

THEATER AND THE CHURCH:
A THEATRICAL THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP,
PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE

A dissertation submitted to the
Theological School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Ministry

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Madison, New Jersey

(August, 2021)

ABSTRACT

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Theater and the church have been at odds throughout history. This conflict has led to alienation and judgment of artists by the church and limited creative opportunities for the church to be a public witness in culture. Connecting with theater allows the church a chance to engage those most marginalized from church, shape disciples and create a unique public theology to share God's justice, equity and love.

Scripture and theology are inherently dramatic. Sacred text is the progressive, story of a relationship between the Creator and the created. Both Old and New Testament are filled with dramatic moments that testify to God's story of love. Consider the New Testament gospel stories of Jesus. From the Incarnation, baptism, a public ministry of miracles and preaching, a processional entry into Jerusalem that leads to death on a cross and resurrection, each story is a theatrical moment that reveals the nature of God. Theatrical theology tells the story of God as writer, Son as hero and Holy Spirit as director seeking to partner with the supporting characters of humanity throughout time. This project explores theatrical theology as a vehicle for the church to shape disciples who take their place alongside the Divine Trinity on stage as public theologians and participate in social resistance within a community.

This project is written in two acts. Act I is the history of theater and the church, the background of theatrical theology and its praxis. Act II is the case study of a large, mainline denominational church in Florida. ACT II breaks the fourth wall with the spectator (reader) through digital media embedded in the writing. Click on each visual to link to live videos and watch a theatrical theology come to life within a church.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the God who made me a weird, quirky kid who loved old movies, theater, music. As a little girl everything was viewed with an understanding that somehow it connected us to God's larger story. I am grateful to the Holy One who offered me grace in my own dramatic life and never left me. Thanks and praise to the One who has never let me give up on this thing known as church and has continually stirred a tenacious vision of how to create a church open for people most often forgotten, ignored, or dismissed.

I also dedicate this work to my beloved family. To my parents who instilled in me a tender and loving theology and showed me God's inclusive nature not just in word, but deed. To John, Grace, Carter and Sam – you let me go to NYC without you, miss dinner and evenings for class, writing, researching and creating. You edited, showed up, and listened. You cheered me on when this was just a pipe dream and every day you each live into St. Luke's values with all your hearts. You have believed in and participated in Theater at St. Luke's at each and every turn, which is a lot to ask of a pastor's family. Thank you for being my number one fans, for supporting me every step of the way, and being the amazing people you are who tell God's story of love in profound ways. I love each of you more than life itself.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the countless St. Lukers who brought Theater at St. Luke's to life through your passions, dedication, and stories. Love and gratitude to the leaders and staff who supported this journey and made space for theater to push our boundaries. I am so proud to be a part of St. Luke's family and have a part in telling the story God and redefine for our community the role of "church." Central Florida is blessed by these faithful disciples who welcome all in the love of Jesus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper and project would not have been possible without the generous gift of time, talents, influence and resources of the following St. Lukers and community:

- St. Luke's Staff Parish Relations Committee who supported the pursuit of this Doctor of Ministry degree with the generosity of resources and resources offered to me in order complete this academic work.
- My incredible staff partners who worked every step of the way:
 - Caryn Royer, Director of Adult Engagement – who compiled, edited, emailed, edited, livestreamed, and in general worked miracles getting me through the work. Without your work none of this would make any sense, without your patience, I might not be here to be called Dr. You are a Godsend!
 - Steve Mackinnon, Artistic Director for his endless ability to vision the connection of theater and St. Luke's for the last 12 years with me. I am forever grateful for his leadership and fierce protection of theater, the vision, but more importantly – the beloved people of God who participate with us. This is just ridiculous, isn't it!?!
 - Rev. Melissa Cooper, Executive Pastor of Worship and Arts who constantly stands in the gaps for me, even when I don't know there is a gap. Who leads, coaches and guides the amazing worship and arts team in order to keep Love being the center for everyone. I'm so glad to be in ministry as a clergy woman with you as my friend.

- Tiffany Meadows, Director of Production for all the ways you consistently keep us going, maintain the through-line of our work and help us remember where we are going, what's next, and do so with grace and care, thank you. We could not be St. Luke's without you listening, taking notes, and then guiding the helm.
- Theater at St. Luke's Core Lay Leadership Team who have built this platform as a chance to stand alongside the vulnerable in the community and center their voices during such a pivotal time of history.
- The Power of One Think Tank: Steve Mackinnon, Rev. Melissa Cooper, Caryn Royer, Tiffany Meadows, Shonn McCloud, Andrea Hochkeppel, Phyllis Van Dyke Thompson, Brian Cambold, Andrea Batchelor, Jim and Val Dobson, Tom Hoback, Lynette Fields. Without this group we would not have created the foundation for our Power of One episodes and Conversations
- The Power of One Production Team: Steve Mackinnon, Tiffany Meadows, Patrick Tyler, John Cole, Ben Adams, Shonn McCloud, Andrea Hochkeppel,
 - Actors: Peyton Brown, Ame Livingston, Alina Alcantera, Laurel Hatfield, Kevin Brassard, Shannon Starkey, Sage Starkey,
- Community Conversation Partners:
 - Introduction: Bill Cowles, Orange County Supervisor of Elections; Gloria Pickar, Co-President of Orange County League of Women Voters
 - Episode 1: Rev, Mary Downey, Founder and Executive Director of Community Hope Center; Fikirte-Mariam Mengistie, Executive Director of

Missions St. Luke's UMC; Lynette Fields, Founder and Executive Director of Poverty Solutions Group

- Episode 2: Shonn McCloud, St. Luker and writer of The Power of One; Pastor Roderick Zak, Pastor of Rejoice in the Lord Ministries, Board member of Stono Institute for Democracy; Pastor David Jacques, Lead Pastor of The Kingdom Church; Dr. Scot French, Associate Professor of History and Director of Public History at the University of Central Florida.
- Episode 3: Dennis Latta, Veterans Service Officer with American Legion; Tom Hoback, St. Lukers and Vietnam Veteran; Angelia Taylor, recent retire US Army Veteran; Dr. Lisa Quinn, therapist at St. Luke's UMC Counseling Center and specialist in working with returning veterans and families.
- Episode 4: Bishop Ken Carter, Florida UMC; Sister Ann Kendrick, Hope Community Center in Sanford, Desmond Meade, Founder and President of Florida Rights Restoration Coalition.
- CJ Sikorski who shared his testimony and afforded me the honor of not only leading his beloved's memorial service but sharing a clip within this project.
- Theater at St. Luke's Community of actors, designers, stage managers, production team – you are the reasons this was even a story to be told. You make God come to life in ways you never realized for people we have not even had a chance to meet. Thank you for your magic, your heart, and your willingness to let your talent be used by God to help us all participate in this great theo-drama of life.

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INTRODUCTION

It was a Sunday evening in late May of 2013, when more than 100 people gathered in the choir room of St. Luke's United Methodist church in Orlando, Florida.¹



There were many faces I had known from ten years of being their pastor. More than half of the faces were new to me. In their eyes you could sense a nervous discomfort. There were whispers among friends who

knew each other, while others sat watching and waiting. This night has become one of my favorite “high holy” days of St. Luke’s church calendar. The first read through of Theater at a St. Luke’s summer show.

That particular night a cast of more than 100 would begin the production of Terrence McNally’s musical Ragtime, based on the book by E.L. Doctorow. Ragtime is the story of America at the turn of the 20th century told in the intertwined stories of a wealthy white couple, a Jewish immigrant single father and his daughter just arriving in America, and a young African American ragtime singer who falls in love. It tells the story of immigration, racism, economic injustice and shares the words of historical figures such as Emma Goldman, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, Harry Houdini and Booker T. Washington.

¹ Used by permission Theater at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, May 2013

Our Theater Director introduced himself and the production staff, and then introduced me. My job was to welcome everyone, make newcomers feel safe, and explain why a church was producing a hard hitting, socio-political critique of American culture. I began with the usual welcome and hospitality and then moved to our “why”.

“This summer, you will help St. Luke’s tell the story of America, rich in diversity and ideals, but plagued by a history of racial, cultural and economic injustice. Yours will be a story of the evils of racism, classism, xenophobia, poverty, and pain but also the story of reconciliation, and at the end a vision of how God intended us to live as one. We will keep the original language in, knowing it is not what the community would expect from a church. We believe art can open minds, create conversation, and help envision a more just and equitable community. This summer you will be the preachers of St. Luke’s for the congregation and community. Clergy will come alongside you as you share a vision of what we could be and share how the story of racism and bigotry is antithetical to God’s vision of beloved community.

With those words, a cast of strangers began the journey of creating a theater production which would play for two weekends with more than 3000 in attendance.² Audience size and budget has little to do with the accomplishment of this theater production during the summer of 2013 in Central Florida. While a musical about race and xenophobia in America was being rehearsed in a church gym, the nation watched the Boston Marathon Bombing, heard Paula Deen’s racial slurs, became caught up in the growing “birther” conspiracy against President Obama while Central Florida held its

² Ragtime. Book by Terrence McNally, music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, Used by permission Theater at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church; 2012 production

breath for the verdict of George Zimmerman for the killing of an innocent black teenager, Trayvon Martin, just 20 miles up the road. How does the church speak prophetically beyond its walls about racism, xenophobia, and the growing threat of division as a country? We were in the streets marching, preaching, and praying, but there must be more. For a church who finds itself in the triangle of entertainment and hospitality, filled with artists and entertainment visionaries, we decided there were new ways to begin a community conversation. The prophetic and social resistance of theater could enable us to create a safe space for dialogue by sharing a modern parable of gospel truth.

Protests, rallies, and a community divided set the stage for a summer theater production, as well as subsequent study guides on history and race, community conversations and a sermon series connecting Ragtime, the Broadway musical, to Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. During the summer of 2013, St. Luke's Theater Ministry and congregation began a community conversation about race that would become the first step in embracing a new prophetic social witness. St. Luke's had found a new purpose and process by which to be involved authentically in public theology.

Public Theology has many definitions. Drawing on the work of Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, public theology is "inherently incarnational"³ Day and Kim share that public theology is the response to the call of the public square to faith communities "Show us what theology looks like."⁴ Public theology is the work of faith communities to make theology spoken and taught within the walls, performed in the public square⁵ as answers or conversations guides for the common good in all arenas of life. For the

³ Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, "A Companion to Public Theology" in Brill's Companions to Modern Theology, ed. Tom Greggs (Brown Bill, Leiden, Boston, 2017), 26.

⁴ Kim and Day, "Companion," 19.

⁵ Kim and Day, "Companion," 21.

purposes of this project, St. Luke's understands public theology as the work done by both congregation and its partners to proclaim, through inexhaustible mediums, the good news of God, God's relationship with God's beloved creation and our relationship with one another. The public theology of St. Luke's is inherent in its mission statement to *Awaken Disciples to Reveal the Kin-dom; Reveal the Kin-dom to Awaken Disciples*. St. Luke's is dedicated to revealing a vision of God's Kin-dom lived out in authentic, equitable, just relationships, economics, and politics. The hope is to invite people into a relationship with their Creator and share of vision of relationship with Christ and his church open to people of ages, nations, races, cultures, orientations and religions. For St. Luke's, theater is used in worship, as stage productions, and through digital media has allowed amplification of public theology as both witness and resistance.

The history of the tension between theater and the church finds its roots in misunderstanding the theological nature of sacred imagination, religious experience and revelation, biblical authority and reasoned knowledge. There has always been a push-pull relationship between the world of theater and particular Christian churches. Many Christian churches have shut out the artistic world due to fear. Despite this contention between theater and church competing for people's attention, theological language and the overarching story of Scripture is, in fact, theatrical.

Theater began as religious expression. At its core, worship is the performance of scripture through acts of music and liturgy, or "the work of the people."⁶ Theater can be

⁶ "What is Liturgy," Diocese of Shrewsbury, accessed June, 1, 2021
<http://www.dioceseofshrewsbury.org/catholic-faith/liturgy/what-is-liturgy>.

an effective tool to expand the breadth of worship and discipleship and push the envelope of the public witness and resistance in the public square. The byproduct of this connection allows the church to redefine evangelism and reach people through hospitality, conversations, and genuine relationships. What could happen if a church, given the right cultural context of ‘entertainment, could utilize a theatrical theology to engage people? If a church began to embrace the theatrical nature of scripture and a more dramatic theology of the relationship of God and humanity, would it resonate, especially if storytelling were a means of both witness and discipleship? This paper is a case study to find strength in the connection between these worlds too often polarized, especially in a church positioned geographically in a culture of entertainment.

ACT 1: SCENE 1

THE SORDID HISTORY OF THEATER AND THE CHURCH

Ironically, theater has its formation and creation *in* religion. The origin of drama can be traced back to Greece and the choral rites of Dionysius, god of wine, fertility, ritual madness and religious ecstasy.¹ Rituals expressing the cycle of birth, death and rebirth were created behind the mask of the Greek god of Dionysus. “Within Ancient Greek culture, the sacred rites of Dionysus had been appropriated and transformed to theatre performances. The shaman became the actor, the participants became the audience, the sacred altar became the stage. From myth as a ritual performance emerged the theatre of tragedy.”² These early worshippers imitated the tragedy and suffering of their god through wild acts of drinking, sexual fertility rituals and the breakdown of boundaries of age, gender, and the distinction between humans and animals.³ The ritual was considered lewd and licentious behavior by the “theatrical” community. This over-the-top behavior of actors would continue to cause a separation with church leaders and theologians for decades. As monotheistic faiths began to grow rituals of sexuality and libation began to be curtailed by the church. Sexuality was seen as something only for procreation. Plato dismissed such theatrics and ritual as “imitative representation” and spoke out against the “ethical disapproval of arousing the passions.”⁴

¹ William Wilberforce Newton, *Christianity And Popular Amusements, Or The Church And The Theatre: A Paper Read At The Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held In New York, Nov.1, 1877*, Boston: A.Mudge & Son, 1877, 9.

² Nadja Berberovic, “Ritual, Myth and Tragedy: Origins of Theatre in Dionysian Rites.” *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies* 1, no.1 (2015): 30.

³ Berberovic, “Ritual, Myth and Tragedy,” 33.

⁴ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics*, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2014, 16.

As early as the fourth century BCE, the subtle separation of religion from all things spectacle and “circus” began. In the first century CE, Tertullian, in his writing *Treatise Spectaculis*, rejected the theater and the colosseum as “spectacles of the devil and therefore against one’s baptism.”⁵ Later, Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom claimed theater as the “temple of the evil one.”⁶ Early theologians struggled with claims of the degradation of theatrics, and the true theatrical nature of religion, scripture and faith. Augustine continually shared two disparate voices of theater and theology. During preparation of catechumens for baptism, Augustine spoke out against followers being “insincere or double minded ... who will populate the churches on feast days but fill the theaters on pagan festivals,” Ironically, at the same time, Augustine would write and produce theatrical Easter vigils and catechesis ritual, full of drama, to share the salvation story.⁷

Consider the Holy story of the crucifixion. Begin with the moment of the final breath of Jesus, fully human and fully divine. A breath so powerful it makes the earth quake, tears the veil of the temple floor to ceiling, and three days later rolls away stones, leaves death clothes to the side and appears as a living human, naked in a garden before his female follower. If one just takes this episode of the gospel readings alone, it is difficult to misread the theatrical nature of the living Word of God as anything “simple”

⁵ Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor A. Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, 170.

