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# Designing a Drama-Based Arts Ministry for the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ

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## ABSTRACT

The North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ (“Treadaway”) is a small, predominantly African American congregation located in Abilene, Texas, home of Abilene Christian University (“ACU”) and several other institutions of higher learning. Considering ACU’s Church of Christ heritage and continued affiliation with the Churches of Christ, it is no surprise that Treadaway has often served as a “home away from home” congregation for ACU students and recent graduates who choose to remain in the city. The level of integration of the students from ACU and other local colleges into the life and ministry of Treadaway has varied greatly over the years. The project described in this thesis was designed to create a drama-based arts ministry plan for Treadaway as one avenue to enhance spiritual development and congregational involvement among college students and other young adults.

A seven-member ministry design team and I met for seven sessions. During the first five sessions, we reviewed the preliminary congregational research for the project, explored the history of drama and the church, reflected on the value of drama in a congregational setting, and discussed Treadaway’s unique context related to the use of drama in ministry. In the sixth session, we drafted a drama-based arts ministry design plan to present to the congregational leadership for implementation consideration. During the seventh session, which included an extended time of devotion, we collectively finalized the plan. I also conducted a group interview regarding the participants’ experiences with the intervention and their views on its success.

The intervention resulted in a written drama-based arts ministry plan that details the overall goals of the proposal; the need for the ministry; the timetable and scope of the ministry; the budget and potential support sources; the key personnel; the first-year ministry goals; and the next steps. Following the intervention, the ministry design team presented the plan to the congregational leaders, who gave the plan their full approval and authorized a presentation to the congregation. The ministry team presented the plan to the congregation and received immediate buy-in. Implementation of the plan was pending at the completion of this paper.

Designing a Drama-Based Arts Ministry for the  
North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology  
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Curtis Alexander King

December 2023

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Curtis King, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Doctor of Ministry



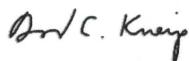
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Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

Date

October 26, 2023

Thesis Committee



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Dr. David Kneip, Chair



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Dr. Steven Moore



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Wes Crawford (Oct 26, 2023 16:31 CDT)

Dr. Wes Crawford

To

Dr. Jerry Taylor and the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ

James and Earline King

Brent and Jessie  
James and Rosaundra  
Malcom and Patricia  
Victor and Josephine  
Emanuel and Carolyn  
& *Progeny*

The  
King | Butler | Williams | Spells  
Families  
*Past, Present, Future*

Dr. and Mrs. Andrew J. Hairston

Robert Nealy | Sidney Saxton

*Ubuntu*

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*I am grateful to everyone who has played any role in my academic journey – far too many people to fit on these pages. I have named some, but the list is not exhaustive! To all who know that your name would have fit well in the space above, please charge it to my head (along with the limited space) and not to my heart. I still say, “Thank you!”*



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents the outcomes of a ministry intervention project aimed at enhancing spiritual development and congregational involvement among college students and other young adults at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ,<sup>1</sup> located in Abilene, Texas. Recognizing the collaborative nature and the service potential of the arts in ministry, the goal of the intervention was to generate a drama-based arts ministry plan, suitable to present to the congregational leaders for implementation consideration.

Chapter 1 outlines the ministry context, the problem to be addressed by the intervention, and the purpose of the intervention. The chapter also makes note of basic assumptions, key definitions, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 2 discusses the conceptual framework of the project, and Chapter 3 details the research methodology, inclusive of intervention session descriptions and the evaluation process. Chapter 4 provides the findings and the results of the data analysis. Chapter 5 completes the thesis with conclusions and implications of the study.

#### **Ministry Context**

The North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ is a predominantly African American congregation that was established in Abilene, Texas, in the 1930s by the

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1. Hereafter referred to as “Treadaway” and “North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ” interchangeably.

prominent African American evangelist and church planter Marshall Keeble.<sup>2</sup> Keeble's work was chiefly financed by white church leaders who wanted to see African Americans become members of the Church of Christ but also wanted to maintain racial segregation.<sup>3</sup> Along those lines, the start of Treadaway was initiated by leaders of the then all-white College Church of Christ (now University Church of Christ), also in Abilene. This coincided with the era when Treadaway Boulevard, on which the congregation is located, was near the eastern edge of the geographic boundary, set by law and tradition, for African Americans and Hispanics to live and operate businesses, including churches, within the city of Abilene. For decades, Treadaway was the only Church of Christ congregation in Abilene that allowed attendance by African Americans, including African American visitors to the city. Until 1979, Treadaway remained the only predominantly African American Church of Christ in Abilene. At times, the church experienced memberships of over 200 with many of the members living within walking distance.<sup>4</sup>

According to an internal church document, more than forty men have served as ministers for the congregation. That number includes several students who were attending Abilene Christian University<sup>5</sup> at the time of their service and other men who were noted in the document as interim ministers. The current minister's involvement with the congregation marks a return to the Treadaway pulpit. He began his initial tenure soon after his arrival in Abilene to teach at ACU in 2003. He served as the Treadaway minister

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2. Edward J. Robinson, *Show Us How You Do It: Marshall Keeble and the Rise of Black Churches of Christ in the United States, 1914–1968* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 182.

3. Robinson, *Show Us*, 3-4.

4. Jimmy James, interview by author, Abilene, TX, December 20, 2017.

5. Hereafter referred to as "ACU" and "Abilene Christian University" interchangeably.

until 2005. He returned to Treadaway in the fall of 2015. Several men, without formal titles, lead the congregation and provide oversight of both spiritual and operational matters.

Prior to the current minister's return, approximately thirty people attended Sunday morning worship services on a regular basis. Since his return, attendance has fluctuated widely from week to week and has been as high as sixty people on a given Sunday. The fluctuation and noted increase of attendees was fueled, at least in part, by the presence of college students, mainly from ACU, during fall and spring academic semesters. The congregation is nearly 100 percent African American. The term *adherents* will be utilized in lieu of *members* for the purposes of this paper. *Adherents* are individuals who have formalized their membership through baptism or transferring membership from another congregation and individuals who attend on a regular basis but have not formalized their membership through baptism or membership transfer.

At Treadaway's most populous times, "two congregations" that divide along a wide generation gap have peacefully co-existed. Young adults (including college students) and senior citizens have been the two demographic groups with the highest representation. Via both casual conversations and the formal research process (interviews and a focus group), individuals within each of the two predominant demographic groups expressed sentiments that revealed a difference in perspectives on corporate worship, with the older adherents displaying a conservative view of church life and the younger people taking a more progressive view. In the Treadaway context, *conservative* is used to describe strict adherence to traditional Church of Christ doctrines and norms that call for the absence of expressive movement, instrumental music, and female leadership during corporate worship. In this context, *progressive* refers to people who express openness to

expressive movement, instrumental music, and female leadership during worship, though they do not insist on any changes to continue their attendance. The above is not stated to imply that no overlap exists between the two groups but instead to acknowledge a few notable distinctions.

