Festival alumni have gone on to pursue careers in the arts, mostly in the realm of music. Notable alumni include Christian recording artists and Grammy nominees Francesca Battestelli, Natalie Grant, and Matthew West, as well as pop group The Jonas Brothers (Segrist 52-53).

Over a half-century later, the festival continues with a focus on both evangelism and discipleship, seeking to encourage students to use their artistic gifts in ministry. According to the *Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019*:

Fine Arts is ultimately about spreading the gospel because whether you sing, play an instrument, dance, design, act, or speak, you can be gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered, and personally responsible for the mission of God. There are people all around us who need Christ. They may be in the audience as you sing, act, or preach; they may be in your

dance studio; they may be in an art gallery viewing your designs. As these people interact with students like you who are using their ministry gifts, they are actually interacting with an ambassador for Christ. (3)

Resembling the way that children's musicals, such as those produced by Saddleback, encourage students to share the gospel through their performance, National Fine Arts sees students as active participants in sharing their Christian faith. But unlike the performance at Saddleback, Fine Arts participants take the performance outside of the walls of their own church and spread their message to a larger audience through the festival format.

National Fine Arts provides students with the chance to participate in eighty-two event categories separated into nine divisions: Art, Communication, Dance, Drama, Enterprise, Exhibition, Instrumental, Vocal, and Writing ("What is Fine Arts"). Some of the categories are typical of what one might expect to find in a mainstream fine and performing arts competition; examples include instrumental ensemble, vocal solo, three-dimensional art, and ensemble drama. Other categories focus on church-specific arts including ensemble and solo children's lessons, short sermon, dramatized [Scripture] quoting, worship dance, and Christian bands. Some categories feature arts often attributed to pop culture, such as stand-up comedy, flash fiction writing, and urban dance. And still other categories include events not readily associated with the fine and performing arts at all, like the business plan category in the Enterprise division (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 4-9). Recently, some of the most popular categories were also split into junior and senior levels, including digital photography, worship dance solo, human video solo, percussion solo (traditional), worship leading solo, and poetry (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 11).

Over 65,000 junior and senior high school students participate at the district and national level each year ("What is Fine Arts?"). In many ways, the structure strongly resembles secular

youth performing arts festivals, such as the International Thespian Festival, which began its national festival in 1941 (“History of EdTA”).<sup>6</sup> Students enter specific event categories, such as musical theatre ensemble or drama solo, at district festivals. Students are assessed by a panel of adjudicators using a point system and predetermined scoring criteria. Based on the accumulated number of points students receive, they are given a rating: Fair (up to 25 points), Good (26-30 points), Excellent (31-35 points), or Superior with Invitation (36-40 points). Students who receive “Superior with Invitation” at a district festival are eligible to compete in the National Fine Arts event, which is hosted in a different city each year during late summer.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the individual or group receiving both a Superior rating and the overall highest score in each category is honored with the “Award of Merit” during the festival’s closing ceremonies. Through this program, students have the potential to earn more than just a rating; they are also eligible to win scholarships from participating Assemblies of God colleges and universities across the country, who also frequently attend the festival promoting their schools (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 17-19).

To learn more about the Fine Arts Festival process, I attended the Peninsular Florida Fine Arts Festival on Friday, April 27, 2018.<sup>8</sup> The festival took place at Faith Assembly of God in

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<sup>6</sup> It’s possible that the early leaders of the Fine Arts Festival would have been familiar with other high school events like the National High School Drama Conference, sponsored by what is now known as the International Thespian Festival. On the last day of the first 1941 festival, NBC aired an original radio play cast entirely with Thespian members (“History of EdTA”).

<sup>7</sup> Assemblies of God churches are broken up into districts based largely on geographic location, although there are some districts based on ethnic delineations. The Assemblies of God website currently lists 67 districts. Referencing the District Office Directory, I notice that while most states have one district (or combine with nearby states to form one district), Florida is home to five offices: the Brazilian district (Lighthouse Point, Florida), Florida Multicultural district (Orlando, Florida), Peninsular Florida district (Lakeland, Florida), Second Korean district (Goldenrod, Florida), and the West Florida district (Marianna, Florida) (“About PenFlorida District”).

<sup>8</sup> According to their website, the Peninsular Florida district that I visited includes “the peninsula of Florida from the Suwanee River to the Atlantic Ocean and from the Georgia border to Key West” along with the U.S. and British Virgin Islands (“About PenFlorida District”).



Orlando, a Florida megachurch that started in 1975 as a small congregation of ninety-five and has grown to serve over five thousand people on a weekly basis (“About Us”). Walking toward the building reminded me of attending the Florida Junior Thespian Festival as a middle school teacher; groups dressed in black pants and coordinating solid-colored t-shirts rehearsed in the parking lot. The lobby was filled with booths promoting various colleges, universities, and other post-secondary training opportunities. A merchandise table was set up, selling t-shirts and other items for participants to commemorate their experience. I spent most of the day moving room to room throughout the church, watching students participate in a wide variety of performing arts events, including dramatized quoting, musical theatre, reader’s theatre, urban dance, and step troupe. But one event I observed at the Fine Arts Festival stood out for its uniqueness – the human video.

Human videos are a form of drama found mainly within the evangelical Christian subculture. A product of the 1980s MTV phenomenon, the origin of human videos can be traced back to Randy Philips, a “fine arts fanatic” who used the music video craze to create a new form of ministry (Chace). At the 2018 PenFlorida Fine Arts Festival, human videos took center stage for much of the morning. While many festival events took place in smaller classroom spaces throughout the building, Friday morning’s Human Video Large Ensemble category took place in the middle of the church atrium – a large open area of the three-story building complete with a baptistry and stage area in the center. Chairs were set up for the audience (I estimated around 200). Audience members would come and go between performances, but the area remained relatively full throughout the day. In addition, the atrium area functioned like the center court of a large shopping mall, opening to the building’s multiple levels so that people could watch the action from the balconies above.

“Believer,” a human video presented by Glad Tidings Assembly of God, provided my introduction to the event. The performance, like most of the human videos I watched throughout the day, combined elements of mime, drama, dance, and lip sync (with a few cheerleading-style lifts added in) to tell a story set to music. Many of the performances I watched throughout the day featured careful audio splicing of songs, sermons, or news clips to present an evangelical message. Some common themes quickly emerged as I watch multiple groups perform. Many tackled social issues in “ripped from the headlines” fashion. One human video ensemble known as “Essence,” for example, spliced multiple audio clips into their musical selection that spoke of school shootings, ISIS, and same sex marriage, including a speech from former President Barack Obama.<sup>9</sup> It ended with a sermon clip, all while the group continued their interpretive dance and aerial lifts. Other human videos retold Biblical narratives like the Genesis account of Adam and Eve or the Gospel story of Jesus’s birth. But probably the most reoccurring scene featured dramatic battles between good and evil. In these scenes, students taking on the roles of both Jesus and demonic forces. In most human videos, students used creative lifts to portray Jesus’s crucifixion and victory over evil – whether that be victory over literal demons or human sin.

I suggest the process of creating human videos, such as the one portrayed by “Essence,” provides a designated space where issues of politics, culture, and faith can collide for young evangelicals. Many Fine Arts participants likely find themselves existing in a liminal space between the conservative Christian faith taught at church and their generation’s increasingly liberal beliefs. Barna Group’s 2016-2017 study of Generation Z points to a huge discrepancy between engaged Christian teens and their non-religious peers, especially on moral issues.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A video of the performance I watched is also posted on YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p13RW0zUDc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p13RW0zUDc).

<sup>10</sup> The Barna Group defines “engaged Christians” as people who “identify as Christian, have attended church within the last six months and strongly agree with each of the following: The Bible is the inspired word of God and

Compared to teens of no faith affiliation, engaged teens are four times more likely to think lying is wrong (77% vs 20%), and over fifteen times more likely to think sex before marriage and homosexuality are morally wrong (76% vs 5% and 77% vs 4%, respectively). Politically, young conservatives also can find themselves isolated from their Republican elders; less than 60% of Republican-leading Gen Zers approve of Donald Trump compared to 85% of Baby Boomer and 90% of Silent Generation Republicans. This is largely attributed to shifting generational attitudes on factors like social issues and ideal levels of government involvement in society (Parker et al). By splicing together clips from both mainstream media and evangelical sermons, the soundtrack of some human videos becomes an intense dialogue between the two voices regularly encountered by students both inside and outside of the church walls.<sup>11</sup>

On one hand, some might argue that human videos and similar evangelical performances merely propagate conservative views within the Church in a didactic, uncritical way. Yet, I argue the human video creative process holds the potential to be a valuable space to discuss critical social issues in an evangelical setting, much like the way that sociologist Sally Gallagher argues some mainline denominations use youth programs to encourage teens to “construct their own opinions and beliefs” (178). Assemblies of God acknowledge this potential in one of the festival guides, noting that Fine Arts should be a place where students “wrestle” with questions regarding the way their faith interacts with culture (“Music Selection Rule Clarification”). Theoretically,

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contains truth about the world, I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today, I engage with my church in more ways than just attending services, and I believe that Jesus Christ was crucified and raised from the dead to conquer sin and death” (“Gen Z and Morality”). While it’s outside the scope of this study to gauge the individual belief level of festival participants, the vast majority of Fine Arts Festival participants would likely fall into the “engaged Christian” classification of the Barna Study. This is based on the festival requirement that participants be Christians, in addition to the high level of church attendance and involvement required to prepare for the festival. While it’s probably true that not every festival participant agrees with the “engaged Christians” belief statements, those statements are also fairly basic assertions for members of the Assemblies of God denomination.