⁶ William Wilberforce Newton, *Christianity And Popular Amusements, Or The Church And The Theatre: A Paper Read At The Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held In New York, Nov.1, 1877*, Boston: A.Mudge & Son, 1877, 11.

⁷ Wesley and Hart, *Theatrical Theology*, 171.

and sanitized. Even the most non-believing reader would recognize the theatrical, dramatic nature of the writers to interpret the Story of God.

The use of theater to teach theology and the Sacred Story was best seen during the Medieval period. During this era miracle plays came to life as the church used drama for “religious instruction and devotion” through passion plays or teaching of the nativity in the plays like *The Second Shepherd*.⁸ These plays were opportunities for those on the margins of society, uneducated and unable to read, to learn narratives of theology in the common language of the people while the church continued using Latin for liturgy of formal worship. This art was created to teach theology and history and help common people see God’s work in their difficult present lives.⁹ Biblical stories were written to incorporate humor and satire and allowed the wall between actor and audience to be broken in order so “everyone participated in the collective mystical experience of Christian faith in festival times.”¹⁰ This became a “decade clergy sang praises of the theater's potential for inspiring and increasing the robustness of faith”.¹¹

Unfortunately, the harm of the doublemindedness of church leaders and theologians to both reject and denounce as well as embrace and utilize theater, caused harm on the people within the theater community and the public witness of the church. In the early centuries an actor could be baptized only if they gave up a life of theater and drama. By 438CE, the *Theodosian Code* prohibited “all diversions in the theater and the

⁸ William Wilberforce Newton, *Christianity And Popular Amusements, Or The Church And The Theatre: A Paper Read At The Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held In New York, Nov.1, 1877*, Boston: A.Mudge & Son, 1877, 9.

⁹ Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart *Theatrical Theology* pg. 271

¹⁰ Peter Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012, 139.

¹¹ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 120.

arenas on Sundays, festivals and seasons of special sanctity.”¹² The Council of Trullo in 692 condemned plays altogether seeing actors and performers as public sinners because of their sacrilegious use of scripture, portraying opposite genders, and being inauthentic to their baptism. During the Reformation, the church was at strict odds against anything theatrical and anyone attributed to the dramatic arts was shunned. By 1650, in England’s Puritan Commonwealth, “theaters were destroyed, spectators fined, and actors whipped at the cart tails.”¹³

The great abolitionist pastor, William Wilberforce, in his address to the New York Protestant Episcopal Church in 1877, claimed “the subject of the theater and theater-going perplexes the bravest Christian heart with strong hopes and fears.”¹⁴ Laying out everything evil and wrong with theater and actors, Wilberforce claimed the problem is not with drama, but the “science of the play house which is corrupt.”¹⁵ However, Wilberforce then put forth an argument for the work of evangelizing the actor and redeeming drama and the theater form .

“The practical question then, which comes before us as Christians and as citizens is this: shall we go on forever and forever denouncing the stage, or shall we, in the name of the one who had compassion upon the multitude...look into this matter...and speak that one word... REFORM! I believe then, that as Christian citizens we...ought to go down into the world of amusement and try to make it purer and better.”¹⁶

The history of the complex relationship between theater and church didn’t end with the Reformation but continued into the 20th century in America. Kathleen Brandon, in

¹² Herbert Thurston, "The Theatre," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912, accessed March 15 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14559a.html>.

¹³ William Newton Wilberforce, *Christianity and Popular Amusements*, 11.

¹⁴ William Newton Wilberforce, *Christianity and Popular Amusements*, 1.

¹⁵ Wilberforce, *Christianity and Popular Amusements*, 11.

¹⁶ Wilberforce, *Christianity and Popular Amusements*, 14-15.

her dissertation on the relationship of theater and the church, writes “when the theater later became popular in the independent United States, churchmen continued to see in it a rival for the allegiance of human souls.”¹⁷

During the 20th century, a theatrical method of sharing sermons and scripture helped church leaders find new audiences and converts, but there continued to be growing tension in theater's power to sway the masses who attended theater much more often than they attended worship. A desire to legislate morality in public spaces began to emerge out of religious groups from the 1950's throughout the 1980's. During this time, statistically “churchgoers were less likely than the rest of the populations to attend arts events in America.”¹⁸ During the rise of the Christian right in the mid 70's, the church movement of creating Christian art echo-chambers began to rise. Christian music, theater, and art began to be seen as a rival to secular radio, theater, and television. However, as the seeker ministry movement grew in the late 80's to 90's, artists began to push their music and art toward the mainstream. Artists like Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith began to have playtime on secular radio, Christian themes became popular in cinema and there was an increasing push to use theater within worship. Large evangelical, non-denominational churches began to write and publish their own scripts, creating a market for churches to tap the potential of theater for worship. Christmas and Easter became a time for elaborate, theatrical productions seen as “safe entry points” for the community, and theater became the tool to produce the great theo-dramatic stories of God's love in Christ. Seen as a vehicle of evangelism, theater and church in the 90's created a connection by which

¹⁷ Kathleen J. Brandon, “A Grounded Theory Study Of Contemporary Christian Attitudes to Theater” (PhD diss., Wayne State University) 48.

¹⁸ Brandon, “Contemporary Attitudes” 56.

people found themselves connected to storylines and were convinced to strengthen their character and religious faith.¹⁹

This growing relationship of theater and the church began to open opportunity for the arts and drama to enhance the work of worship and the witness of the church during the twentieth century. Finally, churches began to see that an intentional connection between theater and theology and theater could not only enhance worship and create a framework to awaken disciples, but also serve as a way for the church to help individuals perform their faith and theology on the stage of their lives. Theater became a common vehicle by which the church began to have a creative and prophetic voice through worship. But is this where the connection stops? Could theater as ministry also be a means by which disciples become theologians in the public square?

If the church is not available for the primary work of reaching people, especially those on the margins, with the Sacred Story of Love, then what is the point of the church today? If the church no longer allows the mystery, passion, and drama of the good news of Jesus Christ to actually be shared in a way that draws people into God's larger story, then what is the appeal? If the church is not creating disciples who use their livelihood, and sphere of influence to be public witness' to God's kin-dom then what is the point of gathering as a community of faith?

¹⁹ Brandon, "Contemporary Attitudes," 77.

ACT 1: SCENE 2

A THEATRICAL FRAMEWORK OF THEOLOGY

Vander Lugt and Hart ask a poignant premise for the church today. In the context of American Christianity in the twenty-first century, when “Christian churches are struggling to attract and retain members...the challenge of inviting people into the ‘doing’ of God’s story may well require the research and resources of theater.”¹ In a world where scripture has been reduced to a singular meaning through literal readings of the text the progressive church has lost its voice in secular society. Instead, the theology of the Christian Right has allowed faith to be reduced to laws of black and white. How does the church find its voice in the public square by reclaiming hermeneutics of theater, drama or performance to express convictions of the Kingdom of God, inclusivity, equality of all humanity, and justice beyond the traditional understanding that faith is simply a personal insurance policy to an afterlife?

Rev. William Wilberforce proclaimed, “The dramatic instinct is implanted universally in human nature.”² Even the most introverted people recognize there is a place within everyone trying to tell our story –of love, dreams, hopes or fears and pain, hoping to connect with the larger world around us. *Do we matter? Will we make a mark? Why am I here?* Humans have sought answers with philosophy, science, politics and success, art

¹ Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor A. Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, 176.

²William Wilberforce Newton, *Christianity and Popular Amusements, Or the Church and The Theatre: A Paper Read at The Church Congress of the Protestant Episcopal Church Held In New York, Nov.1, 1877*,ston: A. Mudge & Son, 1877, 4.

and religion. These are questions the dramatic nature of the Sacred Story engage.³ This human instinct of storytelling is inherent in the work of religion and theology. Wesley Vander Lugt coined the phrase Theatrical Theology. He writes “theology is inherently theatrical, and it is so by virtue of its object, mode and goal.... theatrical theology deals not just with our human drama but with the theo-drama: the drama of God’s being and action.”⁴ The theatrical nature of theology is rooted in the role of sacred imagination, religious experience, revelation and biblical authority and reasoned knowledge.⁵

Between 1960 and 1980, Swiss, Catholic theologian, Hans urs Van Balthasar penned the idea of a theological connection between theology/doctrine and theater, which he called *theo-drama*. He wrote “theatre a metaphor, model and analogy for Christian theology.”⁶ Balthasar was “doing theology in a time when theology has little to say to the world and only that much more to the Church” seeing his role to “bring back the Church to its Incarnational origins: to re-dramatize before a watching world (and for the sake of her own faith) the action that makes the Church distinctively Christian.”⁷ Theo-drama is defined as “substance of what the Triune God has done on the stage of world history.”⁸ The theological premise of Balthasar was that through the act of Creation, the Divine

³ Ibid 151

⁴ Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart, *Theatrical Theology*, 8.

⁵ Claire Maria Chambers, "Restless Bedfellows: Theatre, Theology, Religion, and Spirituality," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 1 (2018):115, DOI:10.1353/tj.2018.0017.

⁶ Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements with Imagination, Language and Literature*, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest E-book Central, 32.

⁷ Ivan P. Morillo Khovacs, “Divine Reckonings in Profane Spaces: Towards a Theological Dramaturgy for Theatre,” Ph.D. diss., University of Saint Andrews, Scotland, 2007, 6, <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/329>.

⁸ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics*, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2014, 3.

Trinity began a great drama, producing a dramatic Story of love expressed in creation and humanity. The gift of free will to humanity gave agency for individuals to write their own script and co-create a narrative with the Holy Trinity that continues the Story of Divine love and relationship throughout time. Balthasar leans into reformed theology of God as the Sovereign playwright, a God who has a plan “partly hidden and partly revealed: which allows the actors to write their own final performances.”⁹

The great triad of the Trinity is Creator as Playwright/author, Redeemer as Protagonist/actor and Spirit as Producer/director interact on the great stage of creation as an interplay with creation and humanity. Human agency led to separation of the human actors with the Playwright, Protagonist and Director, forcing the great climax and conflict of human history.¹⁰ Balthasar believed the conflict and drama of salvation is grounded in the “preeminent performance” of the Incarnation.¹¹

Balthasar continues this theatrical metaphor of the Holy triad in his work on understanding the Incarnation. The Incarnation was the moment God “entered the theodrama as human protagonist of Jesus.”¹² The “play within a play” is the historical event of the cross. Balthasar says this dramatic moment is “the primal drama of the emptying of God’s heart.”¹³

The Gospel Story is full of dramatic scenes of temples turned, the dead brought to life, feeding of multitudes, the cross and an empty tomb. Vander Lugt writes the heart of each of these dramatic stories “are dialogical covenants God initiates with God’s creation

⁹ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 80.

¹⁰ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 4.

¹¹ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 4.

¹² Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 45.

¹³ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 12.

and chosen people... entail(ing) a real relationship drama between God's infinite freedom and sovereignty and the finite freedom and responsibility of his covenant partners."¹⁴ Spiritual formation, theological reflection, and the ecclesial mission should shape people of faith to understand their place within this dramatic Story of God and fulfill their purpose and mission. The disciple's "performance" is rehearsed within the community of faith and enacted on the stage of their life. Discipleship is the work of strengthening our relationship to the Divine to "perform" through the guidance of the Holy Spirit/Director as a spect-actor created to make a difference in the world.

Claire Marie Chambers, in her review of Trevor Hart, comments "in the same way that theater studies have witnessed a 'religious turn' over the past twenty years or so, theology has witnessed a 'theatrical turn.'"¹⁵ Theological language and the overarching story of scripture lends itself to the metaphor and identification of drama, theater and screen with ease. From epic movies such as Ten Commandments, The Passion of the Christ, The Last Temptation of Christ to animated stories of Prince of Egypt to stage performances of Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat or Jesus Christ Superstar, the stories of scripture beg to be enacted with passion, artistry, and special effects. Russell Crowe's box office fail based on the story of Noah may have been over the top for most theater goers including Christians, however it began a dialogue about the biblical story's fantastic dramatic nuances most readers overlook. It pushed audiences to begin to ask questions about the character of God, humanity's true relationship with God, and the strength of what it means calling and conviction. This cinematic movie provided more

¹⁴. Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 20

¹⁵ Chambers "Restless Bedfellows," 113.

conversation around questions of belief and a response of faith than many churches create on a Sunday morning. These fantastic stories of scripture being imagined into the world creates not only deeper conversation but also allows sacred space for people to find their own way into God's stories via theological imagination.

Trevor Hart defines imagination as a "way of thinking, responding, and acting across the whole spread of our experience". Dogmatics and doctrine have often depleted sacred imagination out of scriptural engagement and spiritual formation. This unfortunate reality has made the church seem like static places of rote creeds without meaning or passion to the watching world. Hart asks the church to consider if the "question facing us is not so much whether we shall be imaginative as human beings but HOW shall we be so."¹⁶ Church could become a space for the imaginative disciple to meet the sacred imagination of God to begin a journey together. But there seems to be a lack of spiritual imagination and discourse between disciples and the great theo-drama within too many churches. God and following God is held to narrow paths, and well defined boxes to define faith, salvation, and the meaning of life. In contrast, a theatrical theology envisions God as Creator with the imagination to make the heavens and earth, male and female and the full spectrum of life contained in-between such binaries. Holy imagination invites humanity to enter into the God's Story and through relationship Divine the process of sanctification enlivens and informs the way we perform our every day lives.

From the beginning of the Scripture, the reader is invited by God into the role of co-creators in this theo-drama. Shannon Craigo-Snell writes that both John Calvin and

¹⁶ Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements with Imagination, Language and Literature*, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest E-book Central, 5.

Karl Barth “portray the cosmos as the theater of God’s glory.”¹⁷ Imagination is in the very breath of humans, the gift of life from the *ruah* of God. However, while some in the church argued for the inerrant truth of Genesis 1 and 2 as a science textbook, secular theater has utilized this ancient hymn of chapter 1 and ancient folktale of chapter 2 to describe the relationship between the Divine and his beloved children. In one of the best theological expressions of the relationship between God and humanity, the role of free will, sin as pride and the role of forgiveness, Stephen Schwartz’s musical Children of Eden offers secular audiences deep understanding in a Broadway musical. The gift of God’s image in humanity is expressed in the lyrics of “Spark of Creation.”

*“I’ve got an itching on the tips of my fingers
I’ve got a burning in the back of my brain
I’ve got a hunger burning inside me, cannot be denied
I’ve got a feeling that the Father who made us
When He was kindling a pulse in my veins
He left a tiny spark of that fire, smoldering inside
The spark of creation is flickering within me
The spark of creation is blazing in my blood
A bit of the fire that lit up the stars and brought life into the mud
The first inspiration, the spark of creation”¹⁸*



¹⁷ Shannon Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church: Theater, Theology and Bodily Hope*, Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014, 2.

¹⁸ Stephen Schwartz and John Caird, Children of Eden: *Spark of Creation*, lyrics by Stephanie Mills, (New York: Music Theater International, 1998).

The *imago dei*, the call and design of humans as co-creators, the gift of free will, is expressed in these lyrics. The song and dramatic moment invites listeners to understand original sin is less about defiant disobedience and more about the struggle of free will as a deep desire to wonder and create.