On Sundays, the morning worship service begins at 10:30 a.m., wherein the interim minister consistently delivers dynamic lessons of approximately forty minutes in length. On some Sundays, the associate minister or a male college student delivers the sermon. On each first Sunday, the congregation serves a fellowship meal after morning worship. Sunday evening services, which the congregation recently discontinued, were often designated as a time for young preachers, both in and out of college, to gain pulpit experience by preaching sermons of approximately twenty minutes. The song leader chooses a mixture of upbeat songs and slow-paced selections for all worship assemblies. On Wednesday evenings, the church holds a fellowship meal from 6:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. for everyone. Bible class begins at 6:30 p.m.

The corporate life of the church revolves chiefly around fulfilling the congregation's Sunday and Wednesday assembly rituals. In addition to the already noted activities, Treadaway provides a ladies' Bible class one Sunday a month. Several of the adult females also attend Ladies' Day events at other Church of Christ congregations. Additional activities have included backyard cookouts at different adherents' homes, a back-to-school cookout at the church, a fall festival for the youth, and occasional fellowship gatherings for college students and other young adults. Several church leaders consistently visit adherents who are not able to attend church assemblies due to illnesses or disabilities. Treadaway continues its clothes closet, offering free clothing for persons in need.



Other events and programming outside of the ongoing activities of the congregation have also occurred. Several years ago, a summer wellness camp for youth (Summer Blaze), started by one of the young adults, was based at the church, giving several individuals an opportunity to express their gifts and talents related to teaching and coaching youth athletic activities. The wellness camp ran for four weeks with a fun week added to close out the program. Additionally, the camp organizers conducted a Summer Blaze car wash and fun day.

During the project discussed in this paper, I conducted a congregational appreciative inquiry in accordance with Cameron Harder's asset mapping instructions.<sup>6</sup> The exercise, completed via three sessions to accommodate a wide range of schedules, revealed a wealth of resources lying dormant in the congregation. Participants in the sessions fully engaged and expressed readiness for the next steps to actualize the possible projects revealed by the asset mapping. The asset mapping activity indicated a gap between the current involvement among members and what is possible with the right engagement vehicles. With the congregation's heavy emphasis on worship assemblies and fellowship gatherings, many resources and talents available through the adherents to enhance both the congregation and the surrounding community remain untapped and underutilized. Potential projects and programming that emerged included congregation-wide spiritual retreats, a reentry program for persons leaving prison, and a resource center operating at strategic times during the day to serve the community.

Forty-two percent of the participants were willing to donate time to assist the church with the projects mentioned above and/or other congregational activities and

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6. Cameron Harder, *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches to Building Community Together* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2013), 124–27.

programs that may develop. When it came to things that participants said they were good at, 18 percent mentioned some variation of organizational skills and problem-solving, while 36 percent noted strong relational skills. Regarding things done for fun, answers included such things as photography, leading painting classes, sports, and teaching. Roughly 45 percent of the participants included artistic activities like singing, dancing, acting, and writing.

College students and young adults (five females and four males) participated in a focus group as part of researching the Treadaway ministry context for this project. One of the most revealing portions of the discussion was triggered by the question “Do you feel that college students and young adults are valued at Treadaway?” One of the male college students gave the first answer, sharing how he felt that the college students were valued and mentioned how he has always been encouraged to pray or to read Scripture during worship services. He also noted an opportunity afforded him and his sister to lead conversations about the generation gap at the church. One of the female college students responded next. She stated, “I think it’s relative. Like for me as a female, no, I do not feel as if I am as valuable as...”, and she named male students who were present. Immediately the other females confirmed her statement, noting that there were no voices being heard from the women in the church.

The conversation turned to the observation that a huge generation gap exists, with a clear divide between the elderly and the college students. It became the consensus of the participants that the older adherents are holding on to traditions, whereas the younger people would not mind women taking more active leadership roles, both in and out of worship. Respondents summarized that a certain amount of appreciation for the college

students is present, but when separated out, the Treadaway experience is vastly different for young men versus young women, with the women feeling less valued.

During the focus group, the presence of several adherents with expertise and experience in the dramatic arts within the congregation prompted questions to gauge interest in the performing arts as a means of direct involvement in church life. The participants were asked, “Would you be interested in attending movies and/or live theatre with the intention of discussing the issues that they raise?” and “Would you be interested in live productions in the church context? Would you be willing to participate?” The participants enthusiastically gave their full support to attend and discuss live theatre and movies, and they expressed an immediate desire to not only have live productions in the church context but to also perform in them.

Considering the amount of interest in the performing arts and similar activities, both from the focus group and the asset mapping exercise, a drama-based arts ministry offers an immediate opportunity for expanding participation among college students and other young adults in the life of the church. Such a ministry would create the possibility of better utilizing the giftedness of that group of adherents. Some adherents have been trained in the dramatic arts and others have extensive experience with church and/or school productions. Not all adherents will want to act, sing, dance, or otherwise perform, but theatre itself is an act of community where technical assistants and audiences are important parts of the process as well. Additionally, a drama-based arts ministry can support aspects of other potential programs and ministries that emerged during the asset mapping exercises.

In both research efforts, the need to address current issues and concerns resonated most with college-aged adherents. A drama-based arts ministry is one avenue for college

students and other young adults to embody and explore the issues they wish to talk about. A drama-based arts ministry would also give them a chance to increase their empathy for others, to experience personal growth, and to instruct and exhort other adherents and guests. Another benefit of a drama-based arts ministry is that the inclusive and egalitarian nature of the arts can be one way that female adherents will be able to find consistent space to exercise their voices and to express their gifts as a part of the life of the congregation.