<sup>11</sup> To watch an example, see the “Essence” human video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p13RW0zUDc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p13RW0zUDc).

the creative process of putting together the human video could serve as a viable, valuable avenue for students to ask valid questions and search for answers as they attempt to navigate the tension between their conservative faith and liberal culture.

But as church groups work through the process of creating their performance, what exactly defines a good human video? To learn more, I analyzed a performance posted online and created by the youth group at Evangel Temple in Jacksonville, Florida. Last year, Evangel received a “Superior with Invitation” rating at the 2018 PenFlorida Fine Arts Festival I attended and later won the Award of Merit at the 2018 National Fine Arts Festival in Houston (the festival’s highest honor). Evangel is an Assemblies of God congregation that experienced massive growth under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Cecil Wiggins. When Wiggins became pastor of Evangel Temple in 1964, the church had eighty members. When he retired in 2010, the church had grown to 1,700 in regular Sunday attendance. In 2000, the church expanded from their 1,000-seat auditorium to a new building designed to seat 3,000. In addition, the church became well-known for its use of both media and the arts under Wiggins’s leadership. The church made extensive use of television and radio for evangelism, and they brought the well-known evangelical Christian theatrical production, *Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames*, to the church for twenty-eight years (Strickland). After his 2010 retirement, Wiggins was succeeded by his son, Garry, who has continued his father’s legacy.

Titled “The Screenwriter,” Evangel’s performance was more enigmatic than most I observed, yet it still tackled the theme of light versus darkness I witnessed in other performances.<sup>12</sup> The human video opens, not with music but with a series of sound effects: a

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<sup>12</sup> A video of “The Screenwriter” can be viewed on Evangel’s Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155611710865770](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155611710865770).

large, eerie door opening and closing, followed by echoing footsteps. One of the student actors walks through the “door” and down a “hall” created of his fellow performers, all carefully in sync with the pre-recorded track. The sound effects give way to haunting instrumental music as the main character pulls out a mimed typewriter and begins working on a script. On the track, we begin to hear narration – the inner thoughts of the screenwriter as he begins typing potential storylines, carefully brought to life onstage through the actions of the ensemble. After discarding his first attempt, the screenwriter begins telling a story about a girl who “grapples with demons” as the haunting song “Dark Matter” by secular recording artists Les Friction plays in the background.<sup>13</sup> Narration alternates with song lyrics as the ensemble portrays the girl’s torment and angst through choreographed movement. Finally, the narrator tells the central character, “There are no demons here,” breaking both the building tension of the scene and the silence in the audience as the crowd begins to cheer. The dark song gives way to the popular Christian praise and worship song “Holy Ground (Jesus Changes Everything),” by Passion featuring Melodie Malone, as the tone of the piece shifts to portray the hope and light offered by Jesus, played by one of the ensemble members.

On one level, the performance includes many of the elements listed in *Relevant* magazine’s satirical article called “9 Things Every Effective Human Video Had:” teenage actors wearing black t-shirts, demonic forces, veiled references to darkness, and a crucifixion scene (Carey). But while my knowledge of the competitive human video scoring world is admittedly limited to attending this festival, comparing the performance to the judging criteria in the 2019 Fine Arts Rulebook helped me see why the Evangel piece might have received high scores.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Les Friction’s website, the album featuring the song “Dark Matter” was created “in the spirit of album-oriented concept rock opera ... in the tradition of Pink Floyd and Queen” (“The Story”).

Entries are judged in four categories: selection, communication, presentation/technique, and overall effectiveness. In the selection category, “The Screenwriter” stands out because of its unique concept. Choosing to veer from societal hot topic issues, Bible stories, and on-stage portrayals on drinking scenes and other Christian taboos in favor of an artistic narrative set it apart from many other videos I watched during my visit to the festival. In addition, the piece featured distinct character development in the lead character, in part because the dialogue on the soundtrack enabled the audience to hear his thoughts. Movement throughout the piece was also clearly choreographed and executed with precision.

But one facet of the performance caught my attention. The inclusion of secular music served as a striking choice given the nature of the competition and the fact that students are judged in part on “Christian Message” and “Relevant Ministry” (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 57). Including secular music in the festival is a controversial issue among denominational youth leaders – enough of an issue to warrant an additional three-page document called “Music Selection Rule Clarification” on the festival website. The addendum addresses some thoughtful questions about art and culture in the context of the Church (“Music Selection Rule Clarification”). This document highlighted some of the larger issues surrounding Christian art in general, noting the way Christian art can be negatively impacted when it’s limited to a pre-defined message from the onset of the creative process. The rule sheet reads, “The church is hemorrhaging artists and one of the reasons may be that we stymie their creativity by placing outside demands on their art. When the purpose of art is determined before it’s even made, the creativity suffers” (Music Selection Rule Clarification”). But even while the festival leaders do not condemn the use of secular music, they also place limitations on its inclusion in the festival, noting that “to honor the diverse thought across our Fellowship, presentations including secular

music will not be allowed to present on the National Fine Arts Festival/National Youth Convention evening stage as a preservice presentation or during the Celebration Service” (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 21). This likely explains one of the comments under the posted video of Evangel’s performance. One person lamented that the Evangel’s performance, the top scoring large group human video of the 2018 National festival, was not allowed on the main stage during the Celebration Service. Instead, they performed outside of the conference venue at the conclusion of the festivities (“Evangel Temple”).

Overall, the National Fine Arts Festival, like the Saddleback children’s musical, functions on both an internal and external level. First, inside the church, the festival acts as a discipleship tool for students as performances reinforce biblical lessons. It also serves as an instrument of devotion for believers who attend the festival and watch the emotion-filled scenes. However, the Fine Arts Festival also promotes external engagement as it encourages students to use their talents for evangelistic purposes. While there was no altar call at the festival like there was during the Saddleback musical, some youth groups use their human video performances as evangelistic tools on mission trips, although some argue that the uniquely Christian art form might seem unusual when removed from its church context..<sup>14</sup>

But what separates the theatrical performances of the Fine Arts Festival from other forms of church-based TYA is the competitiveness. In tracing the history of the festival, Jesse Segrist noted that concerns regarding the competitive nature of the festival arose in the 1970s, and a concerted effort was made by event leadership to promote the value of participation over the

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<sup>14</sup> Using human videos and other forms of drama as an evangelistic tool on mission trips is so ubiquitous that Christian magazine *Relevant* even posted a gently satirical article about the art form, clearly meant for church insiders who spent their adolescence performing these skits. Noting that human videos are sometimes used on mission trips, the author adds, “As with most forms of street evangelism, the intentions were typically very good, but the results were often very mixed. As it turns out, sometimes a supernatural deliverance from drug addiction reenacted to a chorus of a Michael W. Smith song using only hand gestures just doesn’t translate in a public park” (Carey).

desire to win (51-52). While the primary goal of the event may be spiritual growth, the fact remains that good scores and even college scholarships may be awarded for high-ranking performances. This raises questions on both ends of the spectrum: Is competitive ministry counterintuitive to biblical values? How do church leaders prevent the desire to win from overshadowing the discipleship aspects of the performance? Is it possible that receiving a lower-than-expected score could actually discourage someone from further pursuing their art as ministry? At the same time, the Bible occasionally uses competitive imagery to describe the Christian life. I Corinthians 9:24 says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” (NIV). Could the competitive nature of the event serve as an impetus to students to push past the mediocre reputation of Christian art to strive for excellent work?

Through all the performances, several aspects of the PenFlorida Fine Arts Festival separated it from its secular counterparts. The first was the level of emotion demonstrated throughout the day, which showed the way the performance functioned as an instrument of devotion for believers in the audience. Each human video performance was followed by loud cheering, yelling, and applause from audience members. As NPR reporter Zoe Chace noted in her own experience with Assemblies of God human videos, the audience becomes especially vocal during crucifixion scenes. After watching the national-winning entry from 2010, Chace said:

The climax of the human video is signaled by the screaming kids in the audience, who recognize it early. One of the kids turns into an unmistakable Jesus, who is strung up on a crucifix made from his teammates standing on each other’s shoulders. He dies, quickly, and is hauled off by his teammates. The audience goes wild. And the people in the crowd really lose it when Jesus returns.



In my own experience, in addition to the loud cheering, I noticed people brought to tears after some of the human video performances. On one hand, this could be attributed to the generally expressive nature of the Pentecostal faith (Chace). On the other hand, such visceral displays of emotion might also be influenced by who enacts the scenes. At the festivals, parents, family members, and youth sponsors compose a large percentage of the audience. While watching any depiction of Jesus's crucifixion is significant for Christian believers, watching the scene depicted by one's own children could compound the emotional impact as it symbolizes the legacy of faith being passed from one generation to the next.

Another aspect of the festival that stood out was the level of racial and ethnic diversity among the participants. Throughout its history, the Christian church in America has been known for its lack of racially diverse congregations. Appearing on NBC's *Meet the Press* on April 17, 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11:00 on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America." This reality has not changed much over the last half-century. Some research organizations, such as Pew Research Center, classify Protestant churches as mainline, evangelical, and historically black, formally recognizing the racial divide that has existed (and continues to exist) in U.S. churches. According to a 2014 survey conducted by Lifeway Research, "Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated hours in American life, with more than 8 out of 10 congregations made up of one predominant racial group" (Smietana). The Assemblies of God as a denomination, however, is comparatively diverse, as forty-three percent of U.S. adherents are members of ethnic minority groups, while over ninety-five percent of the global Assemblies of God followers live outside of the U.S – an interesting statistic given that the denomination began in the U.S. only a century ago ("2017 Full

Statistical Report”). Categories offered through the Fine Arts Festival acknowledge the diverse cultural backgrounds of the denomination. Event categories such as step troupe, urban dance, and rap highlight arts that first emerged within African-American culture. Five popular events – short sermon, human video ensemble, vocal ensemble, male vocal solo, and female vocal solo – have Spanish subcategories, which require participants to perform entirely in Spanish. In addition, American Sign Language comprises two more event categories in the festival (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 4-8). Through these offerings, the Fine Arts Festival both celebrates the diverse cultural backgrounds found throughout the denomination and highlights the church’s strong global evangelistic mission as it attempts to reach diverse people groups with the Christian gospel of salvation.