Using a theatrical lens to see God's Story and theology calls for the church to hold sacred text and teachings in a balance of academic theological discourse and holy imagination at the same time. This spark of imagination and creativity given to humanity from the sacred imagination of God often finds itself at odds with systematic theology. The tension lies in the difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxy defined as the "epic and lyric modes of faith and theology."¹⁹ Vander Lugt describes these two modes in the following way:

- Epic stance = Objectivity - understand reality according to systems and structure
- Lyric = subjectivity and the intensity of human experience.²⁰

These two modes of faith and theology allow disciples a balanced understanding of growing in relationship with the Divine and their context. Too often the church has chosen one mode of faith expression over the other. Often the church has pushed away the dramatic imagination of scripture and theology in preference of orthodoxy. Systems and structures are indeed, critically important for organizations and the church's survival. However, process is not the only way to teach discipleship. Instead of teaching disciples to engage in holy interplay with scripture and theology, the Western church has often been more prescriptive about belief. At times, faith has been turned into a list of things to

¹⁹ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 25.

²⁰ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 25.

believe versus the interior work of seeing oneself in a larger theo-drama; the work of discipleship being the work of relationship and dialogue with the Protagonist through the imagination, emotions, sensing and Spirit guided direction.

The work of the church has too often sought to disregard or minimize holy imagination as a means by which humanity can try to explain God. To leave theology to a list of doctrine only is to create an “*imaginectomy* (that) would render us incapable therefore, not just of artsy activity but of much, possibly most, of what makes us human at all.”²¹ Orthodoxy must balance orthopraxy, allowing a person to invite the entirety of their self into relationship with the Divine. Faithful people facing unexpected struggles of hurt, loss, grief, questions of identity, relationship, purpose which do not fit into black and white objective or linear thinking are left parsing their faith as a compartment separate from the other portions of life. John Wesley explores the work of both objectivity and subjectivity in interpreting scripture and theology through the lens of reason, tradition and experience, inviting both the seeker and follower of Jesus to bring one’s whole self to the work of scriptural interpretation and the act of faithful living in dialogue with the Divine and the world. This balance of orthodoxy as a practice of theatrical theology allows the bible to become the sacred *scrip-ture*, a script of Holy Stories of relationship meant to inform the roles we play in life.

²¹ Trevor Hart, *Between Image and The Word*, 13.is

ACT 1: SCENE 3

A HERMENEUTIC OF PERFORMANCE AS DISCIPLESHIP

The nature of the scripture's progressive revelation of God does not end simply with The Book of Revelation and its fantastical dream of a revolutionary hope of Kingdom. Scripture does not end with the final words on the page. The Sacred Story continues as readers engage in a relationship with the Divine in their everyday life. Spectators of the Holy Story become spect-actor, bringing the fullness of their own reason, experience, and tradition to bear on its interpretation to "act" the Story to life.

Holy script-*ure* is full of dramatic scenes of humanity lost in the grip of relentless pride, mythical creatures closing the entrance of a utopian garden, soap-opera worthy relationships, prophets marrying prostitutes and donning costumes of burlap, camel hair or nakedness to proclaim of monologue of sacred imagination, temples are violently to express holy rage, grief punctuated by the loosening of smelly grave clothes, multitudes fed with a little boy's simple lunch, and tongues of fire empowering homogenous followers to tell a singular story in the languages of the people. Each story invites readers from every century to see the depth of human emotion and experience and finding themselves within the great theo-dramatic story of God's love.

Entering scripture and theology with holy imagination gives permission for people to encounter the drama of the text to inform moments of struggle, identity, doubts, celebrations, and the full range of human emotion and experience. A theatrical theological framework for reading the script-*ure* allows even the most disconnected to interact with an epic, Holy Story still alive, relevant, and accessible.

Throughout scripture, God has sought relationship and human beings do not disappoint in taking the stage to play their part. This idea of humanity as actors living on stage was articulated by William Shakespeare¹, spoken by the character of Jacques in *As You Like It*, but first expressed by the Roman philosopher Epictetus. He writes “remember that you are an actor in a play and the playwright chooses the manner of it...for your business is to act the character that is given and act it well, the choice of the cast is Another's.”² Trevor Hart writes “The world's a stage and life a drama in which each of us has a particular part to play and perhaps many different parts.”³ Systematic theologian Karl Barth expresses “I am neither the author nor the producer nor the principle actor.”⁴ God is not coercive in this role, producing only one stage direction or a predestined or predetermined mode for the actor but instead “interacts with human actors, who are free on the basis of their response-ability and answer-ability.”⁵ The writer of the gospel of John in 6:28 acknowledges that the disciples ask Jesus “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (CEB)

The work of the church in the Book of Acts was the formation of communities to help ensure that, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the story of God in Christ would continue by each disciple playing their role.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions

¹ Mary Jo Kietzman, *The Biblical Covenant in Shakespeare*, New York City: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 8.

² Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements with Imagination, Language and Literature*, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, 189

³ Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word*, 188.

⁴ Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word*, 191.

⁵ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 21.

and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved – Acts 2:42-47 (CEB)

These early disciples surrendered themselves to the larger community so the story would continue. The work of the early church's intentional continuation of the Story through their worship, prayer, study and service is the hermeneutic of performance as discipleship. The term performative hermeneutics was coined by Letty Russell. Russell uses the term to explain that scripture and doctrine are primary but meaning comes in the reality of "particular communities in the praxis of action and reflection."⁶ Johnson and Savidge explain that "the Coming One is already present with us as we live out his story... it is the living out that story that helps us discover meaning."⁷ It is a life lived in response to participating in God's story of love.

In this lens of a performative hermeneutic, a disciple is on an active journey to take their place in the Holy Story of God alongside the protagonist Jesus, seeking to be more like him through acts of love, grace, mercy, and justice. Wesleyan theology expresses this as the work of sanctifying grace. Disciples are called to intentionally participate in a relationship shaped by the heart of the Hero, seen through their everyday actions. Balthasar believed this formation and practice of Christ-likeness is grounded in contemplating what is good and beautiful to enable the "actors to perform the good, which leads to actors into formative encounters with the beautiful" rehearsed in worship.⁸

⁶ Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, "Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue," *Literature and Theology* 24, no. 4 (2010): 441, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.drew.edu/10.1093/litthe/frq037>.

⁷ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 43.

⁸ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 45.

Robert Webber expresses “worship does God’s Story, it enacts it and it embodies it, it is not the performance of our faith, instead it is the rehearsal of our faith. We tell this story of worship *by becoming the story.*”⁹

Church discipleship ministries should prepare seekers to not just read and memorize scripture but encounter themselves *within* scriptures, finding their place in God’s theo-dramatic story of love. Engagements with these stories should then impact the disciples daily living and interactions in their world. For instance, how one interacts with the stranger should be shaped by the parable of Jesus defining neighbor in the story of the Good Samaritan. How one interacts with their own financial stewardship finds direction as the Spirit brings to life Jesus' parable of the talents, or the hundreds of other texts about money, wealth, and possessions.

Samuel Wells builds on the idea of discipleship as performative by explaining that theo-dramatic formation “is the preparation, development and growth of individuals and the church toward Christ-likeness...readiness for particular roles and performances in the theo-drama.”¹⁰ What’s interesting with Samuel Wells is a move from seeing the work of discipleship as merely the repeating of the Holy Story as narrative but instead invites disciples into God’s theatrical exercise of improvisation.¹¹ We do not exit the narrative of scripture when our reading and study ends, or when the worship service is over. The narrative continues as we deepen our relationship to the Divine in an improvisational partnership at work in every aspect of life.

⁹ Wesley and Hart, *Theatrical Theology*, 157.

¹⁰ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 45.

¹¹ Shannon Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church: Theater, Theology and Bodily Hope*, Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014, 32.

Improvisation is the exercise of accepting what is given to the actor and responding with ‘yes - and.’ In improvisation, the actors work as a team, committing to the acceptance of the premise of a story and adding one’s own experiences or ideas to move forward with the plot. Improvisation is collective work deciding how to drive a plot, change the plot, and work through conflict to find resolution.

This idea of improvisation and its connection to humanity in relation to the Divine is grounded in scripture. Wesley Vander Lugt writes “in the beginning there was improvisation.”¹² Creation began with the work of the Trinity beginning to create, calling it good *and* added to the next layer of imaginative creation. The Trinity created humanity, called it good, saying *yes* to human’s very nature, *and* gave humans dominion as co-creators with God.

The Incarnation was God’s *yes* to humanity, confirming the covenant with the people of Israel, *and* inviting the fullness of creation to be a part of God’s gift of love in Jesus Christ.¹³ The highly dramatic moments of the writings of Isaiah, the Incarnation, the resurrection, and the event of Pentecost are all God’s “*yes-and*” in the great theodrama.

This improvisational back-and-forth offers the disciples a new understanding of faith as a living, dynamic relationship with the Divine Trinity, and with others. This improvisational discipleship moves us from the evangelical, salvation-centric *yes* for heaven, to participating in a holy *yes-and* of resurrection living in the present. To denigrate a life of faith to crossing the *yes* finish line and allow the moment of justifying

¹² Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics*, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2014, 32.

¹³ Jennifer Stiles Williams, “God’s Yes AND,” Sermon, Orlando: St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, December 24, 2019.

grace be the last chapter until death, is reductionist. The roman road *yes* many churches concentrate on, without supporting the journey of *and* reduces the progressive story of God offered in the original invitation in Genesis for humans to be Co-Creators of the Kingdom of God in the present and future.

A performative hermeneutic grounded in holy imagination and improvisation, allows the church to become less focused on ensuring disciples prescribe to a list of God's "no's" and instead releases disciples to a life of faith learning to trust Playwright, Protagonist and Director as the ultimate improvisational partners. Disciples released to the fullness of what the interplay of their life with the Divine could become, allows them to look at their daily life, purpose, calling, and even relationships with a sense of wonder and imagination of possibilities. Each encounter with a stranger or friend, each decision made in the workplace, or comment made in the neighborhood, becomes an opportunity for a disciple and their improv partner with God to say *yes-and*. Each moment God's "yes" to us, adding to the yes, the opportunity to participate in endless *and's* of justice, mercy, joy, beauty, and let the Holy narrative continue through our daily living. Small moments begin to matter. Big decisions bear eternal significance. Strangers become opportunities for us to say *yes and* allow us to learn more of the nature of the Divine. Disciples begin to see their decisions, heartbreaks, and hopes in relation to a larger narrative they are a part of, who they are, what they do, decisions they make are a part of God's progressive story of justice and love, which inherently changes the smallness with which one sees their life. Disciples now begin to see what Shakespeare meant but with a Divine center. All the world is *God's* stage, *yes, AND* we are invited to be players on that

stage, and a performative hermeneutic of my discipleship begs of me, what story will my life tell?

ACT 1: SCENE 4

THE HISTORY OF THEATER AS PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND RESISTANCE

Theater has been used as a work of spiritual resistance throughout history. Whether being an empty place for the marginalized to connect with the larger world, to public resistance to matters of race, poverty, political empire or cultural commentary, theater evokes emotion, teaches and leads people to larger decisions about the world, themselves and often, God. Aristotle used classical theater to aspire people to a greater sense of citizenry. While this seems like a noble cause, often the use of coercive and manipulative theatrics was used to “legitimize the status quo”¹ This framework of theater as civil disobedience has been used to either boost activism² or more often as a “restorative catharsis inclusive of excluded or repressed citizens.”³

The prophet Micah expressed to the people of Israel that the work of the Lord was to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God. This has always been “the prophetic imperative of scripture, a combination of social justice (*mishpat*) and steadfast love (*chesed*)”⁴ The early Christian resisters in the book of Acts disrupted the Roman Empire’s economic and political oppression through their communal acts. “The early Christian Church movement known as “The Way” after Pentecost dramatically disrupted the colonial pretense of the Kingdom of Rome through preaching the Kingdom of God.”⁵

¹ Peter Heltzel, *Resurrection City*. 137.

² Heltzel, *Resurrection City*, 137.

³ Patrice Rankine D. *Aristotle and the Black Drama* 24.

⁴ Heltzel. *Resurrection City*. 139.

⁵ Heltzel, *Resurrection City*, 134.

These scriptural prophetic acts were public theological acts of resistance that proved the Kingdom of God was to be the first and only public allegiance of God's people.

The theater spectacle was also witnessed in the life of Jesus in powerful ways. Marcus Borg describes the two processions of Palm Sunday at opposite sides of the city gates of Jerusalem, one from the West Gate of Empire with Pilate entering, and the other from the East Gate with Jesus ushering in the Kingdom of God as an act of theatrical civil disobedience⁶ Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt by the power of God parting the Red Sea in Exodus 14, the gospel of John's vivid explanation of the Word entering into the world as Light, Luke's narrative of a peasant family running for their lives to save their baby son, all of these stories are acts of theological resistance and inform the script by which our lives as humans are supposed to be shaped to reveal the just Kin-dom of God. "We talk of 'holy' scripture and for good reason. And yet it is not, in fact, the script that is 'holy' but the people; the company who perform the script...the performance of scripture is the life of the church."⁷ Scripture sets a foundation of theater as public theological resistance for us, but history tells the story as well.

In Nandi Bhatia's study of colonial India, history shows acts of resistance through public theater was a tool of to reach illiterate audiences and talk about nationalism in a subversive way, thereby allowing spiritual and cultural resistance against the colonial state.⁸ In the 1860's Dinbandhu Mitra's play was written and produced to show the brutality of the British Indigo planters. The production was so revolutionary it led to the

⁶ Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus Final Week in Jerusalem*. New York City: Harper Collins, 2006. 12.

⁷ Lash, Nicholas. "Performing the Scriptures: Interpretation Through Living." *The Furrow* 33, no. 8 (1982): 467-474. www.jstor.org/stable/27677473. 8.

⁸ Nandi Bhatia. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, University of Michigan Press 2004. 3.

Dramatic Performances Censorship Act of 1876. As early as the 1860's, Cuban playwright, Joaquin Lorenzo Luaces was writing plays that outwardly criticized the colonialism of Cuba and “Negri to became a racialized hero of Cuban identity that spoke against the white, slave-oriented traditions”⁹ Charlotte Delbo in 1941 when working as a theater assistant in South America, returned to Paris to fight against Nazism. Arrested and placed in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, she created theater among the women as a means of survival to “generate a sense of togetherness, being with and being for in a camp that tries to destroy solidarity.”¹⁰ Karl Marx believed “theater should add a log to the fire of revolution” an idea Augusto Boal used as a foundation for creating his Theater of the Oppressed.¹¹ Boal’s breaking of the fourth wall and intentionally bringing the audience into the protest and work of the play sought to “interrupt oppression and provide a means of transformation in the city”¹²

This type of community resistance was seen during the Harlem Renaissance. African Americans began their own theater companies, using African American voices as playwrights, actors and theaters to produce stories that denounced racial and gender inequality and demeaning stereotypes by presenting characters that embodied the African American faith.¹³ Using the history of slavery and the difficult backdrop of the Old South, playwrights like Jean Toomer, Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes which led

⁹ Yael Prizant. *Cuba Inside Out: Revolution and Contemporary Theater*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, (2013) ProQuest Ebook Central. 6.

¹⁰ A.S. Fisher *Imagining Theater in Auschwitz: performance, Solidarity and Survival in the works of Charlotte Delbo*. Duggan P, Peschel L. (eds) Palgrave MacMillan London (2016) 79.

¹¹ Peter Heltzel, *Resurrection City*. 129.

¹² Heltzel, *Resurrection City*, 140.