A drama-based arts ministry will not fully address all the concerns and issues raised during the research process. However, it will serve as a starting point to grow the involvement and engagement levels of a wide variety of the adherents, inclusive of, but not limited to, college students and other young adults.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem of this project is the lack of opportunities for college students and other young adults to be involved in the life and ministry at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ. Treadaway attracts individuals with a wide range of abilities, education levels, and experiences. The current structure most effectively supports the expression of ministerial gifts among males who can preach, teach, lead songs, read Scripture, and pray publicly. Additionally, opportunities to show hospitality at food-centered activities are available at varying levels to both males and females. Through a focus group and asset mapping exercise, a wide range of interests and abilities were revealed that are not being taken advantage of through ongoing ministry opportunities. While female adherents experience a higher level of untapped potential than male adherents at the congregation, the challenge is shared by both sexes among college students and other young adults in a context that focuses heavily on participation

in corporate Sunday worship services and fellowship settings as the major forms of ministerial expression.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to design a drama-based arts ministry for the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ as one avenue to enhance spiritual development and congregational involvement among college students and other young adult adherents. Enhanced congregational involvement would entail an increase in available activities of potential interest to the targeted demographic, followed by an increase in participation. The creation of a drama-based arts ministry would expand the opportunities for adherents to utilize gifts in writing, acting, directing, singing, visual arts, technical support, and instruction that culminate in artistic presentations to serve other members of the church and surrounding communities. The intervention, which included opportunities for the spiritual formation of its participants, was a series of seven meetings to move from discussion of the background, history, and theological considerations of drama as a means of ministry to the completion of a written plan for a drama-based ministry to present to congregational leaders.

### **Assumptions, Definitions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The basic assumptions of the project included the idea that the proximity to Abilene Christian University, Hardin-Simmons University, and McMurry University, along with dynamic preaching, would continue to attract college students and other young adult adherents, primarily African American students from ACU. Additionally, it is assumed that the congregation will continue to utilize all-male leadership during worship services. This provides some opportunities for ministry engagement for young

men who wish to engage in the public reading of Scriptures and leading congregational prayers. However, it limits visible public ministry engagement for young women.<sup>7</sup>

The term *drama-based arts ministry* entails live performances, inclusive of plays, skits, and special programs, which reflect and promote Christian concepts. The term also embraces singing and the visual arts. It does not entail dramatic presentations during the worship services. The initial phase of the drama-based arts ministry will target college students and other young adult adherents as core participants, with all ages welcome to be involved. The term *adherents* allows for the participation of individuals who attend Sunday and/or Wednesday services but have not formally placed membership through baptism or membership placement. This project is delimited to the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas.

The project was completed with finite resources and volunteers from within the Treadaway congregation. Because of already existing relationships, some participants may have exhibited the Hawthorne Effect in their answers and actions, possibly reducing the dependability of the research.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Regarding worship assemblies, the congregation operates with a perspective closely aligned with one espoused by Everett Ferguson, reflective of a literal and broadly applicable interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34 NRSV and 1 Tim 2:11–13 NRSV, calling for women to “keep silent in the church.” Ferguson further maintains that church assemblies are to reflect “God’s hierarchical order of creation,” with designated roles for men that do not accommodate female leadership. The ideology is not strictly applied to programs outside of the worship gatherings for the Treadaway congregation. Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 341–44.

8. The Hawthorne Effect is a theory that questions research dependability in cases when subjects know that they are being studied. Adherents’ desire for the minister conducting the project to do well in their graduate class may skew their actions in hopes that the minister will receive an A for his or her grade. Alternately, the participants may get so engrossed with the “workings of the project” that they give insufficient attention to project design features such as thorough note taking. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 82.

The amount of impact that a drama-based arts ministry will have on the spiritual development and congregational involvement of college students and other young adults is subject to question since not all college students and other young adults will have an affinity for a drama-based arts ministry. Thus, a drama-based arts ministry will not appeal to all college students and other young adults. Additionally, the implementation of the ministry will potentially be impacted by the restraints that come with competing time commitments of college students' schedules. Some college students may be interested but determine that their time constraints are not compatible with participating in a drama-based arts ministry at a local church. A drama-based arts ministry will, therefore, not enhance or provide an opportunity to enhance involvement for all persons in the target demographic.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three theological foundations and a historical review of drama and the church served collectively as the conceptual framework for the current project. The theological foundations were 1) the church as the whole people of God; 2) participation in the life and ministry of the church; and 3) the incarnation: the presence of God among his people. The history of drama and the church is examined through its relationship to expressions of the incarnation of Christ and other biblical teachings.

#### **The Church as the Whole People of God**

##### Expanding the Borders of the People of God

Since the inception of the church, diversity among believers has been one of its hallmarks. Luke wrote of the Jews gathered for the first Pentecost following Christ's resurrection, "now there were in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." He noted that the visitors from Rome included "both Jews and converts to Judaism" (Acts 2:5, 10–11 NIV). It was from this very diverse group of Jews and proselytes that the first converts to what would become known as Christianity emerged.

In the days that followed Pentecost, "they [the believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.... All the believers were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:42, 44 NIV). However, it did not take long before this unity was tested by ethnic favoritism. In Acts 6, "the Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being



overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1 NIV). While the apostles quickly resolved the issue, this event foreshadowed the many points of diversity and the often-difficult task of establishing and maintaining unity within the church as it expanded in diversity.

At the time of the dispute over service to the widows, even with the ethnic distinctions, all Christians were Jews, whether by birth or proselytization. Although they may have not been clear about all of what being a Christian meant, they were still able to identify all believers as being a part of the “people of God,” or more precisely “people of the Lord your God,” as declared by Moses and the Levitical priests to all Israel (Deut 27:9 NIV). With the first Christian conversion of a Gentile, a Roman soldier named Cornelius, along with his household, came the challenge of Jews and Gentiles to find a way to now collectively be the people of God in this new religion (Acts 10:1–11:18 NIV).

Biblical writers address the newly prescribed relationship for believers of Jewish and Gentile heritage, along with other points of diversity, on more than one occasion. The writer of Ephesians declares:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph 2:19–22 NIV)

To the Galatians who were tempted to insist on exercising Jewish traditions within the Christian faith, Paul wrote:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and

female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26–29 NIV)

Although it was not easy, the unity of the church was paramount. It was the gospel of Christ that was the unifying factor for both Jew and Gentile (Greeks) as it afforded salvation to all who believed (Rom 1:16 NIV). When Peter distanced himself from the Gentiles in Antioch upon the arrival of other Jews, Paul rebuked him, declaring that Peter was “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.” Ultimately, Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter became the apostle to the Jews. Even so, Paul made it clear that all believers were considered “one in Christ Jesus” regardless of ethnicity (Gal 3:28 NIV). They were all the people of God through their faith in Jesus Christ.

Although there were deeper levels of diversity than Jew and Gentile, that was a leading focus of reconciliation and the effort to become one body during the first century. Ruth Duck reminds us that “for Paul, that [reconciliation] meant breaking down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>1</sup> Regarding reconciliation today, at least on the macro level, “in the North American context, it means bringing together people of many races, religions, and cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the categories that Duck points out is religion. Although the Catholic and Protestant churches exist peacefully alongside one another in modern times, the sense of “us and them” has persisted over the years. Vatican II, held in 1964, received much attention due to the notable shift of the Catholic Church to decisively expand its interpretation of the “People of God” to describe the Catholic Church and others in

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1. Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), Kindle edition, 256.