Yet for some, church-based children’s productions and youth drama teams, like those participating in the Assemblies of God National Fine Arts Festival, may seem like just another example of the Christian subculture appropriating elements of mainstream culture. What impact might these performances, largely unknown to theatre scholars outside of the faith, possess for those on the outside? First, church-based drama teams simultaneously support and empower young, burgeoning artists who may or may not be involved in theatre outside of the church. Furthermore, church-based youth theatre programs often foster creative leadership, as students must create performances like human videos from the ground up, often through a devising process.

More importantly, these programs teach students that theatre can do more than entertain. In the world of church theatre, art is not created for art’s sake; students believe in the power of art as an instrument for change. Young performers are taught that God can use their performance to spark the desire for lifelong spiritual conversion in the hearts of audience members. In

explaining the “why” behind the National Fine Arts Festival, festival leaders write, “Everyone who has received Christ as Savior has been commissioned to be an ambassador for Christ. God is making His appeal through you. He is telling the world the good news about Jesus, and He is doing it through you! (*Fine Arts Festival Rulebook 2019* 3). Consequently, these early performance experiences teach students that art is performative (that is, when coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit).

Likewise, creating art is viewed as an act of service – an appealing trait for the current generation of youth. According to a survey of 1,500 students conducted by Barnes and Noble College Insight, one characteristic of Generation Z is their belief in their own ability to enact change. The report said,

Gen Z expects to be a catalyst for change and fix the problems of the world for future generations ... Gen Z believes in their ability to make a difference and are willing to start discussions with peers about issues they feel passionately about. In fact, 68 percent of Gen Z students believe in the power of their individual voice to effect change. (“What Gen Z Trends Tell You”)

These performance experiences – whether presenting a human video at a festival or on a mission trip – provide a place for students to engage in service-driven arts and let their voices be heard.

In conclusion, how might the distinct form of training students receive in these venues hold greater implications for the secular arts community? For theatre practitioners, and especially for theatre educators, I believe it’s important to remember that many of the 65,000 students who participate in the National Fine Arts program each year may eventually make their way into collegiate arts programs. For many of them, their fine arts training involves more than just instruction on technique. At the heart of the Assemblies of God Fine Arts Program is the motto, “Discover. Develop. Deploy.” Leaders encourage students to discover their talents, work hard to develop them, and ultimately, to actively deploy those gifts in Christian ministry (*Fine Arts*

*Festival Rulebook 2019* 3). In this way, the National Fine Arts leaders empower students to engage in performance as a form of evangelical activism as they attempt to use art both to encourage Christians to stand firm in their beliefs and to reach out to non-believers with a call to embrace the Christian message of faith. In doing so, they could also contribute to a new generation of artists of faith who believe in the innate power of theatre and the arts to serve as a catalyst for social and spiritual change.

## **Chapter 4. An Unlikely Sanctuary: Church-Based Performing Arts Academies**

Given the proliferation of theatrical performance opportunities described throughout this dissertation, church drama directors can find themselves in a predicament. Where do church leaders find performers? How do churches ensure that their productions are led by skilled technicians, playwrights, and production teams? These are all valid questions, especially when lack of artistic excellence remains one of the most frequent areas of criticism launched at church-based theatrical performances. In this chapter, I look at the way some churches integrate arts training programs into their ministry offerings, both to better equip artists for ministry inside the church and to reach out to the broader community, providing arts education opportunities at a time of precarity for theatre programs in public schools.

Criticism directed at the quality of Christian theatre often starts where the plays begin – with the scripts. Willow Creek Church drama director Steve Pederson said, “Churches tended to define the use of drama too narrowly. Either they would limit it to retelling biblical stories and dressing all the characters in bathrobes, or worse yet, they would attempt to preach a sermon through it, wrapping everything up with tidy answers in an eight-minute sketch. The drama didn't reflect reality as most people experienced it” (Pederson). One of the most visible examples of these claims comes from the faith-based film industry. When Sherwood Baptist Church, a megachurch in Albany, Georgia, began Sherwood Pictures, a “moviemaking ministry” of the church, their movies, such as 2008's *Fireproof* and 2011's *Courageous* were frequently panned by critics for their lack of artistic excellence. (The movies received a 40% and 33% critics' score on *Rotten Tomatoes*, respectively). Paul Bond, a writer for *The Hollywood Reporter* notes, “None of these Christian-themed movies is up to Hollywood production standards, though by

one metric -- box office compared to budget -- they're some of the most profitable films in modern history” due to their popularity among church-devoted moviegoers (Bond).

Numerous theatre practitioners and scholars have issued a call for Christian theatre artists to seek training and pursue excellence in their art, including the art of scriptwriting. In *Performing the Sacred*, the authors compared the work and training of Christian musicians to that of faith-based playwrights:

If God gives an artist a work to produce, God always expects the artist to use, attain, or hire the skills necessary to create the work with excellence – that is the way God created the world and that is the pattern God has set for us. It would be absurd for a musical composer to claim divine impetus for a piano sonata apart from training in musical composition and theory. Similarly, a writer must make the sacrifices necessary to learn the technique of playwriting and couple that with the leading of the Holy Spirit. (Johnson and Savidge 103)

One might argue that a similar mandate toward artistic training applies to actors, directors, and technicians who work on church-based performances. But in terms of finding support for artistic endeavors in contemporary Protestant churches, some evangelical artists in the recent past found themselves fighting an uphill battle (Johnson and Savidge 104).

The church’s need for trained artists is further complicated when one examines the state of arts education in U.S. public schools. In 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics found that the percentage of elementary schools that offered theatre classes dropped from twenty percent in the 1999-2000 school year to only four percent in 2009-2010 (Parsad et al. 46). Secondary schools experienced a three percent drop during the same ten-year period (Parsad et al. 49). In prepared remarks delivered in response to the study, then-U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “We know that theatre can be an effective and creative way to support literacy and English language learning. Even at the secondary school level, more than 40 percent of all students do not have theatre instruction at their schools” (Duncan). These statistics

underscore the reality that adequate and equitable access to the arts is on a downturn in the public school environment.

While few would debate the precarious state of arts education, the reasons for the lack of arts education opportunities in public schools are complex and multi-faceted. First, state education policies continue to undermine arts education as a necessary facet of a well-rounded education. According to the 2018 National Center for Education Statistics's evaluation of state arts education policies, just over half of U.S. states (29) "defined the arts in statute of code as a core or academic subject," and only twenty states include "arts courses as an option to fulfill graduation requirement" ("State Education Reforms"). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, major governmental education policies reflected this tendency toward second-class status for arts education in public schools. According to Bowen and Kisida, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) placed pressure of schools to score well on reading and math exams, with schools often facing sanctions for poor standardized test results. The researchers noted that "by the governments own estimation, NCLB's narrow focus on reading and math led to decreased time spent on arts education" (8). Lack of necessary resources provides another obstacle to adequate arts education (Bowe and Kisida, 8) For example, a survey of Pennsylvania public schools revealed that thirty-seven percent of school districts planned to cut elective classes like the arts, foreign languages, and physical education during the 2013-2014 school year, due to shortfalls in schools' financial resources (Neiderberger).<sup>1</sup> Yet, as some public schools continue to cut arts education programs, evangelical institutions – historically some of the theatre's staunchest adversaries – have started to form performing arts academies that offer

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<sup>1</sup> For additional research and statistic of the state of arts education in public schools, see Michelle Staggs, *Theatre Works: Why Public Theatre Education is Important* (2013).

solutions to both problems: the lack of trained artists to serve in arts-related church ministries and the dearth of arts education programs in public schools.

Other artists and scholars have written about the impact these academies make on the lives of congregants and communities. On the practical side, Brian Hedrick offers real-world suggestions for creating a church-based fine arts academy on the WorshipLife website (a site published by Lifeway Christian Resources, a Southern Baptist agency.) In *How to Start a Fine Arts Academy in Your Church*, Texas music minister John Parker provides an entire curriculum for churches interested in starting their own arts program, complete with forty-six printable documents that churches can customize for students and parents. Scholarship has also addressed the impact of these church-based arts programs. In her 2014 dissertation, *The School of Performing Arts at Bellevue Baptist Church as a Model of the Church-Based Arts Academy*, Hae Eun Kim traces the history of Bellevue's groundbreaking academy from the perspective of a musician, ultimately suggesting how the program might translate in a Korean context. Within her work, Kim identified at least three other dissertations that analyze church-based performing arts academies through the lens of music.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I extend these conversations by examining church-based performing arts academies from a theatre perspective. During my research, I visited three U.S. evangelical megachurches that offer on-site performing arts education programs: Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee; First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida; and Calvary Community Church, Westlake Village, California. Here, I discuss the structure of each program, their method

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<sup>2</sup> Those music-based dissertations include Wai-Chun Sabrina Li, "Prevailing Principles and Practices in Church-Affiliated Music Academies of Selected Southern Baptist Churches in the United States" (D.M.A. diss., University of Houston, 2001); Elizabeth Carol King-Chipman, "A Study of Three Church-Related Applied Music Programs in Shelby County, Tennessee" (D.M.A. diss., University of Memphis, 1996); and Althea Renae Lindt, "A Case Study of Schools of Music Operating in Baptist Churches" (D.M.A. diss., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2000).



of theatre education, and their impact on the church and surrounding community. Next, I look at the unique solution offered by Christian Youth Theatre, a national after-school theatre program frequently housed in large (often evangelical) churches across the country. Finally, I argue that performing arts academies sponsored by churches deserve the attention of mainstream arts programs and theatre companies because of their professionalism, relatively low cost, and impact on arts students' horizon of expectations. In this way, church-based performing arts academies regularly take on the challenge of empowering and equipping artists within their congregations by providing weekly training in music, dance, and theatre.