¹³ Heltzel, *Resurrection City*, 3.

to the Black Arts movement in 1977 and the Penumbra Theater, which is one of the few all African American theater companies still in existence¹⁴

The German playwright, Bertolt Brecht wanted “theater to be an arena in which vital questions are freely answered with a view to their solution and to fulfill a social function in which communal realities - especially realities of hunger, cold and oppression - could be brought to light and expressed.”¹⁵ This is a powerful definition of what the church’s mission in public theology and witness could be as a work of spiritual resistance. Peter Heltzel gives the same clarion call for “members of the church to awaken from their slumber as mere audiences to the machinations of priestcraft and become spect-actors in the struggle for social transformation in the local community...take liturgy outside the gates of the church and into the streets and community to disrupt business as usual and usher in the Shalom of God.”¹⁶

Martin Luther King Jr. understood the power of civil disobedience as not just an idea but a dramatic action.¹⁷ The work of the leaders in the civil rights movement strategically created every opportunity for the story of oppression to be told through the media and the stage were the lunch counters, the buses and the streets of everyday America. This use of theatrical devices to tell the spiritual story of justice and resistance was what led to Resurrection City - the tent city built on the National Mall in Washington DC by the Poor People’s Campaign after Martin Luther King Jr was shot. The idea was to “bear communal witness to the ravages of poverty and homelessness.”¹⁸ Peter Heltzel

¹⁴ Heltzel. *Resurrection City*, 17.

¹⁵ Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church*, 97.

¹⁶ Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church*, 147.

¹⁷ Patrice D. Rankin *Aristotle and Black Drama*, 7.

¹⁸ Patrice D. Rankin *Aristotle and Black Drama*, 17.

says this national moment “provides us with an example of the kind of socially engaged, prophetic witness that the world needs today, and jazz music provides us with a metaphor for how contemporary Christians can improvise for justice in their specific contexts.”¹⁹

Whether through the Youth Ministry for Peace and Justice in the South Bronx that performs guerilla theater in community or the clergy of Occupy Wall Street lying in beds to demonstrate the growth of those homeless at the NYC mayor’s office, the church can use the power of God’s theo-drama to exit its safety of worship and liturgy and upset the status quo as they live their performance of discipleship in the world.

But theater has turned to theology as well in a reciprocal moment of connection. Playwrights such as August Wilson (Fences, Jitney), Alfred Uhry (Parade, Driving Miss Daisy), Tarel Alvin McCraney (Choir Boy) all follow the same resistance arc of Terrance McNally (Ragtime, Things that Go Bump in the Night) to give voice to those excluded and oppressed, tell their stories through holy theater and create space where the Holy meets the needs of the community. Listen to the words of Bobby as he steps on the edge of the stage in Terrance McNally’s Love! Valour! Compassion!

“Do you believe in God...Do you? I think we all believe in God in our way. Or want to. Or need to. Only so many of us are afraid to. Unconditional love is pretty terrifying. We don’t think we deserve it. It’s human nature to run. But He always finds us. He never gives up. I used to think that’s what other people were here for. Lovers, friends, family. I had it all wrong.”²⁰

The church’s silence in using theo-drama and spiritual imagination to go to the streets and speak of justice and mercy and never-ending love of the Trinity, has created a vacuum theater has been left to fill. Godspell was never meant to be a Christian teaching

¹⁹ Patrice D. Rankin *Aristotle and Black Drama*, 17.

²⁰ Frountain, Raymond-Jean. *The Theater of Terrence McNally: Something About Grace*. Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2019. 7.

about Jesus and John the Baptist, but a political allegory lyricist Stephen Schwartz says is simply “ a timeless story about how a community is formed around a man with a simple but profound message.”²¹ Yet it is one of the clearest acts of evangelism and resistance to tell the story of the Protagonist Jesus to this day. Productions of Godspell still inspire millions of secular spectators more than the typical reach of a traditional church service worship ever will. For too long the church has kept its distance from public acts of justice and resistance to creative ways to harness the spiritual imagination of people and connect them with the Author/Playwright who is God. This is the connection of theater and theology as public theology and social resistance.

²¹ Allen Reeves Ware and Perry L. Glanzer Religious Themes in Public Educational Theater; *Journal of Church and State*. V47 Issues 3 (Summer 2005) 563.

ACT 2: SCENE 1

THE CONTEXT OF ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The hermeneutic of performance and gift of sacred imagination are capstones to understanding not only the history of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Orlando Florida but understanding the community and cultural context of the Central Florida. Since 2012, Theater at St. Luke's has been a full production ministry developed out a vision to use art and theater, the hallmark of our community and cultural context, to be both evangelistic and prophetic witness. But the vision for this ministry was rooted in the founding of the church.

For its first thirty years, St. Luke's United Methodist Church in the Windermere suburb of southwest Orlando had been a large, predominantly white upper to middle class church. Membership grew to 5000 in mid-2000's after the burgeoning church growth of the nineties. The church defined itself as a place of welcome to all with strong Wesleyan understanding of theology and scriptural interpretation from its inception with founding pastor, Rev. James Harnish.

In his leadership book Good to Great, Jim Collins explains great organizations are built by disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action.¹ This was the organizing design for St. Luke's UMC from the beginning. Original leaders included executives from Walt Disney World (*seven miles to the south*), SeaWorld (*10 miles to the east*) and eventually, Universal Studios (*3 miles to the east*). These leaders were pioneers

¹Collins, Jim, *Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. New York, New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc, 2001, page 126

in creating Orlando as a vacation destination through the entertainment world of theme parks. Other early and current leaders of the church were running hotel, restaurant and other sectors of the hospitality industry, entertainment executives running theaters, television channels and Orlando's up and coming movie industry, as well as civil and computer engineers and executives with the arms, aerospace and defense corporation, Lockheed Martin. The church campus was built on barren citrus groves, owned by local citrus entrepreneurs and owners, on land directly across the street from Arnold Palmer's Bay Hill country club, (*Winnie Palmer was a founding member*) and Isleworth Country Club, the neighborhood home of Shaquille O'Neal and Tiger Woods. From its very inception, prosperity and visionary leadership defined this attractional church which became known in the community for impactful mission and creative arts ministries.

In the early 90's as the HIV/AIDS pandemic was at its peak, the Central Florida community was hit hard. St. Luke's held the first benefit concert in Orlando to raise money for HIV/AIDS advocacy and support. A goal to raise \$10K in a day for Habitat for Humanity raised \$200K in three hours. Second Lead Pastor, Rev. William S. Barnes, oversaw the boom of membership in his first ten years. Captured during the church growth of the 90's the evangelism pattern of St. Luke's during this time was "open the doors and they will come". The membership grew from 1000 to 5000 in a little over a decade. Thriving children, youth and adult discipleship ministries, cutting edge music, worship and mission ministries as well as a growing recreational program complete with a gym and fields, held everything seeker boomers of the 90's needed to feel connected with the church. Bill leveraged a music ministry that "pushed the envelope" on creativity to teach sound progressive biblical teaching and lead the way to champion local

legislation. Bill became known in the community as a champion for same-sex partner benefits, creating Shepherds Hope, multi-site free medical clinics for the under and uninsured staffed completely by volunteer medical experts and being at the helm of an inclusive church. Before Bob Lupton wrote Toxic Charity and spoke of asset-based ministry² St. Luke's was already doing the work of long-term partnerships to alleviate poverty in the community. However, as mega churches began their decline in the mid 2000's and the seeker movement bubble of attractional churches began to burst, so began the slow, unnoticed decline of St. Luke's.

As thriving and cutting edge as St. Luke's was, there was a culture of non-threatening comfort. LGBTQ staff and members in critical roles of leadership were not publicly "out". Three families of color helped start the church, but while people of color would visit, especially whenever the choir from Bethune Cookman University would perform, few ever stayed. Mission and mercy ministry were primary, but justice ministries of advocacy for policy change and statements of anti-racist, gun control, or economic disparity struggled. In 2005, the numbers in worship, giving, discipleship and membership started to plateau. With 2500 in worship regularly decline was hardly noticeable, but disciplined leaders began to try to discern how to turn the "cruise ship" church around.

Three major moments created a confluence of identity questions for St. Luke's. The housing crisis and recession of 2008 caused a reduction of a \$4.5 million dollar budget and leaders asked two strategic questions: *How the church will help the*

2 Lupton, Robert D. *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011.

community survive and if ministry had to be cut, what MUST happen in the congregation? The answers were worship and missions. There was a focused return to the history of the original building, which had clear windows and a cross directly OUTSIDE the chancel area of the sanctuary, where the mission field of Jesus called. Ministry and resources would be focused on sustaining members and build ministry of resource support OUTSIDE the church walls.

During Holy Week of 2010, a fax notified the pastors that Westboro Baptist church would be picketing St. Luke's UMC and First Baptist on Easter Sunday morning because we accepted LGBTQ+ people. This claim was true of St. Luke's alone. As Pastor of Evangelism, I took it as a sign it was time to stake our claim on our core values and scripture and stand for who we were for the LGBTQ+ community with no apologies. This act of social justice began to have a marked impact on the number of visitors and new members who became involved in the life of the church. People who had been looking for an inclusive church began coming to St. Luke's.

The final straw came in 2011 as the church wrestled with what do about a failed mother-daughter new church launch. Church growth models such as Natural Church Development had helped churches like St. Luke's discover their "weakest staves" on a holistic bucket of ministry that led to leaking mission and vision.³ These staves were typical ministry strategies of worship, discipleship, evangelism, age level ministries and the like. The process of this model was to determine where the vision was leaking and shore up that stave with intentional ministry focus. After much study and consultation

³ Schwarz, Christian A. *Natural Church Development: How Your Congregation Can Develop the Eight Essential Qualities of a Healthy Church*. South Winfield, B.C.: International Centre for Leadership Development and Evangelism, 1998

with the congregation, evangelism was shown as the weakest “stave” in the St. Luke’s bucket of ministry. The idea was to focus on evangelism and start a new church in order to shore up the ministry balance and continue the vitality of St. Luke’s in the community. The problem was the spiritual gifts of the membership of St. Luke’s was not evangelism. In fact, only about sixteen people at St. Luke’s had the spiritual gift of evangelism at the time, and ten of those people were on staff. A church that works outside its gifts and graces does harm to everyone, especially those outside of the church, which is exactly what had happened with St. Luke’s and its daughter church.

In 2011, the failed attempt at a mother-daughter new church plant led to a difficult church council meeting. A brilliant lay leader asked the council two pivotal questions: *What are the core competencies of St. Luke’s? What do we “do well” beyond our core values to reach and impact our local community?*

The concept of looking at an organizations weakness through a SWAT analysis may work of a business, but it seems contrary to a scriptural understanding of the Body of Christ. A church’s spiritual gifts are designed to reach the surrounding culture and speak its language. In trying to follow church growth models, St. Luke’s lost focus and identity. That night the church council unanimously agreed that the core values, mission ministries, and creative arts were St. Luke’s core competencies. These were the areas and values where people had passion, ministry thrived, and new people were drawn into the life of the church. But would the church at large agree?

That meeting led to a congregation wide Appreciative Inquiry vision process. It was not however going to be enough this time, to put a large group of key leaders in the room for a weekend. St. Luke’s needed as many people involved in the strategic

visioning process as we could possibly find. During Lent, through worship and small groups the entire congregation and guests were asked questions created to *Discover* strengths, *Dream* how those strengths could meet the needs of the community and *Design* a 5 year strategic vision *Destiny* focused on the mission statement.⁴ After a year of study, evaluating answers, and discernment, a vision task force with more than 100 people involved, created a strategic five year vision to direct, guide and create boundaries for the mission purpose of St. Luke's: *Building the Kingdom by Building Disciples*. This 4D vision was adopted with a focus to leverage the core values to speak love aloud through creative arts, mercy and justice ministries and intentionally become a congregation who reflects the diversity of Central Florida, welcome those marginalized from the institutional church and lift families out of poverty one neighborhood at a time. Crisis, decline and a need to re-engage identity led to clarity of focus, growth in diversity, and the chance to create lasting community change and public witness over the last ten years.

It was out of the 4D strategic vision particularly connected with how St. Luke's would "speak love aloud" and reach the marginalized, diverse communities of Central Florida, Theater at St. Luke's was born. The idea was to connect entertainers in the community who had been hurt or marginalized by the church and allow them to use their gifts alongside welcoming St. Lukers to use compelling storytelling to articulate vision, values and create conversation around social witness. The first experiment was a production of the musical Hairspray in a gym with a cast of 40, an orchestra and a budget

⁴ Whitney, Diana Kaplin, and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.

of \$3000. Half the cast were St. Lukers and half were local actors and entertainers from the community, most who came by personal invitation. In the last two weeks of rehearsals, devotions connecting scripture, basic theology, and our core values to the story of Hairspray were offered each night. Utilizing the plot, music, and character of the show with a connection scripturally to our core values and basic tenets of our theological understandings of God, justice and community, the cast was being trained, disciplined, and offered the platform as a cast to become the preachers of St. Luke's, professing a public theology. A vision was cast of the important message the church was seeking to share with the community about love, acceptance, and racial equity. The production sold out after the first night. More than half the community cast began to sing in worship and within a year joined the church.

Ten years later, theater ministry produces three weeks of full scale shows with unpaid cast, crew, and volunteers of close to two hundred people from a self-sustaining budget averaging \$20 thousand dollars. Productions are regularly reviewed by the local theater critic, and receives awards for cast, crew, and production value from Broadway World Orlando. Fifty percent of every cast and crew come from the community and on average more than half become of our guests who participate in a show become a part of the church. Over the last decade, by St. Luke's focusing on building a reputation of excellence and respect has led to unexpected opportunity for St. Luke's to support the city of Orlando and its entertainers during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Before 2020, many of the congregation still questioned the purpose of using musicals and plays from Broadway as a part of our ministry focus of time and resources. While those who worshipped regularly began to see some cast members leading worship

on stage, or serving in leadership positions, many did not see or understand the impact of discipleship and witness occurring with the cast and crew during each production. Many also didn't always understand the public witness St. Luke's was creating by telling the unique stories we choose to share from the stage of a church. While we were connecting the themes of the show to our worship themes and scripture, what was missing was a larger understanding of the theatrical nature of theology and how worship and spiritual formation was the work of practicing and rehearsing every disciple's role on stage in our community. Our congregation needed to better understand the connection of theater and theology to understand how God was using theater to change people's lives, and to transform and build bridges in our community.

The vision was to see the impact that happens when a congregation looks beyond itself, beyond a church putting on a play for its members and instead see theater as an opportunity to invite marginalized people into community through the stewardship of their gifts, create opportunities for a cast of St. Lukers and community guests to become community, and use the story as a means of a public theology of witness and resistance. To make this shift from the attractional use of theater to a missional understanding of theater requires the scripturally and theologically grounded connection between theater, discipleship, and the ecclesial mission.

St. Luke's believes it is difficult to participate in the work of public theology as mercy and justice without a balance of spiritual formation and worship. This idea is grounded in a Wesleyan understanding of discipleship being the intersection of personal holiness and social holiness. The first step is utilizing worship and discipleship as a means to teach this framework of theatrical theology.