2. Duck, *Worship*, 256.

proximity to them, alongside their long-held imagery of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. Nearly forty years following Vatican II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, reflected heavily on the implications of Vatican II in relation to recognizing who comprises the People of God. The Catholic church's historical use of the image of the church as the "mystical body of Christ" meant that a person was either a member or not; "there are no other possibilities." For Ratzinger, the term *People of God* indicated a much more ecumenical approach to understanding a broader sense of humankind's relationship to God.

Ratzinger highlighted the betterment of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants that resulted from the Catholic Church's minimizing the emphasis on the body metaphor and moving toward the idea of the People of God. This action decreased the complaint of Protestants that the Catholic Church aligned itself with being the body of Christ in such a way that to criticize the Catholic Church was synonymous with criticizing Christ. Through the lens of the People of God, the Catholic Church, like all churches, can be recognized as "a Church of sinners, ever in need of purification and renewal, ever needing to become Church."<sup>3</sup>

The Catholic Church's recent embrace of the term *People of God* still centers itself as "the Church," but now recognizes non-Catholic Christians as being in communion with the Church and non-Christians as being "ordered" to the Church, thus embracing on some level all of God's people.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, January 23, 2002, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ecclesiology-of-vatican-ii-2069>.

4. Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II."

In light of the Catholic Church's historical view and reputation of holding that parishioners' only way to God is through ordained Catholic priests, one of the chief contributions Ratzinger made to the discussion of the people of God was the recognition that in using the phrase, Vatican II recognized the "vertical relationship" that exists between God and the people. This is not meant to be used in contrast to the ministers' roles, but to allow for complementary ideas, wherein ministers maintain their positions, while acknowledging that all believers have a relationship, a connection, a link directly to God as well.<sup>5</sup> This opens the space for individuals to better utilize the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit in the service of the church.

As alluded to above, Vatican II pressed the Catholic Church toward a more pronounced ecumenical posture toward Protestant churches. Beyond this specific broad move, there is an international, interdenominational ecumenical movement with roots back to the mid-nineteenth century and anchored deeply in the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. As the movement has developed over the years, it has come to the point that it can be accurately described in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* as follows:

Ecumenism is now embedded in the lives of the churches: common confession, witness, and (to a lesser extent) worship are increasingly the norm rather than the exception. Ecumenism now includes the people of God in all their diversity: ecumenical structures seek to include persons from a variety of confessional, cultural, social, and gender identities. To be sure, other churches are still to enter this ecumenical space; but evangelicals, Pentecostals, and independents are increasingly involved in the search for a credible common Christian confession, witness, and service.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II."

6. Ola Tjørhom, "The Early Stages: Pre-1910," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (New York: Oxford Academic, 2021), <https://doi-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600847.013.1>.

## Harmony among the Generations

The North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ's chief categories of demographic diversity are age and gender. Additionally, the presence of local adherents whose permanent, primary residences are in the Abilene area can be contrasted with the presence of the more transient college student population. These dynamics, if left to their natural progressions, will lead to a continuation of Treadaway's existence as "two congregations" sharing space. Those dynamics, unattended to, can also fuel the idea that the located adherents are "the church" and the college students are extended visitors, a situation that is antithetical to the idea of the church as the whole people of God.

One way to counter the natural progression of the separation of the generations within a congregation is to employ the concept of "church-as-family," an idea espoused by theologian Timothy Paul Jones. This concept calls upon Christians to prioritize the family of God in relation to their identity and to let that idea supersede other allegiances and identity markers.<sup>7</sup> While at first glance, this may seem to be eliminating space for acknowledgment and embrace of diversity in the church, his intent is the exact opposite. He states, "The church is called to pursue ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity" and to "nurture one another within a rich matrix of intergenerational relationships."<sup>8</sup> Particularly striking for this project is the idea of members of the church nurturing one another across what appear to be intergenerational lines of division. One approach to building the idea of "church-as-family" is through the embrace of fictive kinship, "the

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7. Timothy Paul Jones, *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 30.

8. Jones, *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, 30.

substitution of otherwise unrelated people for familial roles.”<sup>9</sup> An example of this is Paul’s declaration of Timothy as his son and the acknowledgment of the church as the “household of God.”<sup>10</sup>

The “church-as-family” concept is fertile soil for a congregation that serves college students and other young adults, many of whom find themselves temporarily or permanently distant from their family support systems. The concept allows for healthy mentorship that supports spiritual development among college students through these fictive kinships with older members. Some scholars have described persons aged between eighteen and thirty as “emerging adults,” noting that the transition to adulthood is quite different today than it was decades ago. A combination of taking on adult responsibilities, while retaining some of the freedoms that characterized their younger years, is common among emerging adults. During this time of development, which has also been called “extended adolescence,” college students and other young adults can benefit greatly from mentorship by older Christians. Jason Lanker posits that “the natural mentoring of adolescents for their spiritual development happens best when the church views itself as family—where those who are older intentionally live life by God’s truths and seek to pass on that understanding to younger generations through both words and deeds.”<sup>11</sup>

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9. Mona Tokarek LaFosse, “Inspiring Intergenerational Relationships: Aging and the New Testament from One Historian’s Perspective,” *Religions* 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/re113070628>.

10. LaFosse, “Inspiring Intergenerational Relationship.”

11. Jason Lanker, “The Family of Faith: The Place of Natural Mentoring in the Church’s Christian Formation of Adolescents,” *Christian Education Journal* 7 (2010): 267–80.

## Participation in the Life and Ministry of the Church

While there are numerous ways to consider how one might participate in the life and ministry of a local congregation, I elected to focus on the worship and ministry of the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ. In light of the heavy emphasis placed on the Sunday morning gatherings, I am using *worship* to refer to the weekly corporate assemblies. Although ministry occurs within the worship context and worship can occur in the ministry context, *ministry* here denotes corporate and individual acts of service among church adherents and within the community, in the name of the church, beyond the weekly assembly.