### **The Sites: A Look Inside Church-Based Performance Arts Academies**

Bellevue Baptist Church, located in the Cordova neighborhood of Memphis, Tennessee, runs one of the most well-established church-based performing arts academies in the evangelical community. Bellevue Baptist, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, was founded in 1903 and reached megachurch status under the leadership of the late pastor Adrian Rogers ("2018 Outreach 100," Rogers). The church has continued thriving under the leadership of pastor and immediate past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Steve Gaines. Bellevue averages over seven thousand attendees each week, but the church sees many more come through the doors during the annual Christmas show, a mainstay of the music ministry since its debut in 1976 ("2018 Outreach 100," Young).

Founded in the 1984, the School of Performing Arts (which was originally known as the Performing Arts Center) was created as a way for the church to train its own musicians. The minister of instrumental music, Carter Threlkeld, began by creating a strings program, using Suzuki training methods (Kim 39). Although the S.P.A. program started with a musical emphasis, theatre has also served as part of the school's artistic focus; this is not surprising given

Bellevue's theatrical past.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2013, the school offered weekly musical theatre choreography classes. Not only did the class teach a variety of dance styles frequently used on the Broadway stage, but it also focused on "stage presence, performance poise, and some acting techniques as well" (Kim 55). Bellevue S.P.A. has also hosted musical theatre camps during the summer that focused on "audition tips, songs/scene selection, acting, dancing, singing and new techniques to make students competitive in the world of theatre." The camp ended with a showcase performance which allowed students to demonstrate their newly acquired skills (Kim 57). In 2015, the church advertised drama classes are part of "Fine Arts Fridays," special daytime classes that catered to the homeschool community ("Bellevue Baptist Church"). Most recently, Bellevue's School of Performing Arts offered Intro to Theatre classes for the Fall 2019 semester, offering middle and high school-aged students a chance to develop their acting skills ("Intro to Theatre").

But academy students don't just take classes; they also take their lessons into the community. For instance, during the 2016 fall semester, the School of Performing Arts students performed at a block party for a "Jesus Loves Memphis" event and participated in "Instruments of Praise Day" at Bellevue Baptist Church, which "includes 125 ... students leading worship at both the 9:20 and 11:00 morning services" ("What has been happening in the S.P.A.")

For homeschool students, the School of Performing Arts offers opportunities they might not otherwise receive. Bellevue's program is a member of the West Tennessee Music Educators Association. According to the S.P.A. website, this designation "allows our students who do not attend a public or private school to participate through the SPA in their regional, state, and

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<sup>3</sup> Bellevue Baptist Church created one of the first drama ministry programs in the Southern Baptist Convention. They also specially designed their 1952 worship space to accommodate staged productions of *The Robe* and *Ben Hur* (Kim 29).

national events for Band and Orchestra” (“School of Performing Arts”). The church also partners with local schools by offering an “All West Choir and Band Prep Academy.” This Saturday event allows local students from area schools to participate in small-group music classes, get audition tips, and take part in mock auditions before the area’s big regional music auditions (“All West”). Through these activities, the church serves as an advocate and supporter of the local music programs throughout the Memphis area.

### **First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida**

When I met with the Edson Dickinson, director of the Worship Arts Institute at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, he quickly referenced the performing arts education program at Bellevue Baptist Church, calling it “the granddaddy” of church-based performing arts academies. But the program at First Baptist Jacksonville is no newcomer to performing art education. Founded in 1986 as the School of Music, students have been taken classes at the sprawling downtown Jacksonville church campus for over thirty years (Dickinson). But the story of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville started long before that.

The church has been a fixture in the Jacksonville community for over 180 years. But as a megachurch located in the heart of the city’s downtown area, First Baptist, Jacksonville, entered a period of decline about two decades ago. According to news reports, the church that once saw membership top out at 25,000 congregants now averages about 3,000 in weekly attendance (Soergel). Pastor Heath Lambert said urban sprawl and community members’ reticence about coming to the downtown area serve as primary causes for the change (Soergel).

Like the program at Bellevue, the Worship Arts Institute was created to train future musicians who would eventually perform during worship services at First Baptist. And like Bellevue, strings were an early focus for the performing arts school. Essentially, the Worship

Arts Institute began by filling a gap they found in the city's performing arts education programs. According to Dickinson, Jacksonville was an area that had few opportunities for strings education, because few schools, if any, beyond the city's dedicated arts magnets offered instruction in violin and other stringed instruments (Dickinson).

Currently, the church offers two different training options. Students can opt for private lessons in various areas of music: voice, piano, strings, percussion, brass, woodwinds, and guitar. For other arts areas – art, ballet/tap, photography, music theory, and drama – instruction is provided in a group instruction format (“Worship Arts Institute”). In 2017, the Worship Arts Institute at First Baptist Jacksonville served over one hundred students, with eighty enrolled in private lessons, and another forty or fifty involved in group classes (Dickinson).

The church doesn't provide funding for the Worship Art Institute, outside of paying the salaries of the few full-time staff members. Still, the financial goal of the school is to break even, which allows them to offer relatively low rates. Group theatre classes, for example, cost \$40 a month for one-hour weekly sessions; ballet classes are \$50 a month (“Worship Arts Institute”).

While some Worship Arts Institute students do attend public schools, many of the students come from the church's on-site private school. Instead of attending extended day programs on Wednesdays, students who register with the Worship Arts Institute can walk from the private school on one side of the church campus to the Worship Arts Institute classrooms for arts instruction. The Worship Arts Institute also recruits new students through their website, as well as a preservice video that is shown at the church. Homeschool fairs and a booth at the church's annual Vacation Bible School, which can draw attendance of 1000-1500 children, also serve as contact sites for potential new arts families. In addition, the Worship Arts Institute

partners with the city's magnet schools to produce a summer camp opportunity especially for students at the performing arts schools (Dickinson).

In a sense, the Worship Arts Institute supplements the arts education opportunities offered by local schools at a time when some programs are feeling the effects of cutbacks. Dickinson said that local school music programs were strong in the 1980s, but with an increase in standardized testing and a decrease in funding, the last thirty years have been hard for schools. Statistics agree. According to a research brief issued jointly by the Jacksonville Community Council Inc. and the non-profit Cathedral Arts Project:

In recent years, Duval [County] elementary schools provided an average of 18 hours each per year of art, music, and physical education ... Recent budget cuts (2012) have required the elimination of \$1 million in each of the three resource areas, changing the formula to one 'resource' day for every twelve teachers and reducing arts and physical education from 18 hours to 13.5. ("Research Brief: Arts Education in Duval County")

Another challenge for neighborhood schools in the Jacksonville area is the draw of the county's widely-respected arts magnet schools, such as Lavilla School of the Arts (middle school) and Douglas Anderson School of the Arts (high school). While the schools offer excellent arts education opportunities, they also siphon strong musicians away from their neighborhood schools, making it harder for neighborhood school music programs to thrive. "A lot of schools are losing core talent," Dickinson said. "We're in a place where we could make more of a difference."<sup>4</sup>

Dickinson noted several qualities that make the program at First Baptist appealing for parents looking for quality arts education. The leadership strives to hire quality instructors who

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that not even the arts magnet schools have been spared from recent cuts to arts funding. For example, Pine Forest Schools of the Arts (elementary) in Jacksonville had to launch its own fundraising campaign in 2012 to keep teachers at current levels after the district made cuts to the art school's strings and drama positions ("Research Brief: Arts Education in Duval County").

prescribe to the values of the school and develop a strong rapport with students and their families. Program leaders also focus on maintaining the facilities, making sure the building is safe, clean, and professional. For theatre students, Dickinson noted that the art is approached from a different worldview than one might find in a secular theatre class. He noted that students are “not exposed to all that’s in the world ... morally, spiritually, emotionally.” In other words, parents can send their students to theatre classes knowing that the performance material will not be something that might be objectionable or out-of-line with their family’s values.

Ultimately, while the program aims to provide students with a quality arts education, it has also had a missions and ministry focus from the beginning. The church’s late pastor, Homer Lindsay Jr., saw the performing arts academy as a way to reach out to the community. “Dr. Lindsay was really focused on outreach,” said Dickinson. The goal was to see people “affected by the gospel through the ministry.” For Worship Arts Institute leaders, the performing arts training center fits easily into the church’s mission “to glorify God and make Him known to everyone everywhere.” For Dickinson, studying music, for example, enables students “to appreciate how to worship corporately or how to worship personally.”

### **Calvary Community Church, West Lake Village, California**

The performing arts academy at Calvary Community Church, located just north of Los Angeles in West Lake Village, California, offers a different model for performing arts education within the church. Calvary started with a group of Christians meeting regularly in a Hungry Tiger restaurant in 1976; today, approximately 3,500 people, led by senior pastor Shawn Thornton, gather at their 235,000-square-foot building each Sunday (“Guitar Center Professionals”).