ACT 2: SCENE 2

THEATRICAL THEOLOGY AS WORSHIP AT ST. LUKE'S

Worship at St. Luke's has typically been described as "not to be missed." From the beginning of the first worship experiences, the staff and clergy at St. Luke's wanted to ensure the arts held a prominent place in the liturgical moment. We now claim the arts as a part of our liturgical design element as we work diligently to create each week a new arc for the story of the worship experience. Marcia Mcfee, worship design consultant, expresses the connection between art and worship as the following:

"Design' is what I intentionally call the process of worship planning because it alludes to the artistry involved in this endeavor. We take some pretty incredible stories and transformation messages, and we try again and again to bring them to life in deeply meaningful ways. The church today has begun to reclaim the power of the arts and to practices them in ever-more-complex ways. This is not just the latest worship trend...underlying the embrace of multiple art forms as proclamation of the Word are some of the latest theories in effective communication, learning styles and the science of memory formation." ¹

Art and theater is not just to add something interesting and creative to the worship format. Art and theater as ritual should offer an arc to the worship experience. This arc should move the participants through a story line of engagement with the Divine, experience of a conflict or challenge personally or corporally and seeks to offer resolution by a change in thought or action in the present, or the vision of a preferred future. "Our goal is to tell the most amazing Story- and the stories that point to that liberating message – in the most compelling ways that invite people to live with hope and conviction for the 'good news'"

¹ Marcia McFee "Think life a film-maker: Sensory Rich Worship Design for Unforgettable Messages" Trokay press, Truckee CA 2016, 2.

we share.”² Worship should point us to ourselves as supporting characters and remind us that our role on the stage of life is to support not our mission but the journey of the Hero/protagonist Jesus. We think of worship design in the arc of the biblical Story we are seeking to tell, but also the human/God drama we live out in the world daily. This theatrical framework of theology helps us craft worship experiences through music, artistic elements, message and sacraments, to help move the congregation from simple spectating the worship service to becoming spect-actors invested and moved to act, or as Jesus said “*go and do likewise.*” (*Luke 10:34; CEB*)

Worship is St. Luke’s largest weekly gathering of the “company of actors,” or disciples. Worship is a moment to engage St. Lukers in an encounter with the Divine, an experience with scripture and a connection with our core values. Worship allows St. Lukers to rehearse the connection of scripture and values through ritual and sacrament so they leave to enter their portion of the world with new tools to live as public theologians.

For example, when our staff chooses a song, or dramatic monologue to introduce new concepts of racial justice, or the calling for racial equality from the heart of a person who has encountered racism, the climax and conflict of that moment seizes those watching. If we have created the correct “ramp” entry into that moment, easing a person into it through liturgy and music, it allows them to rehearse self-reflection, examining their own wonder, past hurts, fear, resistance, complicity or even guilt. However, leaving the congregation in those emotions doesn’t change anyone or reflect the theology of worship as rehearsals of mini-resurrections. So at this moment in the worship experience, we would add an experiential opportunity, possibly the ritual sacrament of communion.

² Marcia McFee, Marcia “Think Like a Filmmaker,” 15.

Communion could rehearse the improvisational partnership of Christ's "yes-and" found in bread and cup, thereby moving the spect-actor from confession or pain to a place of personal forgiveness and healing.

Each movement of worship is another scene in a two-act play. Act I is the collective orientation from the world, from the individual through liturgical acts that helps the participant admit where they are in life, confess the obstacles between themselves and the Divine, and recenters and realigns the participant to True North. Liturgical call and response, music, art, dance, spoken word and theater present the human dilemma in Act I, generally followed by acts of surrender through confession, prayer, and an act of offering, in Act II moving the participant out into the world with a new understanding, call to action and with God at the center of life. The entire act of worship is realignment with the Great Playwright, rehearsal of belief, and receiving the direction from the Spirit to help the disciple leave prepared for missional performance and ready to be-have the Word proclaimed.

In the St. Luke's performative hermeneutic of discipleship, worship has become the punctuation mark of the weekly journey of individual biblical study and group practice of listening to God at work in one another. According to Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart, "theater is an art form in which actors use signs, words, and gestures to communicate meaning... a medium through which a people - the actors - tell stories by becoming the story."³ In the same way, worship offers an art form in which participants use music, art, theater, spoken word, liturgy and sacrament to communicate the meaning

³ Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor A. Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, accessed November 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, 151.

the ecclesial mission. Worship shapes people of faith to understand God to live out their role informed by drama of scripture and theology. Worship becomes the place where the collective body rehearses to be shaped, formed, as one acting company released in the world to echo the Story of God into life. Since worship becomes the largest meeting of the family of God, it is also a chance to rehearse St. Luke's story of values, vision and mission and our Wesleyan theology. These reminders of our collective story are offered through all mediums to create transformative experiences with the disciple and the congregation as a whole. Worship seeks to create movement in our strategic vision and mission, and send public theologians into the world to call out injustice, to act with mercy and compassion, and witness of the Divine love Story.

ACT 2: SCENE 3

A HERMENEUTIC OF PERFORMANCE IN PRACTICE AT ST. LUKE'S

Gerard Loughlin observes “when a person enters the scripture story, he or she does so by entering the Church’s performance of that story; he or she is baptized into a biblical and ecclesial drama. It is not so much being written into a book as taking part in a play.”⁴ Discipleship ministry in the church should lend itself to helping people take their part in the play or ecclesial theo-drama of God. Discipleship through the hermeneutic lens of performance calls for a life of faith to be a responsive act to the initiating love Story of the Divine Trinity. This performative discipleship moves a person from Christian in mindful assent to active disciples of Rabbi Jesus, from spectator of scripture to spect-actor of God’s Story of script-ure. For those who have walked away from church due to a “narrow path” understanding of following God, this hermeneutic of performance and faith relationship of improvisation with God allows space for free will and a relationship of partnership. Wesley Vander Lugt describes such discipleship, writing “human participation in the theo-drama is improvisational because humans are actors who do not know their lines or how the play ends.”⁵ This means participants in the theo-drama “do not have the luxury of learning about the play before the performance.”⁶ This discipleship model helps disciples understand there is not just one calling or “script” we are called to follow, but instead multiple callings of family, work life, passions. Each calling is another chapter of the unique story God is writing through our lives.

⁴ Gerard Loughlin 31/21.

⁵ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 32.

⁶ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 127.

“If personhood is inherently relational and theatrical, the church is the company in which actors are becoming more fully human, conformed to the image of the Protagonist -Son by the power of the Producer-Spirit.”⁷ This company of actors known as the community of faith is the place where Christians offer good performances, “which involves bringing out the best in each individual actor” with the goal to be in “relational mutuality that strengthens each individual for the sake of the group.”⁸

St. Luke’s has focused on retelling mission, vision and values, grounded in the greater Story of God’s theo-drama through worship, discipleship classes, small groups and mission experiences. Driving home mission, values grounded in scripture has helped to ensure vision doesn’t get lost at the end of a worship service, or once a disciple leaves the campus. This framework has helped to create a narrative St. Lukers repeat in the context of their multiple roles in everyday relationships and life.

Peter Heltzel writes “as actors bring a script to life in live theater, so to, Christians bring the script of Scripture to life through their creativity in the liturgical and prophetic life of the church.”⁹ Focusing on a hermeneutic of performance invites disciples to practice their theology in the everyday life, seeing themselves as public theologians who are extensions of God’s story and extensions of the church’s mission in the world.

⁷ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 115.

⁸ Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 115

⁹ Peter Heltzel, *Resurrection City*, 145.

In 2021, the theological theme for St. Luke’s was “Living the Story”. This was the year the theatrical framework of learning the script-ure, rehearsing through worship and discipleship, and living out the performance through missional mercy and justice came into absolute focus. The focus was to help each person who called themselves a St. Luker to find their place in God’s great love story, engage their role in the story, and echo the story in everyday life. This theme was lived out through each sermon series and subsequent small group study throughout the year.

Lent 2021 centered on the Hero’s Journey on the scriptures of Jesus headed toward Jerusalem and connecting those stories to the United Methodist vows of baptism.

To help express this theme, an original episodic drama was written by lay people and used each week focused on a “virtual game” called *The Vow*.



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This series connected the church baptismal vows to the Lenten scripture of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. The theme taught the theological understanding that disciples are supporting character on stage with the hero protagonist Jesus. The Easter Resurrection story became an invitation to *come alive* as supporting characters who live the Hero’s

¹⁰ [The Hero’s Journey](#) Trailer Used by permission St. Luke’s United Methodist Church Orlando, Florida, Lenten Worship 2021,

story coming out of the tomb after a global pandemic.¹¹ This was dramatically interpreted by utilizing scripture, monologue and music from *The Greatest Showman*. Forty



five theater ministry dancers participated in leading worship, many who had never attended services before. Easter service ended with an invitation to the Eastertide sermon series about calling and spiritual gifts, helping supporting characters to find their passion and giftedness to continue sharing God’s Story. This series was based on sidekicks of stage, screen and graphic novels, supported by theatrical trailers and monologues. These series continued to involve the congregation in a theatrical theology as each worship series helped them “live the Story” out loud.

These two sermon series themes are simple examples of how a theatrical theology of discipleship is connected in the larger context of worship, spiritual formation, and service. For St. Luke’s these “Story” themes created new, creative avenues to engage people in their own storytelling as improvisational partners with God. Continuing to help the congregation grow in their understanding of faith beyond personal holiness and individual salvation to a bigger vision of “performing” their faith on the larger stage as public theologians of witness and even social resistance.

¹¹ “*Come Alive*” from *the Greatest Showman*, Used by permission, St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, Easter Sunday Worship, April 3, 2021
https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=923796391702611&ref=watch_permalink

Worship themes focus the planning and curriculum of the church. But what the church realized is we needed a clear journey, or routine St. Luker's could engage in to deepen the performative nature of discipleship. We kept being asked "what do I do to build my faith?" This led to St. Luke's remodeling discipleship around a theatrical theology to create a clear pathway using the practices of *LEARN, ENGAGE, LISTEN AND ECHO*. This pathway of discipleship allowed St. Lukers to have a routine to learn skills, practice and rehearse in order to perform their faith with God through their personal and social witness. This intentional "schedule" allowed persons tools in the week become a dramaturg of scripture as supporting characters in God's theo-drama.

A dramaturg is defined as "a dedicated person on the creative team whose primary task is to support the play's development by asking key questions, starting conversations, researching, providing context, and helping the artists as they work together to tell the intended story."¹² This weekly pattern of discipleship gave St. Lukers opportunities through the church to research, converse, and explore with one another the weekly scriptural Story. Each step in the journey allowed the Story to come to life and help St. Lukers find ways to understand how the Story connects with them and how they continue the Story in the world through their faith in action.

Disciples are invited to *LEARN* together in a church wide biblical exegesis of the text, learning the scripture, and often reteaching a historical, contextual, linguistically correct reading and interpretation of scripture that is academic in nature. A dramaturg

¹² "What is Dramaturgy", Beehive Dramaturgy Studio, accessed May 2021, <http://www.beehivedramaturgy.com/whatisdramaturgy>

would call this looking at the ‘backstage’ of the characters in the story, the historical context, to mine for more understanding and connection. What we have found as a congregation is that there has been a missing point between worship, which has very little time for in-depth exegetical work small group, which has always focused more on relationship building and conversation. Like an actor who must do their own research, character study and learning the nuances of a script, so it is with biblical and sacred text study. We see this as a time for individual practice and the study is less about interaction with one another, and more focused on education, learning and information.

Worship is designed as space and place to *ENGAGE* the scriptural Story creatively and make the theme and text practical and contextual to everyday living. This is what it means to move from *reading scripture* into *living script-ure*. Music, prayer, liturgy and spoken word engage various understandings and reflections on the text which allows it to come to life with new dimension, bringing the one-dimensional written word into multidimensional life. Worship becomes a tool in the overall ministry strategy of discipleship making, helping move people beyond worship into deeper engagement in their journey of faith.

LISTEN – utilizing peer based small groups called Life Together, congregants engage what they have learned from study and worship through discussion questions created by our Grow staff. Like a cast of characters rehearsing scenes together, or a section of woodwinds rehearsing what they have individually practicing in tune and in harmony with one another, these Life Together groups are a chance to listen to the melody played with different intonations and experience. Age-appropriate discussion questions are created to guide conversation tailored for children, youth, or adult small

group conversation. The use of the word LISTEN helps express the improvisational “yes-and” improvisational skill of hearing how God is at work through the perspective of others. The idea is to begin to pull people out of self-examination in order to hear the Spirit engage a text through the life of someone different. This holy conversation and listening gives individuals new understandings of God. Listening to God at work through others gives the individual new views of God, the text, and the life of faith, recognizing the Story of God is not something we perform as individuals but how we do so together are a company of spect-actors together.

ECHO – The work of discipleship is to respond to the work of our relationship to the Divine through our actions in the world. The church has one mission – to practice the gospel out loud to reveal the Kin-dom of God around us and create relationship between the Divine and others. As the disciple rehearses the text through disciplines of learn, engage, and listen the disciples from spectator to spect-actor, echoing the Story through serving with their spiritual gifts through acts of compassion, justice, mercy, and love. The Divine Story comes to life in the public square in new and unique ways through each St. Luker. “We don’t perform the text, but the drama the text entails and implies”¹³ As we ECHO through using unique spiritual gifts, passions and serving others in public witness and resistance, we create public theologians of the gospel message and Kin-dom values.

Using this language as a frame for worship and discipleship groups has allowed those marginalized from church and those who found themselves often in supporting

¹³ Kevin Vanhoozer, “Redramatizing Theology”, *Scientia Et Sapientia*, August 31 at Covenant Seminar, Accessed April 2021, <https://westernthm.wordpress.com/2010/08/31/kevin-vanhoozer-on-redramatizing-theology/>

roles in the workforce or family life, to find their voice and value within ministry in vital ways.

“Ana” is a mother in her thirties who stays at home to care for the house and now homeschools her eldest. She has an artist’s heart and a very diverse religious background having bounced from mainline churches to fringe denominations to alternative spirituality. “Chelsea” is a woman who is a part of a dual career family with multiple children who grew up in a strict fundamental Christian tradition, where women are meant to stay home and care for the home, men and women discipleship and fellowship is segregated, and women are to stay silent in the church.

Both women have been drawn into worship and study groups that have valued their voice as women and offered space to use their talents to help the congregation. They help visualize the sacred Story, using their artwork and designs through worship or prayer experiences or on stage. What was seen as weakness or stumbling blocks in past religious circles, the Divine playwright is using to help St. Luke’s tell its story through their particular and unique lives. Not only do they have a more beloved understanding of themselves and their relationship with God, but they see their purpose in life and their gifts being actualized through the church.

Connecting a theatrical theology to discipleship allows persons to find their place in a larger Sacred Story and gives greater purpose to everyday life. It provides tools by which they can not only hear Gods Story, but do the work of a dramaturg, mining deeper into the history, cultural context, and relevance of the script-ure, listening to it come to life through the lives of others in order to practice the work of the church. The church’s ability to have a sustainable and diverse public witness is multiplied exponentially with

the seriousness with which spiritual formation, discipleship and helping each seeker find their hermeneutic of imagination and performance as a part of their journey with God.

ACT 2: SCENE 4

A CASE STUDY OF THEATER OF ST. LUKE'S PUBLIC THEOLOGY

2020 was a trifecta of virus. It was what Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis described as the year of three viruses, “COVID 19, COVID-1492 and COVID-45”¹. During this year of virus, violence and vitriol, the Holy Spirit/director has created opportunities for Theater at St Luke’s to practice this theatrical theology of discipleship, worship through a public witness of mercy, justice, and social resistance. It was the culmination of the work of ten years of theater ministry, focus on a performative hermeneutic and gave St. Lukers the opportunity to perform their public theology. One of the examples of the theatrical theology of discipleship is best witnessed through the work of theatrical resistance

created by St. Luker Shonn McCloud ².

Shonn came into the life of St. Luke’s through the 2013 production of Ragtime playing the role of Colehouse.