Each religious congregation has its own set of rituals and rhythms, inclusive of corporate worship. The consistent observance of rituals shapes the development of the individuals participating and sends signals to others as to the person's commitment level and belief system.<sup>12</sup> Ruth Duck notes, "Religious rituals help to create and maintain cohesive communities, and they have a role in healing life's sorrows and integrating life's experiences." One of the dangers of repeated rituals is the possibility that they become rote, a check list of actions that can be compared to set of rules or expectations, without the full engagement of the participants. Duck offers a practical way to address that danger by viewing worship as expressing humanity's response to "what God has done, is doing, and will do." Abraham is an example of someone who responded to God's call by

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12. Richard Sosis, "The Adaptive Value of Religious Ritual: Rituals Promote Group Cohesion by Requiring Members to Engage in Behavior That is Too Costly to Fake," *American Scientist* 92 (2004): 168, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27858365>.

worshipping him. After God revealed himself to Abraham, Abraham's response was to build an altar to worship God.<sup>13</sup>

Participating in worship includes all of those who lead the worship in any form. It also includes everyone present. While some Churches of Christ are moving toward having praise teams that do most of the singing during corporate worship, Churches of Christ have a long-standing tradition of congregational singing that makes room for all who are inclined to participate in the singing. Depending on the worship culture, many of the songs are done in four-part harmony, calling for the talents of females and males alike to achieve the desired sound. The sound of "amen" coming from the pews as sermons are preached is a welcomed and expected component of many congregations. Although there may be a few churches that stick very closely to women keeping "silent" in the church, the act of exhorting the minister through audible encouragement is an egalitarian act open to all. Duck reminds us that one can also participate silently, without moving or speaking while "praying fervently, listening to a sermon or anthem, or participating in Communion elements."<sup>14</sup> Some people are more expressive than others. Some people are more contemplative than others. There is space for all of the people of God in the assembly.

Another opportunity for congregational participation lies in activities designed for children. Some churches have "children's church" that runs parallel to the adult worship assembly. Other churches may have a children's Bible class during Sunday School and then either continue or not with children's church – and so many variations in between. Whatever the structure, persons who design worship services for maximum participation

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13. Alvin L. Reid, "Substance, Style, and Spirit: A Theology of Worship and Church Growth," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 7 (1996): 24.

14. Duck, *Worship*, 21.



should be mindful of the stages of growth and ways of learning for children based on their ages. Duck offers an extensive discussion on ways to be responsive to serving children through the age cycle:

1. Ages six to ten. Provide stories, images, and hands-on opportunities to learn as they attempt to “make sense of the world” and learn what it means to belong.
2. Ages ten to twelve. Incorporate symbolism to nurture their ability to think more abstractly.
3. Older children and youth. Allow participation in activities typically carried out by adults and be mindful that they “may be particularly attuned to imagination and narrative.”<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that young people’s imagination must be fed and given room to be expressed and to grow as a part of their spiritual development. The hope is that the use of the imagination is not limited to children and other youth. It is a natural part of the learning process for youth and adults alike. It is thus an essential tool in spiritual development for all. Dr. Lacy Finn Borgo summarizes the vital role of the imagination in one’s grasp of the Christian journey:

Imagination is essential to faith. We will not trust an unseen God without a little imagination, and we will not be able to catch a vision of the kingdom of God or participate in it without imagination. Imagination isn’t dabbling in what isn’t real; instead, it helps us to live with what is unseen. Faith, hope, and love are all made tangible by imagination.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Duck, *Worship*, 29.

16. Lacy Finn Borgo, *Faith Like a Child: Embracing Our Lives as Children of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2023), 85.

Inclusive of and beyond corporate worship, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ with individual members possessing gifts from the Holy Spirit with which to serve or minister to each other, hinting at an egalitarian distribution of the gifts. Paul also goes to great lengths to promote the diversity of the church, highlighting that all the parts of the body are different, yet all are needed for the body to function properly, calling for unity within diversity.

The distribution of gifts is the work of one and the same Spirit, with all parts of the body receiving a wide range of gifts, just as he determines (1 Cor 12 NIV). Ultimately spiritual gifts are given to facilitate the ministry of the church and to support practical activities that build up the entire body, creating an atmosphere of mutual care among the people of God.<sup>17</sup>

Knowing that each member is given a gift for service to others, it is important to discover those gifts and to employ them for the revitalization of the church. As one thinks about young people in particular, studies have been conducted to better understand how young adults view Christianity. According to noted researcher David Kinnaman, CEO of the Barna Group, young adults aged eighteen to thirty-five are “looking for the Church to provide real, tangible, meaningful opportunities for development. They want the church to be a laboratory of leadership, not just a place of spirituality.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, they are willing to serve when given the right vehicle and opportunity. College students and other young adults are looking to lead and to learn. They wish to participate.

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17. Brian Devries, “Spiritual Gifts for Biblical Church Development: The Holy Spirit Working through Believers to Build Up the Body of Christ,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 13 (2021): 192.

18. Barna Group, “In Review: 3 Key Insights About Young Adults Around the World,” <https://www.barna.com/research/reviewing-global-young-adults/>.

## **The Incarnation: The Presence of God among His People**

The incarnation is “the doctrine that the second person of the Trinity assumes human nature, becoming man, in order to bring about the salvation of fallen human beings.”<sup>19</sup> With the announcement by the writer of the Gospel of John that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14 NRSV) came the proclamation that God had entered humanity’s reality with its limits, including space and time.<sup>20</sup> This significant development is held in tension with God’s omnipresence, his “attribute as a spirit of being wholly present everywhere at once.”<sup>21</sup> Dr. Jack Carter defines God’s omnipresence as “his real and effective presence in every point in the universe at all times,” while noting that God has “also shown His presence in quite visible and graphic ways on specific occasions in specific places.”<sup>22</sup> Over the course of history, the invisible God has chosen several such occasions “to show” himself to humankind.

Prior to the incarnation of Christ, who has been called “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15 NIV), God “appeared” to Abraham, Moses, and others during Old Testament times. Such appearances are called theophanies.<sup>23</sup> Genesis 18 records Abraham’s encounter with God as three men appeared to him. During the exchange with God, Abraham was informed of Sarah’s future pregnancy and of the pending destruction

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19. Oliver D. Crisp, “Incarnation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 160.

20. Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 57.

21. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 125.

22. John W. Carter, “God’s Special Presence in Worship,” *Journal of Biblical Theology* 4 (2021): 228.

23. Morgan and Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary*, 158.

of Sodom and Gomorrah. In another theophany, one of the most well-known, God appears to Moses in a burning bush to commission him to go to Egypt and secure the freedom of the Israelites from Pharaoh (Exod 3:1–10 NIV). Each theophany had a profound impact on the future trajectory of the individual experiencing it and on the people with whom they were most closely connected. For instance, because of his time in the presence of God, Moses walked with great faith and courage in his dealings with Pharaoh. Despite the dangers involved in delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Moses “persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27 NIV). In a similar way, encounters with Jesus in the New Testament had a profound impact on those who interacted with him, whether there was a drastic change within the person or simply a greater clarity of their standing with God.