Unlike the other performing arts academies which started with a music focus, Calvary Community's "Spotlight" began when one of the church's former pastors wanted to start a theatre arts program. Early on, the church had a strong artistic vision and performed large scale, Broadway-style musicals as part of the overall church outreach ministry. Although the church leadership has changed, and the church no longer hosts the church-wide theatrical spectacles, the performing arts academy remains a facet of the church's overall ministry (Burns).

I met with Spotlight Director Judith Burns during a research trip to California in December 2016. Burns told me that Calvary's performing arts training program offers a different experience for students in the fall and spring semesters. The fall focuses on artistic training in a workshop format. Classes for second through twelfth grades meet weekly for four hours on Saturdays. In these training workshops, students learn how to read music, play acting games, and work toward building a sense of community among members of the Spotlight "family." Like Bellevue, Calvary Community Church's performing arts students also participate in community outreach through activities like caroling at assisted living facilities and participating in community events sponsored by the church (Burns).

Fall students also have the opportunity to be involved in a Christmas production. During my visit the weekend of December 10-11, 2016, Spotlight students performed an original musical in all weekend worship services. *Down to Earth: The Final Countdown* was a riff on the TV show *Undercover Boss*, and it was written specifically to match the theme of the pastor's sermon series. In addition to the Spotlight students, four adults acted in the production. According to Burns, incorporating the adult actors "gives adults someone to relate to" when watching the performance.

In the spring, the Spotlight staff and students focus on putting together a fully staged production. The semester starts with an audition workshop, which can draw up to 150 students. Then students audition for the spring musical, which is usually the shorter youth version of a popular Broadway title, such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *Peter Pan*. At this point, the focus turns to the rehearsal process with a few of the theatre games and activities from the fall workshop incorporated into the rehearsals (Burns).

Once the rehearsal process is over, students showcase their skills in community performances held at the church. For regular ticketed performances, patrons watch a second “mini-play” called a “side story” in addition to the featured performance. The second smaller production correlates to the theme of the main production, but it examines a Biblical topic. In addition to adding a religious element to an otherwise secular performance, it allows more students to perform onstage, especially students who can’t commit to the rehearsal schedule of the main show (Burns).

In addition to participating in the musical in the spring, students can enroll in Creative Arts Academy classes throughout the week, which have included courses in musical theatre, acting for TV, and improvisation. According to their website, Spotlight is currently planning to expand their academy course offerings. They advertised a call for leadership in numerous areas, including “vocal & acting coaches, choreography instructors/dancers, music producers, script writers, costumers, hair/make-up artists, set designers/builders, school show coordinator, marketing support, cast support/events, student discipleship, ministry outreach/serve opportunities, volunteer coordination, production assistant and other creative/technical/performing arts gifts” (“Spotlight”). Through this effort, Spotlight leaders



encourage students to explore facets of theatre beyond the regular acting classes offered by other church-based programs.

Like the Worship Arts Institute at FBC Jacksonville, Spotlight offers classes by trained artists at a significant discount from comparable programs. The Spotlight website advertises the cost savings: “Looking at the different options in the Conejo Valley for performing arts classes, at an average of \$14 - \$19 per hour, we are thrilled to offer competitive training with instructors who work professionally in the entertainment industry (including Broadway, television/film, and renowned recording artists) at an average of \$4.50 per hour!” (“Spotlight”). This savings makes classes more accessible to students who might not be able to afford classes in a traditional theatre setting.

Attendance varies depending on the season. In Fall 2016, Spotlight had forty-one students involved; in the spring, that number can escalate to over one hundred students, due to the draw of the spring production. In the spring, Spotlight features a varying cost structure, based on the role the child plays in the show. Older or more experienced students are cast as principals and ensemble members. Beginning and younger students are cast in the chorus, which is an abbreviated program where the students only attend for two hours on Saturdays.

Like the other performing arts academies, Spotlight has a relationship with community schools. Each spring, Calvary’s Spotlight program offers a free Friday morning performance of their musical for local school groups. Burns said that in 2016, approximately 2,500 local students attended the school matinee at the church. This means that for some California public school students, their first exposure to live theatre may not come from watching professional actors in a traditional theatre setting, but rather from watching their peers perform on a megachurch stage.

## **Christian Youth Theater**

All three previous examples of church-based performing arts academies not only provide needed arts education to their communities through afterschool classes at the church, but they also serve as an arts resource for local public school arts programs through mentorship, summer camps, or performance attendance opportunities. Christian Youth Theater (CYT), however, takes their commitment to school-level partnerships to another level by moving part of their program out of the church and into the schools themselves.

CYT diverges from the previous models of church-based arts education programs because it is not affiliated with any one Christian denomination or church. I argue, however, that it deserves attention within this study due to its ties to evangelical churches throughout the country and its growing influence on school-based arts education programs in cities with CYT branches.

CYT started in San Diego in 1980 and currently claims to be “the largest youth theater program in the nation,” with affiliates in twenty-seven cities across the United States (“About CYT”). Most CYT affiliates across the nation meet weekly in large churches and other rented spaces for weekly classes in acting, voice, dance, musical theatre, and technical theatre, in addition to rehearsals for fully staged, Broadway-style performances. The traditional CYT model takes place afterschool and in the evenings, much like the church-based performing arts academies.

Theatre artists and educators Paul and Sheryl Russell started CYT as an independent educational non-profit organization (Deaderick). As a former CYT teacher and Baton Rouge CYT Class Coordinator, I knew firsthand how the church-based afterschool program worked. But on Monday, December 12, 2016, I visited Paul Russell and CYT@School Director Rechelle

Conde-Nau at the CYT national office near San Diego, California, to learn more about the way some CYT affiliates work directly with public and private schools. CYT began formally collaborating with local schools when a CYT mom with children at Blossom Valley Elementary outside of San Diego, California, wanted to bring arts classes to the school, despite its limited art budget. CYT began offering ninety-minute classes that taught elements of theatre, acting, and an appreciation of literature to the school's students in the San Diego suburb of El Cajon (Russell; Conde-Nau).<sup>5</sup>

Now called CYT@School, the program offers several models to both public and private schools hoping to boost their arts education programs, despite shrinking budgets. In the afterschool model, a team of two teachers bring their curriculum to a school for students who enroll in the extracurricular activity. Depending on the size of the program and age of the students, teachers come to the school one to two times per week for classes. With the residency program, CYT teaching artists are contracted to come to the school during the school day to teach performing arts classes. Residencies take place at all grade levels. Most recently, one of the CYT teaching artists was brought into a high school as a full-time arts specialist, teaching classes all day to students at a charter school. Because he is contracted and not a school-board employee, hiring the CYT employee is a lower-cost move for a school that otherwise would not be able to offer theatre classes (Russell; Conde-Nau). According to their website, the San Diego CYT@School program alone has partnered with over seventy different schools since the program started in 2005 ("CYT@School FAQ").

As of April 2019, CYT branches in Austin, North Idaho, Riverside County, Santa Cruz, and San Diego provided information about their CYT@School program on their individual

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<sup>5</sup> Because my interview with Russell and Conde-Nau took place together as a casual roundtable discussion, their names are referenced together.

websites. Each CYT@School program follows a set curriculum and schedule, and it ends with a showcase for the parents. The program now has approximately twenty “Shows in a Box,” pre-written scripts and music that come with costume pieces and props that teachers use to produce the showcase performance in a short time frame and limited production budget. Many of these shows are based on classic literature and begin and end with literature-based lines from authors such as Peter Pan’s J.M Barrie (Russell; Conde-Nau)

During the interview, both CYT Founder Paul Russell and San Diego CYT@School coordinator Rechelle Conde-Nau agreed that being a faith-based organization in a public school setting has not been an issue of concern. Once the Christian organization is invited into a school, it’s unusual for a school not to have them back. Russell said that it is about trust. They make sure that they only send high quality teachers, some of who are working actors. We strive to “be the best we can be without proselytizing,” said Russell. Each CYT@School program also has the option to give a “Shining Star Award,” bestowed to a student who demonstrated exemplary personal character and a positive attitude. This student receives a ten-week scholarship to “Big CYT” – one of the more intensive regular CYT classes. Because “Big CYT” is more demonstratively Christian, teachers always ask permission before awarding the scholarship, which keeps it from appearing to be a proselytizing measure (Russell; Conde-Nau). Through the program and scholarship opportunities, Christian Youth Theater hopes to step into the gap creating by shrinking arts resources in both public and private schools.

### **Performing Arts Academies and Professional Expertise**

One myth surrounding church-based performing arts efforts is that they are led by novice volunteers who possess a great deal of heart and sincerity but a decided lack of adequate arts training. In the realm of church-based performing arts academies housed in megachurches,

however, this rarely seems to be the case. At Bellevue Baptist Church, for example, five of the six music faculty members have biographies featured on the school's website. Of those five, one has a bachelor's degree in worship and music studies, three hold master's degrees in Vocal Performance, and the last holds a master's degree in Opera Performance from Juilliard ("School of Performing Arts"). Although a college arts degree is no longer a prerequisite to teach at Jacksonville's Worship Arts Institute (proof of comparable experience is accepted), all but one instructors featured on their website holds a degree in their art. Calvary Community Church's Spotlight Academy places an emphasis on professional experience, noting on their website that they "are thrilled to offer competitive training with instructors who work professionally in the entertainment industry (including Broadway, television/film, and renowned recording artists)" ("Spotlight"). Lastly, CYT San Diego (the home of CTY headquarters) lists forty-three teachers on their website; almost half of them list bachelor or master's level training in performing arts in their biographies; most of the remaining teachers were either working artists, educators, or longtime CYT alum.