Shonn is an African American man, part of the LGBTQ community and a part of Orlando theater community. Shonn struggled to find a place of belonging in his traditional African American Church but found in St. Luke’s, a spiritual home and community through

¹ Jacqui Lewis, Opening Welcome, Revolutionary Love Conference, Middle Collegiate Church, New York City, April 2021

² “Make them Hear you.” from Ragtime, music by Stephen Flaherty, Used by permission by singer and designer Shonn McCloud, Theater at St. Luke’s Facebook page, Orlando Florida, accessed June, 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/TheaterAtStLukes/videos/299695517740870>

which to embrace his callings. Shonn became a vital partner of St. Luke's, using his voice and gift as a leader on the Church Council, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee and in worship He has also become a public theologian.

After the death of George Floyd under the knee of law enforcement the world took to the streets in protest and resistance. Shonn reprised his role as Colehouse from Ragtime to become a public theologian on social media with an artistic video. Using Ragtime's song "*Make them Hear You.*" Shonn connected images from protests in the state capital of Florida as a vehicle to change hearts and stir the public into action. It was not an official project of St. Luke's. Instead, St. Lukers created their own public witness which was then shared by St. Luke's. Shonn's public theology allowed the narrative of the original 2012 work of Theater at St. Luke's to have a new and relevant voice in the summer of 2021's racial revolution.

Shonn is just one example of how the work of utilizing a theatrical theology and allowing people to find their place in God's Story has led to creating public theologians. His video went viral and led to the creation of a cabaret night. Shonn used his cabaret as an opportunity to center voices of color to sing songs of revolution, raising money for the furloughed entertainment community. In the months to follow, Shonn became a leading voice in the work of BIPOC entertainers to center theater, art and entertainment created, produced, and performed by people of color in Central Florida.

But individual acts of public theology was not the only way Theater at St. Luke's had a public witness during 2020. Ten years of building a reputation of trust and excellence in the Central Florida community led to an entirely new understanding of the mission and work of Theater at St. Luke's when faced with a global pandemic.

March of 2020, Theater at St. Luke's was in its first black-box, theater in the



round, all women production of Steel Magnolias. The audience entered Truvy's hair salon and was literally in the middle of a conversation between diverse women who were lifelong friends as they

embraced change, struggle, death and resurrection together. We planned a Lent theme around their conversation but had no idea how these themes would foreshadow our lives in such profound ways in a weeks' time.³

Three weeks of shows were already sold out, but during the second week of production, COVID-19 shut down everything in our church, city, and nation. We closed production at the same time Broadway closed its stages. The same weekend Disney, Universal



and SeaWorld, as well as all local theater shut their doors, furloughing thousands of

³ Steel Magnolias, Robert Harling, Used with permission Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, 2020 Production

workers. There was no indication the church would open anytime soon, and theater productions were placed on the back burner while the church pivoted to virtual ministry.⁴

Within a month, Theater at St. Luke's participants, found themselves isolated from jobs, financial security and identities. They began to look to one another for creative ways to support one another. Virtual cabarets to raise money, online shops and marketplaces to sell their art and craftsmanship. Overnight, entertainers and stagecraft gig workers became tik-tok and YouTube stars, hosting virtual game nights, murder mysteries, and selling personalized songs for special occasions.

St. Lukers embraced their role as public theologians and began to push church leaders to do something to help the community in tangible ways. St. Lukers, even those only connected through our theater ministries, began to recognize the greater need in the entire community for artists and the entire entertainment community for financial assistance, housing and food assistance. During COVID, like many large cities, our local economics were hit hard. However, the economy of Central Florida is built on the backs of the hospitality industry and in the unprecedented shut down the industry went bust. Record number of industry workers were furloughed and laid off, but contract entertainers, technicians and artists who worked in the "gig economy" were hit the hardest. First rounds of stimulus checks and employment supplements did not include gig, contract workers in entertainment from actors, dancers, musicians, lighting, costume, and scenic design workers. Eventually theme parks would reopen for rides, but

⁴ Steel Magnolias, Robert Harling, Used with permission Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, 2020 Production

entertainment would not be brought back well into 2021 or 2022. Artists lost their livelihood, opportunity for community and a sense of purpose.

Theater at St. Luke's pivoted to understanding that the stories of equity, justice and the St. Luke's core values of hospitality, acceptance, community, discipleship, and service they had been sharing on stage were simply rehearsals to this moment to publicly perform. They decided to make these stories real through tangible acts of justice and mercy through food, financial support, acts of justice and moments of celebration. The theater ministry community and larger congregation began to collect money, partner with local non-profits and businesses to begin a weekly food distribution to feed stomachs and hearts of local theme park employees. Every Tuesday a food distribution line of more than 200 cars became a place of holy theater where the fourth wall was broken by applause for those who had for decades used their gifts and skills to make Orlando a place of magic for millions of people from around the world.

St. Luke's is known in Orlando for creative arts but also outstanding mission ministry that has made lasting impact on lifting people out of poverty in Central Florida. Missions ministries focused on asset-based partnerships serve to fill gaps of food, shelter and job placement and use our resources of influence and expertise to speak into and change injustices in our city, state, and nation. Both our theater and mission leaders are trusted and influential but had never collaborated. 2020 became the perfect seasons to put these two, often siloed ministry areas together to create a strong new partnership. Because of the discipleship work we had been doing not only with our congregation "partners" but those who were only involved in Theater at St. Luke's the groundwork of serving with dignity and protecting the belovedness of those in need was already central.

From the outset this COVID Assistance financial fund, the meal distribution, the Grow-It-Forward micro farm and later, the new non-profit GOPAR centered voices of those most in need to determine how best they could be served, but also created not as a hand-out but a hand of gratitude extended for the value these people brought to our community.

The first partnership was created to fill the immediate need of financial assistance and food needs. With a large donation from one of our members who is a high-ranking executive leader in one of the community's largest industries, the COVID Assistance Fund was created. This member balanced their work as an organization leader who had no choice but to be a part of the decision to furlough thousands, but because of St. Luke's core values, scriptural teaching and justice-oriented view of the Kin-dom made sure to handle the furlough with dignity and care, while resourcing their church to be able to come alongside to assist people. Months of fundraising led to a substantial amount of money in this Assistance fund topping out in amounts of six digits. This fund was used for anyone in the congregation or community who needed assistance in paying bills but was offered with wrap around assistance through trained case managers who could help people navigate unemployment, local, state, and federal assistance, and work with utility companies, mortgage and rent holders, and local food distributions to care holistically for people's needs. All assistance was handled case by case and helped offer support along the journey, not just as a single relief opportunity. Those who were trained were staff members whose hours had been drastically reduced and unable to complete their own roles of ministry, so the church could keep staff employed as well.

The second mercy relief ministry created was our weekly *Supporting HeARTS* food distribution. Four free hot meals per household, produce, dairy and other goodies

were provided to artists and members of the hospitality industry every Tuesday beginning in March of 2020. In just five months, thirty-five hundred household were fed more than nineteen thousand meals. The hope was to offer the gift of some magic back and bring joy to those whose lives had been turned upside down.

The weekly food drive garnered national attention in the *Washington Post*⁵, background for multiples local and national new stories on the theme park entertainment crisis. Theater at St. Luke’s and St. Luke’s missions continued the food distribution for more than eighteen months.

However, this was not just a food drive. St. Lukers were determined to offer more than food to our neighbors in need. These were the magical artists who made our city beautiful and were now missing the weekly applause which had been so much a part of their lives.⁶ St. Lukers wanted to ensure those disengaged from their work community

would find a sense of



⁵ Jaffe, Greg, “I didn’t make it” *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/disney-layoffs-coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR25L48vHbmBesiDoJPYWI3fRG7p88kV1cNeVz3EmUb2G_WMpgR2paA-vkI

⁶ Supporting HeARTS Meal Distributions, Used by permission, Theater at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, April 2021

community during these food drives. It was important each person was appreciated and valued for all of the years of magic their service in the theme parks had offered our city. These goals of the food



distribution leaders led them to use a performative hermeneutic of the gospel of love and gratitude to create magic.⁷

This food drive grew to become more than food, but the value and dignity of the people. Each Tuesday the distribution line created the atmosphere of a red-carpet moment



complete with people standing in an applause section, live improvisational actors, musicians, aerialists, and stilt walkers working side by side with people delivering meals.⁸ Our favorite moment was when the team instantly took umbrage with national media photographing people in their cars. The team believed in the belovedness of everyone who attended should be protected as a sacred trust.

⁷ Supporting HeARTS Meal Distributions, Used by permission, Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, April 2021.

⁸ Supporting HeARTS Meal Distributions, Used by permission, Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, April 2021.

The food distribution was grounded in the congregation’s strategic vision of Restoring Hope by ending food scarcity in Orlando. But this food drive was not funded within the church’s operating budget. Instead the entire project was funded through donations from individuals, partnerships with government and NGO’s, and other faith-based organizations, as well as the creation of a micro farm on property.⁹ Weekly congregation members and furloughed workers traveled the state to glean gardens, groves and farms to ensure there were boxes of the freshest produce available. People brought eggs from their own farms, and more than two hundred thousand dollars of donations were given by the congregation. Grocery stores donated dairy products or baked goods, as well as flowers and balloons as simple gifts joy.



What began to happen as a by-product of this opportunity was theme park workers who normally worked on the streets of Disney or Universal began to hold picnics in the church parking lot. Parking spaces near the meal line became the “green room” as people would enjoy the community being built through this ministry of mercy. No one ever expected that the ministry of Theater at St. Luke’s would become a ministry of mercy which would lead to authentic and natural opportunities of evangelism and

⁹ Supporting HeARTS Meal Distributions, Used by permission, Theater at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, April 2021.

invitation. Dozens of persons have become part of the larger congregation on a regular basis leading to a very unexpected partnership.

Clergy and staff knew Christmas 2020 was not going to be the same. No multiple Christmas concerts with a 100-member choir, orchestra, dancers, the occasional snow machine and more than a thousand in attendance. There would be no way to hold ten Christmas eve services over two nights, seating seventy-five hundred. However, there was still the ageless Story to tell, of the greatest gift of Incarnational love and presence made even more powerful by the Incarnational presence of Supporting HeARts, Grow-it-Forward Garden and assistance ministries.

Around September, St. Luke's staff decided to find an entirely new way to share the Story of Christmas. We knew it would be a drive through, life nativity, millions of Christmas lights event with music, but we had no other ideas beyond those initial thoughts. But a crew who regularly had lunch in our outdoor "green room" had begun to create a new company of improvisational actors. This group who had been the street performers on Disney's Main Street, had literally built the comic troupe of entertainment at Walk Disney world. They came to us with an idea of a drive through Christmas event and we knew we are onto something. Together St. Luke's staff a brand-new company of actors created the TwELF Days of Christmas, a two week light up, interactive event for the community. We lit the entire campus with a Christmas theme that shared the greatest gift the world has ever received, the gift of love in Jesus. Out of work actors were paid a

small stipend to help them through the holidays and worked alongside musicians, singers and more than 200 St. Luke's volunteers to welcome and entertain more than 5000 neighbors in our city.¹⁰

Each night donations were encouraged to support



COVID relief assistance and the Food Distribution. More than twenty thousand dollars was raised in seven days. Since the event, more than half of the guest actors began to participate in the worship and discipleship groups. This was not just a partnership with a secular acting troupe to have a fun event. It was an invitation to a group of actors with little church background to stand with St. Luke's as public theologians to share the story of the Incarnation. Partnering together in such a way, with members and non-members equally participating in sacred story telling was testimony to the the inclusive nature of the story of Christmas. Because of the collaboration on this event, an even larger invitation was made to St. Luke's from the Orlando theater community. This invitation would move the theater ministry beyond the relief and mercy ministries of financial and food assistance, into a ministry of justice for entertainers across Central Florida.

In response to the economic injustice faced by entertainment contract and gig works, Executive and Artistic Directors of Central Florida theaters began a larger conversation about supporting the entertainment community not only in a pandemic but

¹⁰ TwELF Days of Christmas Event, Used by permission Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, December 15, 2020.

year-round. Often theater companies can only receive grants and assistance for their company but not to be a resource for a larger community of people. 2020 proved our entertainment community needed a vehicle for theater companies to work together to create a safety net for struggling artists. The non-profit Broadway Cares launched in New York City during the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a way to offer financial, health services and other support service for anyone in need who held an actor's equity card. Orlando realized in 2020 that between Florida's yearly natural disasters, pandemics, and broken government systems working against the entertainment business, our theater and hospitality community needed a similar network of support.

Because of the reputations of both Theater at St. Luke's and our Director, Steve Mackinnon, we were invited to the table to be in conversation about what could be built. Monies were being raised to support those in need, but there was no program or process in place to distribute funds or provide sustainability to the larger community. When the "how" and "who" question were raised leaders of the theater community turned to St. Luke's UMC and Theater at St. Luke's. GOPAR is a growing, close-to-launch, non-profit being created to help artists, production employees and local theme park entertainment employees. Because those around the table knew the work of St. Luke's missions such as Shepherds Hope, the food distribution and the inclusive theology of our church, St. Luke's was invited to serve as the non-profit umbrella, using our mission volunteers as resource advocates to provide wrap around services as well as financial distributions. Our Minister of Worship and Arts continued to be a voice working to build GOPAR as an independent non-profit. More than fifteen St. Luke's partners were trained as advocates and spending ten or more hours per client walking with them on their journey toward

financial sustainability. Education resources and vocational training have happened in collaboration with area non-profit partners. By June 2021, GOPAR had raised more than one hundred thousand dollars and had distributed more than sixty thousand dollars for financial assistance. During the same month, GOPAR was contacted by local government leaders offering a grant of one million dollars to assist actors in continued economic recovery efforts. This grant would afford this fledgling non-profit staff, resources and long-term sustainability.

Connecting theater and the church allows countless ways to share values, reveal God's desire for relationship with humanity and opens the doors for people to use their gifts, and belong before believing. This becomes the evangelistic work of a theatrical theology of discipleship. The connection offers a safe, low-risk path for seekers to connect with a community of people, and possibly to one day connect with the larger congregation. It also allows congregation members a chance to become witnesses of God's hospitality and *chesed*, the loving kindness of God toward us that we show to others. But there is more.

The connection of theater and church allows all the actors the opportunity to become public theologians, expanding the public witness of the church to the community at large. Through the work of the productions heart transformation happens both in the cast and crew, as well as the audience who watches. This kind of public witness creates credibility and builds the social capital of the church within the context of its community. This happens by the productions and issues the ministry is willing to tackle, but also through the commitment to the company of actors, excellence of production and the to invest and lift up the community at large. This social capital affords the congregation a

trusted voice in the community to tackle systemic issues of oppression and injustice that threaten the heart of a city.

ACT 2: SCENE 5

THEATER AT ST. LUKE'S AS SOCIAL RESISTANCE

Ten years of ministry in the community, with clarity of focus on mission and vision has allowed Theater at St. Luke's to shift from an experiment of a show in a gym to a full-fledged community theater ministry of mercy, justice and social resistance in 2020. Theater at St. Luke's began with a bent toward social resistance from the outset. Shows were chosen for themes relevant to what was happening in society and to publicly express St. Luke's core values of inclusion. From Ragtime, Big River, and Driving Miss Daisy to a production of Footloose, Theater at St. Luke's not only produced quality theater, but showed St. Luke's was willing to tackle tough conversations around race, economics and exclusion while other churches in our area were silent. The purpose was to have people leave an excellent show and declare "*we can't believe that was a church!*"

For example, the show Footloose¹ is the story of a small-town pastor who uses the bible to restrict local teenagers from dancing or drinking as a means to control and protect. The community loved the production and were invited back to a large community



event and studies focused on conversations of the exclusivity often found in churches. St. Luke's leadership chose Footloose for the

¹ Footloose trailer, book by Dean Pitchford, music by Tom Snow. Used by permission of Theater at ST. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, 2019 production.

community conversation it would create. The production was also a way to address the possibly denomination schism around the issues of inclusivity and human sexuality. Knowing the denomination would be in the national news over the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, the idea was to use the themes of Footloose to both a study and sermon series on biblical interpretation. We wanted a chance to invite the community to understand a different way scripture could be interpreted beyond a literal, infallible and inerrant understanding. These conversations and worship services were a way to acknowledge harm done by the church to marginalized people because of race, sexual orientation, gender or economics. Conversations were held throughout the month to help LGBTQ+ individuals share their stories of harm in safe spaces, allowing others to listen, and change their understanding through relationship. Footloose is just one example of how focusing on vision and mission through intentional productions enables a congregation to participate in public theology. Theater productions dealing with issues of race, xenophobia, family dynamics, economic injustice, and classism allow the public witness of the church to focus on social resistance. By choosing shows that open dialogue about controversial social issues, St. Luke's has become a faith voice unafraid to show up in the public square and open difficult conversations.