The theophanies of the Old Testament tended to be immediate and focused within a short period of time. The incarnation of Christ covered the 33 years of Jesus’s life and continues through his followers to this day. His physical presence was visceral and tangible. Guy Sayles describes the presence of Jesus on Earth as follows: “Jesus reveals God in skin and muscle, blood and bone. To see, hear, and touch Jesus of Nazareth was to experience the divine in and through the body of a first-century Palestinian Jew. In him, God became visible, audible, and touchable.”

This embodiment allowed those who lived during the time of Christ and in proximity to him to respond to his presence as the revealed God. The invisible God was made “visible” and “audible,” expanding access to truths that previously existed primarily in text. In a similar way, enacted drama brings to life, and in closer proximity, invisible concepts and stories that engage both observers and performers. This idea is captured well by Max Harris in *Theatre and Incarnation*. He writes:

Something akin to the transformation of text into performance is found at the very heart of the Christian faith. The proclamation that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14 NIV) suggests that speech became spectacle, that God, if you will, dropped himself incarnate into the atmosphere of the world, no longer hidden within the “shell” of what he had said or spoken into being, but seen in the flesh in his full life and color.<sup>24</sup>

### **The History of Drama and the Church**

The church’s use of drama as a medium for expressing the incarnation of Christ and biblical teachings served as a key focus for exploring the history of drama and the church. As noted above, the incarnation is “the doctrine that the second person of the Trinity assumes human nature, becoming man, in order to bring about the salvation of fallen human beings.”<sup>25</sup> The incarnation is noted by some to be “the central and defining event of Christian theology.”<sup>26</sup> The development of liturgy and the accompanying sacraments extend a continuous incarnation of the words and life of Christ.

The institution of the Lord’s Supper (*Eucharist*) was a call from Christ for his disciples to repeat certain acts in his memory, resulting in a widely celebrated liturgical observation. To fulfill this mandate, early Christian services appear to have been broken down into two parts: “an introduction, and the commemorative sacrificial and sacramental act itself.” During the latter, the acts and words of Christ were repeated.<sup>27</sup> The possibility for dramatic interpretations of the acts and the words of the Eucharist was already present. The eventual infusion of dramatics into church liturgy gave the clergy a chance to “place the salient facts of Christ’s life more realistically before their

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24. Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–2.

25. Crisp, “Incarnation,” 160.

26. Crisp, “Incarnation,” 160.

27. Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 1.

congregations,”<sup>28</sup> echoing the impact of Christ’s physical presence during the first century.

The medieval church experienced the impact of incarnation as performers put flesh on the narratives and principles of the Christian worldview. Just as Jesus entered the world through humble beginnings, so too were specifically dramatic elements introduced in the liturgical experiences of the church. The response to encounters with God’s enfleshed word was strong and eventually became overwhelming. Sketches expanded to full productions and developed into several genres of religious drama. Initially, performing the dramas was the domain of clergy only, but over time, persons outside of the clergy were given space to participate.

It was during medieval times that some church communities began including dramatic “sketches” drawn from the Bible with the Latin liturgy in their worship services. Eventually, the “sketches” were translated from Latin to the local vernacular.<sup>29</sup> *Quem quaeritis* [*Whom do you seek?*], composed of the dialogue between the angel and the women at the empty tomb of Christ following his resurrection, is the first example noted of “liturgical drama.” The *Regularis Concordia*, a tenth-century manual of regulations for the Benedictine order, reveals that the scene unfolds with monks taking the roles of the Marys.<sup>30</sup> Other themes within the liturgy that emerged as prime for dramatic enactment were the birth and the resurrection of Christ. By the twelfth century, such topics became

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28. Allardyce Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginning to the Present Day* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 49.

29. Herman A. J. Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 177.

30. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

the “centerpiece of elaborately staged Christmas and Nativity plays, with appropriate scenery and costumes.”<sup>31</sup>

Three types of liturgical drama were fully embedded in the Latin Church by the beginning of the Renaissance: the miracle play, the mystery play, and the morality play. The miracle plays focused on the lives of the saints, celebrating the miracles attributed to the saint either during their lifetime or after their death. The mystery play, of which *Quem quaeritis* is an example, depicted biblical events and stories. Morality plays were allegories personifying vices and virtues to provide moral exhortation for the illiterate masses.<sup>32</sup>

A fourth type of drama emerged in the context of medieval times and was affiliated with the feast of Corpus Christi. A cycle of biblical plays developed in England that were “made up in a sequence from the Old and New Testaments, which told the Christian story from Creation through the Fall, the history of the Jews, the incarnation, Christ’s life and ministry, the Crucifixion, (and) Resurrection to the Day of Judgement.”<sup>33</sup>

Karl Young holds that the dramatic developments outlined above were born of the medieval church, not as a continuation of any previous artistic expressions whether in the church or outside the church. They were “a spontaneous new birth and growth” from within the Christian tradition.<sup>34</sup> Young further asserts, “The liturgy, or plan of public

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31. Timothy Thibodeau, “Western Christendom,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 247.

32. Thibodeau, “Western Christendom,” 246–47.

33. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 271.

34. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1.

worship, in the midst of which the Christian drama of the Middle Ages arose, is that of the Church of Rome.”<sup>35</sup>

Eventually, a strained relationship between the church and the stage developed. In the beginning, the dramatic sketches were added to the sanctioned liturgy and were performed in Latin, the official language of the Catholic Mass. As the popularity of this invention grew, the sketches expanded and were translated into local vernaculars: French, German, and English. They became full productions and eventually, the church buildings could not hold the crowds that flocked to the performances. The plays were moved outside to accommodate the growing numbers. Once the clergy realized that the presentations were becoming “too great a force in the lives of the people,” they sought to regain some level of control. Edicts and criticism were aimed at the plays, and clergy were prohibited from participating in any play that was performed outside of church settings. Governance of the outside productions was put in the hands of local guilds and societies.<sup>36</sup> With this move, elements were introduced into the plays that were not appropriate for church productions. Although the theatre remained a part of churchgoers’ lives, the church and stage parted ways and would not come back together in any significant way for several hundred years.<sup>37</sup>

With the arrival of the Reformation came the voices of Protestant leaders who were set on the elimination of theatre. This was driven in part by the fact that theatre, as it then existed, had originated in the Catholic Church. The plays reflected the influences of

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35. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 16.