These model programs often require a stronger performance or arts-specific educational background that public schools mandate. For example, as is true in most U.S. states, an educator in Florida can teach a new subject by passing a subject area exam ("Subject Area Knowledge"). For Drama (grades 6-12), prospective teachers must pass a 120-question multiple choice test in 150 minutes ("FTCE Test Structure Information"). As of December 21, 2018, if a teacher receives a score of 68% or higher, he or she passes the exam and can become a state certified theatre educator ("FTCE/FELE Maximum Percentages"). Until 2016, California's theatre education situation was even more complex. Due to a glitch in a 1970s law, fine arts teaching credentials were only offered in music and visual arts; under the Teacher Preparation and

Licensing Law of 1970, “individuals seeking to teach theatre or dance must earn English or physical education credentials, respectively” (“California Passes Theatre and Dance Certification Law”). The home state of CYT only began offering subject area exams in Theatre and Dance in 2016 after the passage of the Theatre and Dance Act, Senate Bill 916. (“California Passes Theatre and Dance Certification Law”). This is not meant to suggest that public school theatre teachers are not qualified to teach their art; on the contrary, most have considerable arts education backgrounds and/or production experience. Theoretically, however, public schools in some states do not mandate the formal arts training or theatrical resumes expected by the church-based performing arts programs in this study. While one might argue that professional training does not automatically make someone a great arts educator, making sure that arts teachers have a strong background in their field is a positive step toward creating a high standard of Christian art.

### **Cost**

In an ideal situation, all students would have access to free, quality theatre education programs through public schools. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In fact, schools in high poverty areas have taken the hardest hit when it comes to arts education. As of the 2012 National Center for Education Statistics, only twenty-eight percent of low-income schools in the United States offer theatre arts instruction (Parsad et al. 49).

Church-based performing arts academies usually offer classes at a considerably reduced rate when compared to their community theatre counterparts. For example, youth classes at Theatre Jacksonville, a community theatre located just 2.5 miles from the Worship Arts Institute at First Baptist Jacksonville, cost 60% more per instructional hour than First Baptist Jacksonville

classes. Theatre Jacksonville classes are also purchased as a \$250 10-week session, which might be more daunting for struggling families than FBC Jacksonville's monthly rate of \$40.<sup>6</sup>

For some families, these classes might still be financially out-of-reach. The model provided by CYT@School proves even more equalizing. In-school residency programs are paid for by schools, not families, and fundraising efforts from organizations like school PTAs can help offset the costs of CYT@School programs. But even while the format of CYT@School enables the organization to keep the price point low for families in the afterschool program, CYT leaders still acknowledge a problem with reaching lower-income families with arts education. While sometimes grants are awarded to bring CYT@School to underserved populations, Founder Paul Russell acknowledges that arts still “tend to go to people who can afford it.” Still, in the last fourteen years in San Diego alone, seventy-nine schools, many without full-time theatre educators on staff, have offered theatre classes to 12,000 students through the school program offered by CYT (“CYT@School FAQ”).

### **Horizon of Expectations**

Examining the structure of church-based performing arts academies also helps to understand the horizon of expectations that accompany alumni of these programs. First, students whose primary experience with theatre arts comes from megachurch programs are more likely to be familiar with advanced theatre technology than students who come from traditional high school theatre backgrounds. Megachurch worship spaces frequently offer large stages with state-of-the-art sound and lighting equipment. In 2014, Bellevue Baptist Church completed a fifteen week, two-million-dollar renovation of their 10,000-square-foot stage space. According to an

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<sup>6</sup> This figure takes into account the lesson length. Lessons at Theatre Jacksonville are 90-minutes long, while weekly lessons at the Worship Arts Institute are 60 minutes. Theatre Jacksonville charges \$16.67 per instructional hour, while the Worship Arts Institute charges \$10 per instructional hour

article in *Church Production* magazine, the renovation included a modular choir risers, state-of-the-art video projection systems, and “new conventional and moving light fixtures, additional motorized lighting positions and a new control system that enhances the look and feel of the entire worship environment” (CP Staff). These spaces serve as the “home stage” for performing arts academy students, allowing these young performers to become accustomed to the latest in theatre technology from an early age.

Some church-based performing arts academies also offer specialized classes that go beyond the traditional “Drama I-IV” classes offered in many public high schools. These extra opportunities allow them to become well-rounded artists. For example, theatre students who continue onto college from Spotlight Academy have already had the chance to take specialized Film-making and Acting for TV courses, possibly with working professionals. In CYT, students study a wide range of voice, dance, theatre, and specialty classes that help them develop into well-rounded performers. In a recent interview, *Hamilton* cast member and CYT alum Charnette Batey reflected on her CYT “Audition ABCs” class:

I learned so much from that class about how to be prepared for my auditions. I learned what a monologue was, how to be confident, how to pick the right song, and the importance of being yourself in an audition. They’re all skills and tools that I still use to this day! (Barth)

Because these programs can hire multiple instructors with varying specialties, students in these programs are often exposed to multiple viewpoints and a broader scope of training that a traditional high school theatre student.

### **Models of Partnership**

Lastly, church-based performing arts academies can serve as models for the way community organizations can partner with local schools to expand arts education access to all students. Because many of these church-based programs were designed with outreach as the



heart of their mission, they search for creative ways to get involved with their local communities. From the way Bellevue School of Performing Arts hosts an “All-West Prep Academy” to help schools prepare their students for county music assessments to the way Calvary’s Spotlight Academy offers thousands of free tickets so that school children can experience live theatre (possibly for the first time), these school/church partnerships provide beneficial arts exposure to students who may not otherwise have these opportunities.

In their article, “The Art of Partnerships: Community Resources for Arts Education,” Daniel H. Bowen and Brian Kisida examine the implications of 2015’s Every Student Succeeds Act, which succeeded the controversial No Child Left Behind Act of the George W. Bush era. The authors discuss the income-based disparity of arts education access and analyze the new legislation’s potential to affect change. They note that “Congress has extended support of the Assistance for Arts Education program, which is designed to specifically benefit disadvantaged students” by providing grants that can promote arts education partnerships (Bowen and Kisida 8-9). These changes in legislation, coupled with the work of church-based performing arts education programs, hold the potential to bring arts programs to more students in need of a creative outlet.

## **Conclusion**

As some megachurches began extending their use of performing arts within worship services, the need for trained artists sparked a new ministry to emerge. Although it’s true that many church-based performing arts academies began to meet a need within the church, over time, their reach has extended beyond the church walls. Church-based programs, as well as afterschool programs like CYT, bring educational opportunities to students who might not otherwise have their eyes opened to the world of performing arts. Through these programs, some

students begin the path toward their life-long vocation. For example, the CYT Blog posts a number of success stories, including that of Michelle Williams, a three-time Academy Award nominee, who began her arts training with CYT (CYT Editor). Owen Spruill, a theatre professional who worked on the Parisian iteration of *An American in Paris*, said, “CYT is probably the sole reason I have pursued a career in the arts” (Admin). But for every student who pursues a professional career after training in church-based performing arts academies, there are countless others who become arts advocates and audience members because of their experiences. If partnerships between schools, performance communities, and churches continue to grow, so can their impact on the lives of students.

## Conclusion

When I first considered researching church-based performances, I watched a YouTube video of a Christmas performance at Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago suburbs. I knew Willow Creek's reputation as a pioneer in the contemporary use of church-based drama, but this was the first time I ever witnessed one of their performances. The thirteen-minute pre-show opener based on *The Twelve Days of Christmas* featured an aerialist swinging overhead, a quartet of male tap dancers, a team of unicyclists, and a group of jump roping youth, among other featured performers.<sup>1</sup> What I saw on the video was unlike anything I had ever experienced growing up in my small, Southern Baptist church. I wanted to know more.

Since then, I've visited twelve churches and performing arts ministries in five states, specifically focusing on the way these churches use theatre in their ministry to children and youth. As both a former Christian ministry staff member and public school theatre educator, I set out to explore the way these two worlds collide by considering the following questions, set out earlier in this dissertation:

- 1) In what specific ways are twenty-first century churches employing theatre in their ministry to children and teenagers?
- 2) How do churches aim to shape the burgeoning faith of young churchgoers through these performances?
- 3) Conversely, in what theoretical ways might these early evangelical performance experiences shape the way a child views the purpose and conventions of theatre?
- 4) How are church-based youth theatre programs extending beyond the church walls into schools and other public spaces?

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<sup>1</sup> To view the Willow Creek Christmas video, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4DU5WJsVYg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4DU5WJsVYg).

- 5) What role might these church-based arts entities play in the future of the arts and arts education?

In addressing the first question, I discovered that although churches differ in the way they integrate performing arts into their evangelistic and educational efforts, there are some consistencies among the churches I visited. First, the megachurches I saw provide opportunities for children and youth to be involved in both sides of the stage – as audience members (in Sunday morning worship experiences and large-scale, family-friendly spectacles), as well as performers (in church-wide spectacles and children/youth drama teams). This means that churches have the potential to shape early ideas about the nature of live performance for churchgoing children and youth from both perspectives.

### **Church-Based Performance: To Compete or Not to Compete?**

Yet, there are some striking differences in the way some churches I visited utilize performance in their outreach efforts. One of the most noticeable differences is the way churches react to perceived competition from the mainstream entertainment industry. As noted in an earlier chapter, Jeff Crevier, minister of creative arts at First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale, explained the extravagance of the church's Christmas production by telling ABC News, "We're having to compete with many theatrical things around the country, whether its MTV or the Rockettes or any show you might see on Broadway. We have made a conscious decision to pull out all the stops" ("Commercialization of Christ?"). In essence, churches like First Baptist, Fort Lauderdale, respond to competition by escalating the professionalism of their own theatrical endeavors.