Deliberate discussions were held regarding how the congregation and theater ministry could speak into a contentious election season of 2020. For a city with rising diversity in economics, race, age, orientation and culture, St. Luke's neighborhood tends to be a predominantly "red" political enclave within the larger I-4 "blue" political corridor of Central Florida. However, the political landscape of 2020 had decidedly become more divisive over the last four years of a Donald Trump presidency. Many of

St. Luke's traditional Republicans were divided between the party of Trump and the old Republican party. St. Luke's had both leaders who were involved with the Lincoln Project, and leaders in Central Florida's Democratic party. As with the rest of the country, in Central Florida, the role of the church in the political world had become even more confusing. Evangelical-right churches unabashedly promoted Trump's presidency as a gift from God to save America. But some of the top Evangelical leaders in our area, including one who had served on various presidential faith advisory teams, were now standing up in support of Biden. The split between clergy in our community was becoming fodder for the local papers. Many progressive or centrist pastors faced politically divided congregations in our area, including our own St. Luke's congregation. *How could the church already positioned to take on difficult topics, find a way to lift the focus off of party and pundits, and instead shed light on the issues and the communities whose lives and safety were at stake?* The goal for 2020 was to find a way to create community and congregation conversation and invite people to hear voices and information to change the narrative, and possibly perspectives from the individual to the communal. The hope was to centralize the gospel, specifically the sermon on the mount, as a way to help people recognize our responsibility and power to vote for the common good.

The original goal of this project through Theater at St. Luke's was public theology through social resistance. Before 2020 the plan did not include any work of mercy or work within the context of the larger theater community. However, COVID-19 created a different path of focus for Theater at St. Luke's. The mercy ministries of the Assistance

Fund, Meal Distribution, partnering for Christmas and GOPAR planted seeds in the community for us to take the next steps of social resistance.

Theater at St. Luke's chooses theatrical production by reading the social climate of both congregation and community. Leadership and production choices are made on a balance of when to push the gas on a social issue and when to ease up and create what we call, "breathing space" with a more lighthearted show. While a production of Mary Poppins gives an opportunity to share a public theology of grace in magical ways, it also allows the community to catch their breath before diving into deeper waters of social resistance and more controversial issues of justice. This balance of public theology and social resistance builds social capital of trust and influence. Social resistance cannot happen in a vacuum. This balance and rhythm has helped St. Luke's open hearts, change minds and create the momentum needed to affect systemic change.

Social resistance without relationship, trust or credibility is simply noise for the sake of noise. The power of St. Luke's social resistance theater built on a relationship and credibility of ongoing public theology of mercy and justice. Each previous act of public theology during COVID-19 allowed the theatrical project of social resistance to be heard by some of the most polarized political adversaries in congregation and community. The previous work of Theater at St. Luke's had created the social capital needed for people to listen to new challenges of voting and social issues with trust and empathy.

The original idea was to create a production using a theatrical device to break the fourth wall known as Alienation Theater. Created by German playwright Bertolt Brecht, alienation theater is a form of theater "based on the principle of using live performance as

a means of social and political commentary.”² Through digital images or graphics, video of 24 hours news cycle with current events of police brutality against people of color, and the current events of a presidential impeachment, the story would break the fourth wall and offer social commentary to the audience. This onslaught of acting, story and coinciding media forces the audience to suspend their ability to empathize with one character and thrusts them into their own present reality. This theatrical device moves the audience from passive spectator to the role of active spect-actor, connecting with the character on stage in a way that allows their story to offer critique on the reality happening outside the theater. This allows the dramatic moment to be directly placed into present day events to disrupt the spect-actor from mere observation and instead change their attitudes and reactions.

Alienation theater as a device was used in the 2020 Broadway revival of West Side Story. The famous, and formerly “sentimentalized” song “Officer Krupke” is a perfect example of Alienation Theater. The upbeat, catching tune is suddenly given new meaning with the use of a new aesthetic backdrop that disorients the audience out of old familiarity. A digital wall fills the entire backstage, displaying current, new cycle videos of young men and women of color being harassed and abused by law enforcement in the street, in the courtroom and in the walls of prisons. The footage is actual stories ripped from the headlines of present day. The use of digital footage of present reality is juxtaposed with familiar tune and lyrics so that suddenly these characters dancing and singing on stage from a “different world” become connected with young people in the

² What is Theater of Alienation? By Jessica Ellix, Wisegeek. Com. Accessed June 24, 2021. <https://www.wise-geek.com/what-is-theater-of-alienation.htm>

video footage. This alienates the audience from their sentimental thoughts of the song, and jars them into a new understanding and identification with the lyrics and their present reality. Consider for a moment seeing video of Trayvon Martin, the footage of Ahmad Arbery being hunted down by white supremacist, or the video of George Floyd pleading “I can’t breathe” with a blue knee on his neck as the boys on the street corner sing the lyrics: “*We ain’t no delinquents, we’re misunderstood, deep down inside us there is good.*”³ The audience is stunned into silence as the laughs that began with the familiar start of the song dissipate into muffled tears.

The theatrical device of alienation theater was also used by Jesus. The effect of alienation theater is what happens when Jesus, in Luke 10:25-37, pivots the legal question regarding the “definition of neighbor”(CEB) meant to entrap him, and answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. This dramatic storytelling pivots the listeners to a scenario where they are forced to see someone die on the road next to them and must their role as either the priest, Levite or God forbid, Samaritan. This device would have made those listening become the spect-actors in the Rabbi’s teaching of the law, forcing them to either indict themselves or gain a new perspective. Walter Bruggeman would possibly say this is the work of the prophet. Brueggemann writes “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception *ALTERNATIVE* to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁴ The original intent was to use this form of theater to approach the issues of the 2020 election cycle to

³ Bernstein, Leonard, Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, Sid Ramin, Irwin Kostal, Charlie Harmon, and David Israel. *West Side Story*. [New York]: Jalni Publications, 1994

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001

engage conversation and educate audiences to the current realities facing their neighbors, and consider casting a vote for the common good.

The original pre-COVID-19 plan was to use the Broadway show 1776⁵ The musical 1776, details the story of the constitution finally being ratified only by allowing the Southern states to continue with their use of slaves. The original production design was to use graphics and video footage of today's congress, current footage of racial injustice and police violence, along with color and gender blind cast for the founding fathers, and arrangements and choreography of the music set to a modern feel. Two reasons led to a shift in plans. First, someone on Broadway had a similar idea. The cast was working pre-COVID with an all-female, non-binary and transgender cast and certain production rights had already been restricted. Second, due to COVID-19 this production was unavailable for virtual streaming rights. This meant the production and project team had to completely pivot direction. We needed to design something to allow people to quickly connect with characters who would reflect the diversity of our Central Florida neighborhoods and share stories to move an audience from passive viewing to voters who recognize the power of their influence. A group of sixteen St. Lukers with interests and proficiencies in acting, writing, producing, politics and community resource backgrounds were brought together for a series of four meetings. This team began to identify major themes not only in the national election but local elections. After much reading, studying and deliberation, it was determined St Luke's would write an original, 4-5 episode show to be shared virtually in the month of October.

⁵ Edwards, Sherman, and Peter Stone. 1776: A Musical Play. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

THE POWER OF ONE PRODUCTION PROCESS

This project group was filled with lay people diverse in age, race, culture, and orientation representing theater, the nonprofit sector and political sector of Central Florida. They met for a solid month to create the vision of a public resistance theater project. Their work originally as a team was to read the script of 1776 but shifted to the work of choosing 2020 election themes, determine creative casting opportunities and wrap around conversation with community subject matter experts. The project group interviewed church members and community neighbors, researched both the national, state and local ballots and researched voters guides from across faith and political spectrums. It was important to choose themes which could offer the most education for our Central Florida community around differing ideologies. It was important to the group to not give a voice to local candidates running for election or re-election, and to stay as nonpartisan as possible. The idea was to let the gospel and in particular, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, to be the grounding of each issue tackled. The decision of the top four Central Florida social justice issues became: *homelessness and affordable housing, racism and the racial history of Orlando, immigration, veterans, and issues around human rights.*

But issues centered conversation was not the starting point. The starting point for a social resistance movement around the election of 2020 had to start with the copious amount of misinformation regarding mail-in-voting. It was the hope of the group that somehow, as non-partisan as possible, we could offer the best, most current, trusted information to prepare citizens to vote. The Power of One became the working title of this project of social resistance to help reinforce the idea that the power of one vote can

make a collective difference for all our neighbors. After each episode, there would be a conversation with subject matter experts to share information, educate and share personal stories of neighbors to break down barriers, listen and be able to put a face to each issue, and then allow questions from those watching.

CREATIVE PROCESS

Written by two St. Lukers, both of whom have become partners of St. Luke's Church through the theater ministry. They were both diverse in background, race, orientation and each offered a unique voice of those most marginalized due to the election of 2020. The characters to be used in each episode were important and the first work needed to be fleshed out. The hope was to create an opportunity to model dialogue, empathic listening, prophetic truth-telling and vulnerable sharing across divides commonly seen within our community. Each episode would feature the protagonist creating a relationship with people who were different from the lead. There would be a diverse cast across the spectrum of race, economics, gender, ideology, orientation, and culture in order to lift up and change the traditional narrative on themes of homelessness, racially different neighborhoods and race relations, immigration and veterans affairs.

The Protagonist: The team chose to concentrate on a white female college student who represented not only racial privilege but economic privilege as well. She would be a first time voter disillusioned with the process and the political rhetoric of the day. She has decided her vote doesn't matter and this election will not change anything. Due to COVID-19, she is taking classes from home and is clearly not happy about her circumstances. We wanted her to be ambivalent to her privilege, doubtful she can make a difference and ready to give up.

The main Supporting

Character: Mother of student is middle aged housewife who is who is a voter activist volunteering with a Ride to the Polls program. Frustrated with



her Gen-Z daughters' flippancy, this Gen X, has her daughter drive in her place to see the commitment of other voters to hopefully offer her daughter some perspective and maybe even help her understand the responsibility and power of what it means to vote.

Episode 1: the importance of voting; Housing Crisis: to break the stereotype of homelessness and offer the face of the fastest growing homeless population in



Central Florida, the main character would encounter a single mother living doubled up with relatives. Conversation would focus on tyranny of the moment facing those who have

lost employment; changing assumptions on homelessness; educate on the housing crisis of our city.⁶

Episode 2: Race and History of Central Florida: Young African American male who has returned to live in his childhood historically African American

⁶ The Power of One and Community Conversation Episode 1 and 2. Used by permission Theater at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, production October 2020.

neighborhood in Orlando. Conversation would focus on defining privilege, confronting bias and assumptions regarding racial differences and communities of color in our city.⁷

Episode 3: Veteran and their Families: A patriotic, Vietnam veteran who is in a wheelchair confronts assumptions about politics, generational bias and loss of hope in the American ideals. ⁸

Episode 4: Human rights and Immigration issues: LGBTQ+, first generation,



Latina American who is a public school teacher. Conversation would focus on assumptions about orientation, immigration and education, voting for the common good

beyond personal rights. ⁹

The final scene resolves the entire story as the main character drops off the last rider. She begins to drive away from the voting center and recalls her conversations. Viewers see her pull her car around and return to the building to park. She has decided to use her right to vote after all. In the final scene as our lead character is exiting the polling place, she is asked by a journalist



⁷ The Power of One: Episode 3, Used by permission 2021

⁸ The Power of One, Episode 4, Used by permission, 2021 ,

⁹ The Power of One, Episode 4, Used by Permission, 2021

who she voted for. The camera focus on her face as she begins to state, not the name of a candidate or part, but instead lists the names of each of her riders. She cast a vote for each of them rather than herself because they changed her perspective and her mind.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The production was created to make the audience consider their neighbors and the struggles they carried into the voting booth. The idea was to build empathy and move the audience into the role of spect-actors. In the journal Performance Matters, Susanna Shawyer explains the role of emancipated spect-actors based on the writings of feminist media scholars and the work of August Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed"¹⁰. Shawyer writes that the "activist art can get swept into 'cycles of resistance and consumption, meaning making and undoing, action and reaction' but the emancipated spect-actor takes advantage of the contradictory possibilities of this paradoxical space to resolve social justice values and individual freedoms."¹¹ Spect-actors who are released into new understandings and challenges of their present reality are more likely to take deliberate action to change the inequities they experience. This type of theater allows not only the individual, but the collective community to participate in social resistance upon leaving the theater experience.

The hope for this production by Theater at St. Luke's was to create a collective group of emancipated spect-actors. The goal was to shift from an individual narrative that a vote was about individual rights and liberties to a communal understanding of how

¹⁰ Susanna Shawyer, "Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Ranciere and the Twenty-first Century Spectator, *Performance Matters*, Volume 5, No.2 2019, Elon University, 3. <https://performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/article/view/159>

¹¹ Susanna Shawyer, "Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Ranciere and the Twenty-first Century Spectator, *Performance Matters*, Volume 5, No.2 2019, Elon University, 3. <https://performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/article/view/159>

voting as a collective
opportunity to reveal God's
Kin-dom values found in the
Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.
The Power of One production
was a chance for short cycles



of educating spectators about the plight of their neighbors in Central Florida and remind viewers of our interdependence as a community. The hope was to undo willful ignorance surrounding the real issues around homelessness, race, and immigration and struggles facing veterans and their families. The hope was to offer new insight on ballot issues and the neighbors these issues represent. The ultimate goal was to help people consider their community as they vote, putting faces of neighbors to amendments on a ballot. The project team decided to conclude each episode with facts and information from subject matter experts based on the theme of the evening. Panelists shared history, facts and how the effects of each theme on our Central Florida Community. The conversation helped voters understand how these themes would be present on the upcoming ballots for Florida and Orange County. To set the stage and build a weekly audience, the team created an introduction night as a preview of the conversation and episodes teased with a theatrical trailer.¹² The introduction evening was scripted in two parts. The first was a conversation with the writers about the original episodic material and their passion, the second included the Supervisor of Elections for Orange County and the Co-President of the

¹² The Power of One Trailer, used by Permission of Theater of St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2021.

League of Women voters who gave up-to-date information about how to use cast a vote in this unprecedented time.



Subsequent episodes were followed by similar panel conversations taking the source material and fleshing it out with education and challenges. Each conversation was created to help move people to action beyond the moment, not only in voting but getting involved through public service.