36. Nicoll, *The Development of The Theatre*, 50.

37. Harold Ehrensperger, *Religious Drama: Ends and Means* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 88.



the Roman Catholic Mass, and many Protestant leaders shared open disdain for all things Catholic.<sup>38</sup> By the nineteenth century, in addition to the stigma of theatre's Catholic roots, the stage ran counter to Victorian economic values as embraced by the Protestant clergy. It supported behavior that could negatively impact capitalism (a system fully endorsed by Protestant leaders). For instance, the theatre leaned toward the egalitarian treatment of women and children, as well as the working class, and this threatened the maintenance of the "established social order needed for businesses to operate smoothly."<sup>39</sup> Earlier, the Puritans had stood out as an especially strong opponent of theatre, which they found to be useless. Theatrical activities and the lifestyles of performers were viewed as evil and lumped in with things that the Puritans considered to be vices, such as "gambling, sports, effeminacy, and dancing, long hair and so on."<sup>40</sup>

The Puritans' contempt for theatre was part of a centuries-long anti-theatrical polemic, in both the church and the greater society. This animosity towards theatre reached back to Greek and Roman theatre shortly before and during the first century and included theatre birthed by the medieval church. Plato was hailed as a great critic of Greek theatre; Roman actors were denied citizenship and received treatment similar to that of prostitutes; and church father Tertullian weighed in on the vices of theatre.<sup>41</sup> For many years, fundamentalism and the enormous influence of the church kept theatre and church very distant and distinct enterprises.

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38. Claudia Durst Johnson, *Church and Stage: The Theatre as Target of Religious Condemnation in Nineteenth Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 11.

39. Johnson, *Church and Stage*, 32–34.

40. Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 34.

41. Michael Dobson, "Anti-Theatrical Polemic," *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 1st ed., ed. Dennis Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.

However, the anti-theatre fervor has largely died, and the visceral opposition to theatre has abated. Jonas Barish composed a detailed account of the long-standing opposition to theatre in his classic book, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. He started with Plato and traced the antitheatrical polemic through the mid-twentieth century. He detailed numerous angles and players involved in the opposition of the art form. After reviewing the many ways theatre had been criticized in the past, he conceded: “Antitheatrical prejudice, however, is far from having the last word in the nineteenth century. As the century advances, we begin to encounter not only a tolerance for the theater, and an enthusiasm for the theater, but a cult of the theater – if not for the theater as an institution, at least for theatricality as a mode of existence.”<sup>42</sup> Observing a similar phenomenon, Michael Dobson, in the *Oxford Companion of Theatre*, adds: “While the stage has occasionally drawn fire since [the nineteenth century], it has generally had to be quite strenuously obscene or provocative in order to do so, moralists’ attentions having largely transferred to film, television, and the Internet.”<sup>43</sup>

As the grip of fundamentalism on American society loosened, the relationship between the church and theatre took on new possibilities. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, some Protestant churches began examining the possibility of employing theatre to accomplish some very specific goals that involved “social and cultural concerns.”<sup>44</sup> The wall of hostility was falling, and “the church began to open its

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42. Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 350.

43. Dobson, “Antitheatrical Polemic,” 24. Note: One possible exception to society’s full embrace of theatre is a concern about drag performances that have been occurring in recent years (<https://glaad.org/anti-drag-report>). Even here, the protests are typically not about theatre itself but about the subject matter specifically.

44. Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 41.

doors to theatre, on the grounds that theatre would serve the purposes of the church.”<sup>45</sup>

Major strides to the reunion of church and stage included the formation of the Drama League of America, an organization that encouraged the use of drama in churches and provided plays suitable for church production. Additionally, collections of religious plays were published. Organizations such as the Christians in Theatre Arts were formed, as well as publishing companies to print and distribute plays and books related to religious drama.<sup>46</sup>

Over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, church participation in drama has been growing, but unevenly. The late 1980s witnessed a notable increase in the use of religious drama in churches.<sup>47</sup> Countless churches have produced Christmas and Easter programs and added drama as an ongoing program for ministry, often targeted toward youth. Several churches, such as the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, have stood out as trendsetters to present professional-level theatre in congregational settings.<sup>48</sup>

Herbert Sennett, in *Religion and Dramatics: The Relationship Between Christianity and the Theatre Arts*, suggests that there are four outlets that could be considered for drama in churches: religious worship, religious education, church recreation, and religious edification.<sup>49</sup> Hardin Craig, in *English Religious Drama of the*

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45. Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 43.

46. Herbert Sennett, *Religion and Dramatics: The Relationship between Christianity and the Theater Arts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 28.

47. Sennett, *Religion and Dramatics*, 1.

48. Steve Pederson, “What’s Drama Doing in Church?” *Christianity Today*, January 1, 1993, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1993/winter/9313050.html>.

49. Sennett, *Religion and Dramatics*, 11–15.

*Middle Ages*, states, “The medieval religious drama existed primarily to give religious instruction, establish faith, and encourage piety.”<sup>50</sup> This project seeks to bring the drama of the medieval times into conversation with the twenty-first-century developments in religious drama to explore the ways that the infusion of drama can impact the level of engagement among non-clergy churchgoers, especially among college students and other young adults, as a way to both minister to others and to open themselves up to spiritually formative experiences outside of the weekly corporate worship.

The current use of drama in a ministerial context builds upon the historic development of liturgical drama and religious plays in the Latin Church during medieval times and on a recent turn toward theatre by the religious community. “Liturgy” in Greek is made up of two terms, *leit* (public) and *ergon* (work), and refers to “public worship that follows a prescribed form.”<sup>51</sup> Liturgy had been utilized in churches in the East and in the West long before medieval times. As previously noted, Christian liturgy goes back as far as Christ’s institution of the Lord’s Table (*Eucharist*) as he called for the disciples to repeat the mealtime ritual in his memory.<sup>52</sup>

Churches in the twenty-first century that choose to incorporate drama into their ministries also stand to benefit from the incarnational properties of theatre. Drama invites participants to utilize the ability to imagine and perceive invisible realities. In theatre, performers and audiences are urged to “believe” in the world that is created by theatrical productions. This encourages reflection, an important component of learning, and

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50. Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 15.

51. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 409.

52. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 16.

Christian spiritual formation. Drama offers participants the opportunity to engage texts, including Scripture, in self-forming ways while edifying and teaching others and reflecting the belief that “theatre is a way for us to incarnate our stories ... and to experience the presence of our fellows and of God.”<sup>53</sup>

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53. Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 50.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY

**Format of the Project Intervention**

The project's methodology was an intervention consisting of seven meeting sessions, utilizing qualitative research methods. Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative research as follows:

a field of inquiry ... (that) involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions along with observational historical, interactional and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.... Qualitative researchers deploy a wide-range of interconnected interpretive practices hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand.<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of qualitative research, this study used participatory action research (PAR). In PAR, “action researchers literally help transform inquiry into action. Research subjects become co-participants and stakeholders in the process of inquiry. Research becomes praxis – practical, reflective, pragmatic action – directed to solving problems in the world.”<sup>2</sup> For this project, the research introduced “an intervention in order to provide ministerial leadership for the transformation of the organization.”<sup>3</sup> Along those lines, the first five sessions and the seventh session began with a devotional

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1. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2011), 3–4.