Other churches come to the opposite conclusion when faced with the same choice. At Pathway Church in Wichita, Kansas, the competition from mainstream entertainment outlets

served as a major impetus for the church's decision to forgo weekly skits and puppet shows as part of the children's ministry's regular Sunday morning large group time. Instead, while the church still uses storytelling scripts to present the Bible lesson each week, they place most of their focus and energy on developing strong relationships in children's small groups, where young participants can learn and ask questions about the lesson with a trusted and consistent small group leader (Wilson). According to the church's children's minister, this focus on growing strong, face-to-face relationships differentiates Pathway's children's ministry from many other activities the students may engage in throughout the week (Wilson). Indeed, while Pathway still integrates media and video in their Sunday morning experience, their choice to place the strongest emphasis on face-to-face small groups stands in stark contrast to the current technology-based, screen-centered society.

This decision to "compete or not compete" can lead to a proverbial Catch-22 situation when churches choose to use theatre in a church setting. When churches see value in using theatre as a missional tool but choose not to compete with Broadway national tours and similar theatrical events – opting instead to create sincere theatrical work on a modest budget, using church-based performers who participate out of love for the arts and their faith – the work is often criticized as inferior. As early as 1949, George Eastman, an advocate of the transformational potential of church drama, wrote:

Anyone familiar with the use of drama in churches today know that much of it is still on the level of mediocrity and that its religious effectiveness suffers accordingly. The reason for this mediocrity lies in poor selection of plays, inadequate discipline of directors and players, wretched equipment, low standards of dramatic art, and confused thinking about the purpose of drama in the church. (123)

On one hand, with the dramatic increase in the number of U.S. megachurches since the time of Eastman's critique, I believe many criticisms of church drama aren't as problematic in the

megachurch environment. Among the thousands of congregants, the likelihood of finding trained actors and directors dramatically increases. Through my research, I discovered everything from professional ballet dancers to a former Ringling Brothers circus ringmaster in the churches I visited, not to mention numerous MFA-trained performers in various arts. Likewise, equipment issues are non-existent within the walls of most megachurches.

On the other hand, critiques about the state of art in the church persist. For example, evangelical youth pastor JS Park wrote a challenging open letter to Christian theatre artists in a 2013 article on the *Christian Leaders* website, which began with a strong criticism of contemporary church-based theatre:

Suburban churches have an extremely high tolerance for bad sermons, bad Christmas plays, bad drama skits, bad music and all-around poor production values. We lower our standards with an almost forceful resentment, as if having approval in God gives us permission to be cheap and shoddy.

Yet, if churches like Prestonwood and First Baptist, Fort Lauderdale use their available talent and financial means to create high-caliber, professional level productions, they open themselves to criticism about their use of church resources, even though the million-dollar performances can likely be sustained through ticket sales without tapping into the regular church budget. In “Megachurch, Megashow,” journalist Dahleen Glanton notes that “[s]ome churches have been criticized for spending money on Christmas events that could be used for charities and other community services.” Likewise, some scholars, such as University of Florida English and Advertising Professor James Twitchell views the productions as yet another church marketing strategy, designed to gain new regular attendees (Glanton).

Yet, one thing is certain: these mega-performances appeal to masses well beyond the regular Sunday morning crowd, with performances at some churches drawing nearly 95,000 people annually (Glanton). And it’s likely true that without the live animals, aerialists, lavish

costumes, and indoor pyrotechnics, these productions would not draw the attention and free publicity of both local and national news outlets – which they currently receive in spades. But for evangelical megachurch leaders, the media attention garnered through these productions represents more than just potential new bodies in seats on Sunday morning. It's about the eternal destinies of new converts as they share the gospel message with people who would never walk in the door of a regular church service but will attend these spectacular, secular/sacred hybrid performances. So, churches continue to navigate the nebulous line between marketing-centered entertainment and mission-centered evangelism.

### **Church-Based Performance and Faith Formation**

I also studied the way the churches I visited aim to develop the faith of young churchgoers through performance. I learned church-based performances at these sites offer opportunities for both discipleship (focused internally on believers) and evangelism (focused externally on potential converts). For example, at Pathway Church's Sunday morning experience, leaders engage in discipleship when they use scripts to teach Bible stories to children each week. Likewise, participants at the Fine Arts Festival reinforce the faith of believers when they perform human videos for the largely churchgoing, already-converted audience at the festival.

Yet, participating in church performances also enables students to act as young evangelists as they use the arts as a means of sharing the Christian faith. When Saddleback Church's Kids Choir members create invitations for teachers and neighbors to attend their performances, for example, they engage in a form of relational evangelism popular in many evangelical megachurches. In addition, when Assemblies of God youth perform a human video on a mission trip, they use theatre as a tool to share their faith with others.

## **Evangelical Performance and Shifting Theatrical Conventions**

To answer the third question, I also learned that the way evangelical megachurches use the arts, especially among children and youth, could hold important implications for the way churchgoing members of Generation Z may understand the purposes and conventions of theatre. For example, when it comes to creating large group worship services for children, Pathway Children's Pastor Brandt Wilson actively harnesses the power of children's prior knowledge of theatrical conventions. When Pathway began opening new campuses throughout the Wichita area, Wilson told each new site's children's ministry leader that they needed to make sure they had a stage in their children's worship space. Even though the students sit on the floor during large group time and would easily be able to see leaders standing in the front of the room without a designated performance platform, Wilson says that having a stage makes a huge difference in the Sunday morning experience. According to Wilson, students just know what to do when someone is on stage; for example, even the young elementary students know that it's a space they shouldn't climb on, and they get quiet and listen when someone on stage begins to speak. Those basic theatrical conventions help to maintain order during Sunday morning live worship experiences.

Yet, what might be the reciprocal effect? How might regular participation in live performance within a church setting impact the experience of a child attending a performance in a regular theatre environment? How might it alter their understanding of theatrical conventions and the expectations with which they approach the theatre-going experience? Based on my observations across multiple religious venues, the performances children encounter at church share some commonalities. First, theatre etiquette expectations serve as one way that church performances differ from mainstream theatre events. Broadway stars from Patti LuPone to Lin-



Manuel Miranda have made media headlines in recent years with their public discouragement of cell phone usage in the theatre.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, copyright laws often prohibit the use of any recording devices during performances. But in the megachurch environment, such restrictions have relaxed faster than they have in most theatre spaces. It's common to see congregants using their cell phones during a worship service to access Bible apps during the sermon each week. This summer, my own pastor encouraged congregants to use their phones to text responses to theological questions during the church service, as he reads responses aloud from his own cell phone in real time. During full-scale performances, like the one at Prestonwood, preshow announcements encourage attendees to use their phone during the performance to not only take pictures but to post them on social media using a pre-established hashtag. And since some church theatrical material is often written in-house, copyright prohibitions against video recording can be less of a legal issue. While some theatres have experimented with the use of cell phones during performances, it is still the exception rather than the norm. This may be jolting to a younger church-going generation accustomed to permissible technology use during a live theatre-like event at church.

In addition, live performances in a church setting integrate a high level of mediated performance. In Sunday morning children's worship services, children often dance and sing along with worship leaders standing live on stage as video accompaniment moves across screens in the background. Video teaching segments, like the ones offered by Orange, may pave the way for live storytellers and small group leaders to fill in the blanks of the lesson. Family-friendly

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, Patti LuPone started a conversation about the state of theatre etiquette after she took a cell phone out of the hand of a texting audience member during a performance of the Broadway show, *Show for Days* (Piepenburg). Even the effervescent Lin Manuel-Miranda stepped in to stop a breach of audience etiquette in 2019, when he made an impromptu change to the lyrics of a song while performing the title role of the hit musical *Hamilton* in order to call out an audience member recording the performance on her cell phone (O'Kane).

spectacular performances, like the one at Prestonwood, integrate a pre-recorded actor with live vocalists to create a mediated theatrical hybrid. In this way, even the “liveness” that makes theatre a unique art form may be not-quite-live in the megachurch setting.

This effect is compounded by the high level of theatre technology available to churches for their productions. Sophisticated sound systems, theatrical lighting, and projection screens have become fairly common facets of megachurch facilities. When children and youth perform on the megachurch stage, they likely encounter a larger and more technologically advanced performance space than they see in their school or local community theatre. When children sit in the audience during Christmas productions, technology rises to another level. For example, even with a team of staff members to handle the routine production needs of the church, Prestonwood outsources many of the theatre technology needs for its Christmas show. In the past, the church hired Matt Webb, a freelance lighting designer from New York-based Unlimited Visibility, Inc., to design the lighting for its production. They also contracted with Gemini Light Sound and Video for the production’s rigging needs, as well as the 420 video panels used for the show’s video effects (“Inside the Making of Christmas”). When young people attend shows of this technological caliber, it flips theatre on its head by giving greater value to spectacle rather than character development and theatre’s other more nuanced features. But this is also a point where church-based theatre must be careful. As I was watching the live nativity at Prestonwood Baptist, for example, my eyes focused on the angels flying overhead, the exotic animals walking past me in the aisles, and the throngs of cast members bathed in glowing candlelight. What I didn’t notice right away was the small baby located in the extreme upstage center portion of the stage. From my viewpoint, the spectacle of the performance almost caused me to overlook the most central piece of the production and the reason for the church’s Christmas celebration in the first place –

the tiny baby in the manger. I think in the midst of staging visually stunning moments, churches must be careful that the message of the performance isn't washed away by the production values.