Introduction Night: Writers of Episode, Director of Theater Ministries; Orange County Supervisor of Elections; Chairperson of League of Women Voters Orange County.¹³

Episode 1: CEO of Community Hope Center; Executive Director of Missions at St. Luke's; Executive Director of Poverty Solutions Group.¹⁴



¹³ The Power of One. Community Conversation Introduction, used by permission, Theater at ST. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2020

¹⁴ The Power of One. Community Conversation Episode 1, used by permission, Theater at ST. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2020

Episode 2: UCF Professor and expert in the history of Orlando African



American; two African American pastors; one of the writers of *The Power of One*.¹⁵

Episode 3: Retired executive of Orlando Veterans affairs; Vietnam Veteran St. Luker; Iraq war veteran.¹⁶



Episode 4: Sister Ann Kendrick from Apopka Hope Community Center working with Migrant families; Desmond Meade, Executive

Director of Florida Rights Restoration Commission; Bishop Ken Carter of the Florida UMC.¹⁷

The final episode brought the entire project together with speakers who centered conversation on the power of a



¹⁵ The Power of One, Community Conversation , Episode 2. used by permission, Theater at ST. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2020

¹⁶ The Power of One, Community Conversation , Episode 3 used by permission, Theater at ST. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2020

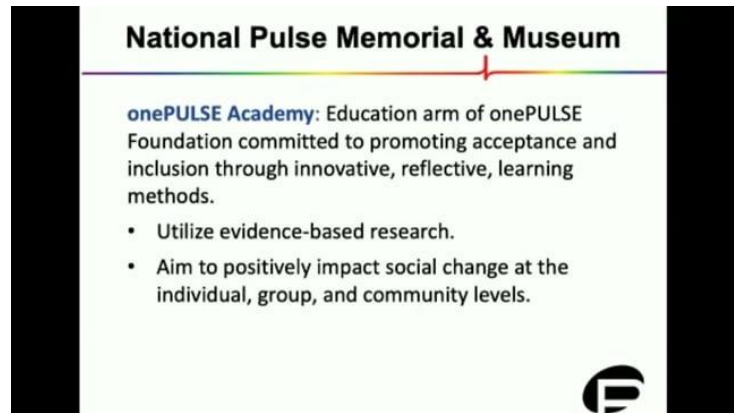
¹⁷ The Power of One, Community Conversation Episode 4, used by permission, Theater at ST. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, October 2020

person's vote to affect change for the good of others. A lively panel with a national renowned guest brought together the entire five episodes of drama in a no nonsense conversation intersecting theology, scripture, and politics. The panelists agreed regarding each person's civic responsibility to vote and were emphatic that a vote should be grounded in the theological command to love neighbor and care for the most vulnerable in a community. The notion that the politics of an individual should be separate from their faith was shattered by all of the panelists. Each panelist called out the historical church as a place who had turned a blind eye to racism and bigotry and too often ignored the Kin-dom call to serve the least of these with voice and vote. Desmond Meade and Sister Ann called those of us who claim Jesus to live out the love of God on behalf of all of God's beloved children through just acts and the power of our vote.

I cannot say this small act of social resistance changed the election of 2020. Our viewership per live episode averaged one hundred live viewers and the episodes have subsequently viewed more than one thousand times. But viewership was not the only goal of creating this theatrical act of resistance and change. Other impacts for our community resulted from this social resistance experiment.

First, these five episodes and subsequent conversations created dialogue and interest around issues of race, homelessness, and even veterans that were informative, and helped people to find a way to get involved in giving, volunteering and conversation not happening previously. Community connection between St. Luke's and local Orlando community leaders that had previously gone untapped and led to a community prayer

vigil for peace and resilience, invitations to panel discussions on race, Christian nationalism and faith and the LGBTQ+ community. The most recent public resistance was hosting with the onePULSE Foundation a night of dialogue about overcoming



barriers between LGBTQ community neighbors and faith communities.¹⁸

Second, tying in the production of *The Power of One* and conversation with worship, we created a worship series entitled *Love Matters More*. Holding these two events in tandem allowed us to lift people culturally, scripturally, and theological above partisan politics into a theological discourse of the power of community. We held up the history of the early church’s devotion toward the collective good as an example of making decisions for the collective community focused on God’s Kingdom. We may never know how those conversations changed an individual vote on the presidential ballot, but it gave our predominately white, upper-middle class congregation more insight into the effects of local races and legislation on their neighbors. *The Power of One* changed conversations in the church around the mission strategy of Restoring Hope. Mercy ministry conversations around food scarcity became justice conversations around solving food apartheid and affordable housing issues at a local and government level.

¹⁸ Mowatt, Dr. Earl, Dr. Joel Hunter, Rev Terri Steed Pierce and Rev. Jennifer Stiles Williams. “Overcoming Barriers between LGBTQ+ and the Church” Panel Discussion. St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, Orlando, Fl. June 9, 2021.

The Power of One changed the climate around the church. People found new civil and grace-filled ways to talk with those they differed from politically. #*Lovemattersmore*, the tag line for both The Power of One conversations and sermon series, became a trend on social media platforms as St. Lukers neared the day of election. We were able to track some difficult social media interactions regarding race and economics and watch St. Lukers step up into inviting deeper conversation either off social media or engaging in de-escalation of heated arguments to civil discourse about facts, citing *Love Matters More*. Conversation happened around race, sexual orientation and even patriotism happened because of each episode, allowing people to practice empathetic listening and consider new perspectives. People who would have never been in smaller groups together, suddenly could share their stories and listen with open hearts. These conversations offered St. Lukers chances to perform what was being “rehearsed” in worship and practicing in study. By having the tools to stay in difficult conversations, St. Lukers began to understand the challenges we had been expressing in worship and discipleship studies.

The Power of One helped place a stake in the ground for how the larger community saw St. Luke’s. The church has always been a large, progressive church but this helped push this narrative into the public square of Central Florida. The episodes and conversations were an effective vehicle for evangelism. The marketing before and after each episode allowed St. Luke’s an opportunity to claim Christ’s call to affect change and tackle social justice issues without compromise. This drew community people who had been waiting for a church to stand for some of these social issues. In turn, it also encouraged people not committed to our vision, mission and understanding of scripture to

find another place of worship. I'm not sure the loss and gain ever became a net zero sum, but losing people not committed to vision, mission and values was just as critical to the ongoing work of the church as gaining new people.

If public theology is the public witness and interpretation of God's theo-dramatic Story of love and justice, social resistance is the act of publicly resisting a culture of injustice and brokenness to share a vision of God's Kin-dom of beloved community and justice. Social resistance should help a church express what it stands for and what it stands against. It draws a line in the sand for those seeking to attend church as a social club, and often causes those nominally committed to vision and mission to decide to either lean in or find a place of worship and community that better aligns with their desires. Theater as social resistance allowed those engaged a low risk chance to see St. Luke's beliefs and core values in action. The Power of One was an avenue for those who felt marginalized from other churches or disagreed with a political agenda of exclusion, to find in St. Luke's' a safe space working toward full inclusion and justice for all.

After The Power of One episodes, we noticed an uptick in our online worship numbers and between the premiere episode and the new year one hundred fifty new partners joined in membership. Some new partners found the church through our online presence and expressions of resistance following the murder of George Floyd. Some found us through friends who shared St. Luke's work with Supporting HeARTS, GOPAR. Some found St. Luke's through our statements of diversity and equity and because of The Power of One episodes. Each of these acts of public theology, byproducts of the connection between theater and the ministries of the St. Luke's, helped people find their new church home. One new partner expressed it was hard to believe an inclusive,

justice-oriented church existed because the religion of her youth had told her such beliefs were sinful. Another new couple said it was the first church they had found who balanced social justice and inclusion with a theology grounded in scripture. They had found churches who either focused only on social justice OR focused only on discipleship, one or the other, but never both. St. Luke's, sharing a theatrical theology and public witness of mercy and resistance was the balance they had been looking for in a spiritual home.

CONCLUSION

Fallen from grace, evangelical pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek mega church once said something that changed my calling of ministry. “The local church is the hope of the world.”¹ I have always believed this statement and used it as a guide for how I lead the church. I have watched the church participate in attractional ministry, vibrant worship, and incredible mission work. I knew eleven years ago it would be important for St. Luke’s future to become laser focused on vision, mission, and values in order to continue to grow in relevance and vitality. Our neighbors are the entertainment and hospitality community. The Spirit led us to embrace the reality that our mission to *Awaken Disciples and Reveal God’s Kin-dom* must create opportunities to reach, embrace and allow this community to belong before they believed. The best way to connect was to offer an authentic invitation for them to share their gifts to help us tell God’s Story.

In 2020 I watched God start producing the second act of St. Luke’s purpose through the unfolding work of theater. During a global pandemic Theater at St. Luke’s has indeed been the hope of our local community. We have allowed the theatrical theology of God’s great theo-drama to help us meet people, engage them, invite them to be co-creators in producing God’s Story of love on a weekly basis in worship. We have fed thousands, supported hundreds financially, changed the way people converse and possibly, even changed their vote. None of this would have happened without a clear

¹ Patrick Mabilog, “3 Reasons the Local Church is the Hope of the World” *Christianity Today*, November 23, 2016, accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/3-reasons-why-the-church-is-the-hope-of-the-world/101606.htm>

understanding of our values, mission and the surrounding community God had called us to reach.

While these avenues of ministry most often connect with definitions of public theology as resistance and justice work, I believe the work of public theology is not only about social change but evangelism. Theater at St. Luke's, and the community it has created, has allowed marginalized communities to feel the church is an extension of their family. While many will never join in partnership or even come regularly to worship, participating in Theater at St. Luke's has shaped their faith and understanding of how they are a part of God's greater drama. Without ever joining a small group, those in our theater ministry have participated in discipleship.

This connection of theater and the church is reciprocal in nature. It not only benefits and shapes those who are the actors, but those who simply participate as spectators, and support the ministry from the pews. For the larger congregation who will never take their place on St. Luke's stage, they have found through worship and spiritual formation that they too have a role to play in God's great theo-drama. They have learned through a theatrical theology their role as public theologians in the community. They no longer rely on the "preacher" to articulate vision, mission, values, and theology, but express each of these in the scripts they play out in the larger world.

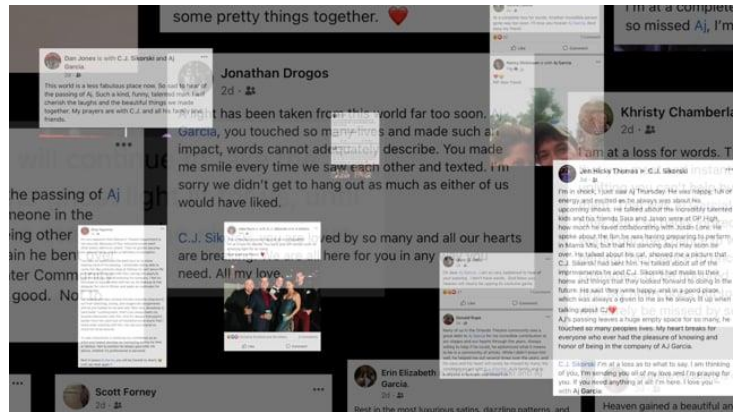
I always say ministry has been solidified in a congregation when you have the opportunity to walk with people through their most intimate moments, marriage, baptisms and death. Over the last year, Theater at St. Luke's has brought new members to the church, both those who perform and those who simply watch. It has been an avenue for many who felt harmed by religion to reconnect again with God and church. This

connection allowed people to invite the church to be a part of their lives in meaningful ways.

This year we were afforded the privilege of performing the first post-vaccine wedding for a couple who joined our theater ministry over the last five years. Filled with entertainment people from the community, it was a chance to share in a liturgy of love and celebration. Theater at St. Luke's created a safe space for people to seek counsel and support during this traumatic season of grief and upheaval. We baptized adults and new babies of families who were part of the entertainment community. Most profoundly, Theater at St. Luke's allowed us the privilege of being there spiritually when a member of our community lost his partner tragically. These two men had been a part of our ministry since Ragtime, as actors, dancers, costumers, and designers. The one who passed created the most beautiful costumes inclusive of all shapes and sizes for all the theaters in town. He lived out our core values through his design, artistry, and care for each actor. We honored him by offering to create a hybrid online and in-person memorial service attended by a theater community of thousands from around the nation. Using the arc of a play, we celebrated his life and legacy. Act I was his eulogy; Act II spoke of Legacy as the theological understanding of resurrection.

This worship service was, for me, the real reason God gave St. Luke's the vision to reach our entertainment community through a theater ministry. In this moment the church had a chance to offer a theology of grace, love, and healing to people most harmed by religion. Midway through the service we paused for a spiritual "intermission". This was a moment of spiritual teaching for a grieving audience not familiar with church. It became a chance to reframe the difficult and unhelpful cliches people often share about

God in moments of tragedy. We spoke in words and ideas familiar to an entertainment audience. We preached of a Divine Playwright who would never cause this person's death or willingly grieve us. We spoke of a Divine Spirit/Director who never left



him, and now embraced him in resurrection. We were able to speak against the false narrative of sexual orientation holding any exemption to his embrace in God's Kin-dom.² The amount of social media attention after the funeral was overwhelming. The public witness of strangers and friends of St. Luke's again became a place of public theology, as the way God and God's love were expressed opened people's hearts. People publicly shared how St. Luke's was a church that could bring them back to church and the God



they had longed to know all of their lives. New people began to attend worship online and in person, stating the funeral helped them feel safe visiting St. Luke's. Months later, CJ,

who has never attended a worship service, but has been a part of every stage production over the last nine years, gave his testimony for the congregation. He shared what his

² AJ Garcia Memorial Service, St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando, Florida, Used by Permission from C.J. Sikorski

connection with Theater at St. Luke's has meant to him and described his how St. Luke's has shaped his understanding of community.³ He spoke about a church who showed up, during the weekend of The Pulse Tragedy, and during his personal journey of grief. St. Luke's changed his understanding of church. These men would have never known us if not for an audition announcement on social media for a church production of Ragtime. If St. Luke's is never able to produce another show, having this one person experience a redefinition of church and faith makes all the work worth every second.

None of these life changing connections would have happened if we had built a ministry of theater and arts simply to allow members to have fun putting on shows. None of these transformative opportunities of evangelism, mercy, justice, and witness would have happened if the entire church had not embraced their role in this ministry as evangelists and theologians who produce theater, and if they had not seen that theater and drama were ways of expanding their relationship and understanding of God and the Sacred Story of love. Allowing theater to be grounded in the vision, mission, and strategy of the church to *Awaken Disciples to Reveal the Kingdom* allows those marginalized, distant from the church or a relationship with God, find their way into God's Story and the cast of characters known as St. Luke's. The connection of theater and the church as a theatrical theology of discipleship, public theology and social resistance can be a framework for the church to broaden its reach and find its public voice in its community. The connection of theater and church is an intersection of sacred and secular, where the

³ C.J. Sikorski Testimony on Community, Used by permission of St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Orlando Florida, Worship June 13, 2021, <https://www.st.lukes.org/online/>

church must relinquish control to the Divine at work writing a sacred Story in others. The connection of theater to the body of Christ is a holy opportunity for the church to embrace the mysterious theo-drama of God. This connection can open God's stage to any beloved performer ready to participate in the greatest love Story ever told, through worship, discipleship, on the stage and in the public square. The connection of theater and the church is an invitation to acknowledge how God and God's people are continuing the work began in Genesis; participating still in an improvisational exchange of holy creation to change hearts, change communities and reveal the Kin-dom of God's love, justice, and beauty. The connection of theater and the church encourages God's unique cast of characters to assume their role with the Divine Protagonist, go into life and take God's stage to write a living Story of love that changes the world.

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