### **Theatre and Evangelical Activism**

Additionally, churches who use theatre as an evangelistic tool can impact the way students think about the purposes of theatre, as they contribute to a rising generation that believes in the power of performing arts as an instrument for positive change in their world. For example, when I began teaching Introduction to Theatre classes at Louisiana State University, it was hard to get my students to believe theatre could serve any other purpose other than pure entertainment. Yet, young people who grow up performing in children's musicals with strong evangelical messages, like the one at Saddleback, learn that they can share their faith through the music and dialogue of a theatrical performance. Youth who participate in Christmas productions, like those at Prestonwood and Bellevue, watch audience members respond to the performance by streaming down the aisles with tear-filled eyes. Students who perform in human videos go on international mission trips where they find they can bridge language barriers through expressive movement inherent in the highly evangelistic human videos. Given these experiences, how much more likely are these students to believe that theatre can be a tool for sparking change in the world?

### **Evangelical Theatre Beyond the Church Walls**

This dissertation also focused on the way some evangelical churches provide formal training opportunities in the arts. Although these performing arts academies often originated with the need for skilled musicians for worship services, churches now provide classes in a diverse range of performing arts, often led by highly trained instructors. Some of these church-based performing arts academies extend beyond the walls of the church by serving as valuable arts resources for local schools. At a time when the percentage of public schools offering theatre

programs is declining and funding for existing arts programs dwindles, churches with arts ministries can serve as a pathway for arts education and local school support. Whether it's providing free or low-cost school day performances of popular kid-friendly musicals (like CYT and Calvary's Spotlight program) or joining with local schools to provide on-site arts mentoring or classes (like Bellevue Baptist and CYT), churches are giving back to their communities by offering valuable and affordable arts experiences for students who might otherwise go without them.

### **Church Theatre, Community Partnerships, and the Future of Arts Education**

Churches can also play a role in the future of arts and arts education through increased partnerships with schools and community organizations. In an article about the state of Theatre for Young Audiences, TYA practitioner Emma Halpern encourages TYA artists to think creatively about theatre. She notes that "schools and community centers and places of worship all have theatres in their buildings, and TYA companies should be their natural tenants ... these kind of community spaces are such a direct way to reach audiences, and engaging communities in those spaces could be so powerful" (Halpern). While this is true, I think it's also important for secular theatre artists to notice the theatre that may already take place within these spaces. How can we look at the way partnerships may better equip both churches and TYA organizations to enrich the lives of children and youth through positive arts experiences?

Visiting church sites, I also came to realize the innovative ways churches and faith-based arts organizations are partnering with local schools to provide stronger connections to the arts. At a time when some theatre teachers must actively recruit students to their public school program to justify its continuation, church-based arts programs can help generate interest in performance arts participation. Like new research from the New Victory Theater shows us, if a child hasn't

been exposed to theatre by the age of eight, they are more likely to believe that theatre is not “for them” in the future (Halpern). Churches that offer free performances to schools, like Calvary Community Church, make it easier for children to experience those early connection points with the arts. Likewise, if children have a positive experience in theatre at an early age through productions at churches like Saddleback and Prestonwood, it is possible that some students might also be more open to participating in shows at their school as well. By partnering with local churches, perhaps by offering occasional coaching to church-based drama teams, theatre teachers might find a new avenue to expand their own public school programs.

### **Future Questions**

Researching the way churches integrate theatre into their ministry, especially to children and youth, raises several other questions that could be explored through future studies. As an extension of my research on human videos, one potential area of further study lies in the way evangelical churches use theatre and performance as a proselytizing tool beyond the United States. Some evangelistic skits, particularly mime or movement-centered performances that don't require language translation, make their way to churches around the world with subtle variations. For example, a skit called “Sin Chair” has been performed in U.S. evangelical churches for decades, yet it continues to be enacted on mission trips and in global churches. In the pantomimed skit, an actor walks up to a chair labeled “do not touch.” The actor ignores the sign, touches the chair, and becomes stuck. As others walk by, they try to help the stuck actor but end up getting stuck to the chair themselves. Finally, the last passerby (possibly holding a Bible) sees the hoard of trapped people and responds by kneeling to pray. As a result, the chair group becomes unstuck, and they all begin praising God. One of the actors turns around the “do not

touch” sign to reveal the word “sin” (“The Chair”). Basically, the skit tries to show how easy it is to get trapped in bad decisions and that God is the way to freedom from bad choices.

Performances of the same skit, with similar staging and even occasionally using the same background song from the Christian band “Five Iron Frenzy,” can be viewed on YouTube by numerous groups: a full-gospel youth group in San Francisco (with over 1.8 million views), an Assemblies of God church in India, a drama crew in Nigeria, and a missionary sending organization called Missions.me (listed as a mission training video).<sup>3</sup> While some of these skits may be transferred from church to church as mission teams share them with congregations they visit on international trips, the internet also serves as a tool to share evangelistic drama beyond church walls and across the world. Some of these skits seem to move, not as much through written scripts, but through a more organic process as they become viral sensations in the global evangelical world.

As an extension of this dissertation, I am also interested in looking at the use of theatre and performance in collegiate ministry. What happens when megachurch-attending high school students graduate and move up to an adult worship service that doesn’t start with a high-energy game each Sunday? What happens when the pastor teaches a sermon series on parenting or marriage that doesn’t reflect the immediate world of the young adult, like he or she became accustomed to during the years spent in children and youth-focused worship services? What happens when the high school youth pastor, responsible for knowing and meeting the needs of one select age group, is replaced by a senior pastor, who is charged with meeting the needs of a congregation of thousands?

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<sup>3</sup> The videos can be viewed and compared on YouTube: San Francisco version, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Lokdp2dCqQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Lokdp2dCqQ); Indian version, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpbqmBtDoGg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpbqmBtDoGg); Nigerian version, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPZsol1ls9-U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPZsol1ls9-U); Mission.me version, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=06YRf039jJA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06YRf039jJA).

In my research, I frequently came across statistics about the number of students who “drop out of church” when they graduate high school. Yet, as a former Baptist Campus Ministry staff member at the University of Pittsburgh, I know firsthand that there are many students who don’t attend church in college, yet they also don’t abandon their faith or the practice of corporate worship. Instead, they consider collegiate parachurch organizations, like BCM or Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), as their church, attending weekly small group Bible studies and regular on-campus worship services. I have yet to find research about the way campus ministry participation may skew the statistics regarding perceived lack of religious involvement among U.S. young adults.

These on-campus Christian organizations often function much like the children’s and youth ministry worship service students grew accustomed to in the megachurch environment – student-led, contemporary worship music in an age-specific, interactive group setting led by a dedicated college minister who tailors sermons to the needs and issues that relate directly to the lives of college students. And some of these collegiate, parachurch organizations now use theatre as a tool for outreach and mission-oriented fundraising. For example, the Baptist Campus Ministry at Louisiana State University stages an annual Broadway-style musical as a fundraiser for their summer mission projects. The musical tradition began after one of the associate campus ministers brought the idea to LSU from her days in the University of Georgia Baptist Campus Ministry, where the annual musical has been mainstay on the BCM calendar for decades. The musical challenges students to consider how they can use their artistic gifts in ministry, as the funds raised go to support summer mission efforts (“Dinner Theatre”). This research would provide insight into the way theatre continues to play a role in the religious life of young believers after they leave the youth group setting.

Lastly, this dissertation also revealed the need for future quantitative studies on the impact of church performances on children and youth who participate. These future research projects could provide data on a wide range of questions that emerged during my project. For example, are students more likely to recall information from a Bible story presented through live performance or video? How many students actually engage in theatre for the first time in a church setting, and how does that affect their perceptions of faith and theatre? How does participation in a church-based youth drama team impact views of theatre's potential for social change? Future quantitative studies could help identify specific ways that church-based performance plays a role in developing the next generation of theatre participants.

### **Willow Creek and the Future of Church-Based Theatre**

So, what does the future hold for theatre as a teaching and evangelism tool in U.S. megachurches? If we look to Willow Creek Community Church, a congregation known for being on the forefront of the use of creative arts in worship, we will find a surprising shift in their approach. After watching the video of Willow Creek's Christmas performance in the early stages of research, I knew I wanted to see their Christmas performance firsthand. When I couldn't find performance dates online, I called Willow Creek directly and learned that the church doesn't stage Christmas productions anymore. When I began researching further, I learned that Willow Creek also discontinued drama as a component of their worship services. One former Willow Creek drama team member said the change was driven by "the thought ... that the culture has changed and drama is no longer relevant" (Sherbondy). Because Willow Creek served as a leader in the field of church-based drama – conducting church drama workshops and publishing scripts for other churches to use – it will be interesting to see if their decision has a residual impact on the use of drama in other churches.



But will this decision mark an official parting of the ways between theatre and the evangelical church? After researching both historical and contemporary church-based theatre, I don't believe it will. Although the ways that evangelical churches use theatre within their walls may change with time, theatre continues to be a powerful tool for churches as they seek to share their faith and encourage the faithful in each new generation.

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## **Vita**

Carla Lahey has worked in the fields of Christian ministry, public education, and theatre. Upon receiving a bachelor's degree in Journalism/Mass Communications from Samford University, Carla began working as a Baptist Campus Ministry intern at the University of Pittsburgh before serving as the Mission Partnership Coordinator for the Baptist Association of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

After realizing her passion for working with students, she moved to Florida and began a career in public education. Two years later, Carla became the drama teacher at Oceanway Middle and began developing the school's first comprehensive theatre program. To equip herself for her new role, she earned a Master's degree in Theatre for Theatre Educators from Florida State University. She then decided to continue her theatre studies by enrolling in the doctoral program at LSU.

Currently, Carla lives in Kansas and serves as a theatre faculty member and Campus Activities Director at Hesston College. Her research interests include the many intersections between faith and performance, as well as early American history.