2. Denzin and Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 21.

3. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 58.

dedicated to the spiritual formation of the participants and to the demonstration of the potential impact of the inclusion of drama in ministry.

The first six meeting sessions were held over two weekends, two weeks apart, at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas. On each weekend, a Friday evening session and two Saturday sessions were conducted, with each session lasting seventy-five minutes. The first five sessions covered such things as the background, history, and theology of theatre; context-specific considerations; and document brainstorming. The sixth session was used to create an initial draft of the design document.

The seventh session was held two weeks after the sixth session on a Friday evening at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ. The gathering lasted two hours and forty-five minutes and was comprised of an extended devotional period, final document editing, and a group interview of all participants. The result of the intervention was the design of a drama-based arts ministry, detailed in a document ready for presentation to church leadership (see Appendix C).

### **Description of the Participants**

The minister of Treadaway served as a key informant<sup>4</sup> in the participant selection process. Via purposive sampling,<sup>5</sup> 11 current adherents and former adherents (who had

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4. Key informant: A local person who is a resident expert who provides important background or current information about the community. Key informants assist the researcher to understand the people and the context of their project. They also can facilitate the researcher's access to resources, organizations, gatekeepers, and others who might not otherwise be available. Finally, key informants can facilitate wise decisions in many areas of the project (e.g., participant selection, problem analysis, interpretation of data, etc.). Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 13.

5. Purposive sampling: The process of selecting "people who have awareness of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to [the] research. This selection process was guided by the following criteria: persons that are politically savvy, have a vested interest, or are key stakeholders; persons that are generally knowledgeable about the subject; persons that fit the college student and/or young adult

been a part of the congregation within the prior three years) were invited to join the study, with the goal being five to seven participants. Former adherents were included to allow for the consideration of persons who were a part of the church during the preliminary study who might still be able to meaningfully contribute to the project, especially those who were college students and/or young adults. A total of seven participants, four females and three males, agreed to be a part of the study. Three of the participants have professional training and experience in the dramatic arts and/or filmmaking. Two of the participants are on the ministry team of the church. Participants included individuals in their twenties, thirties, fifties, and sixties. One of the seven participants also served as an observer<sup>6</sup> to assist in the note-taking process. For purposes of the study, pseudonyms were assigned during the sessions for recording and note-taking. To protect the identification of the participants, in this paper, participants will appear as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, and Participant 7. Because of the small size of the congregation, with little exception, the pronouns “they,” “them,” and “their” will be used to further avoid identification of the participants based on gender.

### **Description of the Project Sessions**

#### Session One: Orientation: Background, History, and Theology

The devotional focus for Session One was “The Word Became Flesh,” based on John 1:1, 9–14. Following the reading of the Scripture and a minute of silence, I asked

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demographic; and participants chosen by the congregation’s minister, a key informant on the project. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 83–84.

6. In addition to myself, one other person was recruited to take notes during the intervention. The notes were synthesized with mine to get a more complete picture of what transpired among participants during the research project. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 93, 180.



those present to share with us what imagery came to their minds as they read and heard the Scripture. Participant 6 saw a “connection to the Spirit world ... as children need parents, we need God, we need the Spirit.” Other answers included “larger than life figure in the midst of the world ... transparent standing in the midst,” “light, brightness, picturing a sun,” and “a huge door slammed shut, image of a person standing on the outside, knocking ... he is actually the door that people on the inside don’t realize they are on the outside and don’t know it’s Christ.” We discussed how biblical texts often trigger our imagination to envision the details.

I asked if there had been a movie or a play that had truly impacted their lives. Answers included *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Godspell*, *Romero*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Participant 2 remembered “crying, weeping” when watching *Godspell*. They gave credit to the director for holding everyone in place and noted that an audience member had a panic attack during the crucifixion scene. They stated, “Art has power.” Participant 3 chose *Romero*, a movie about a Catholic priest who risked his life to advocate for the poor and oppressed of his country. Participant 3 closed their eyes as they vividly described the final scene of the movie: “He [the priest] falls to his knees and proclaims, ‘I can’t, you must show me the way.’ He holds up the Eucharist as he is being assassinated.” For Participant 3, the movie was a visceral depiction of the price that we [as Christians] “must be willing to pay.” We discussed how the arts have the power to impact people’s thoughts and choices.

Participant 5 did not immediately answer the question related to a movie or a play that impacted them. Then, later in the meeting, they brought the conversation back to the movie question and said, “*A Time to Kill*.” They shared how the movie came at a pivotal

point in their life when they were not active in church. They credited the movie with illustrating “the power of doing right” and drawing them closer to the Spirit of God and, ultimately, back to church.

During the session, I provided background information on the overall thesis project and the preliminary research that I had conducted at the congregation, as detailed earlier in this paper. This included the congregation-wide appreciative inquiry exercise; an interview with longtime church adherent, Jimmy James; and a focus group with college students and other young adults. We discussed the appreciative inquiry that had consisted of an asset mapping exercise, conducted in three sessions to allow as many interested persons as possible to participate. Through the exercise, a broad range of talents and areas of expertise was discovered among the Treadaway adherents, along with a willingness to volunteer to assist the congregation as activities and programs are developed.

I shared information gleaned from my interview with Jimmy James, who had been with the congregation since his childhood in the 1930s. James had spoken about how deeply segregated Abilene was before integration and how a local white congregation of the Church of Christ sponsored Treadaway’s beginning to keep the churches segregated. I gave details about the focus group that was held with college students and other young adults, who expressed an appreciation for the congregation but also voiced concern about the lack of ministry leadership and engagement opportunities for the college students and other young adults in general, and for college-aged and young adult females in particular.

Reflecting on the arts-related talents and interests discovered in both the appreciative inquiry and the focus group, I shared how a drama-based arts ministry was seen as one avenue to increase engagement for college students and young adults, both female and male. I informed the intervention participants that the goal of our time together would be to create a drama-based arts ministry design suitable for sharing with the leadership with the possibility of implementation.

A substantial amount of Session One was spent walking through the history of drama and the church. I discussed the incarnation of Christ as a theological framework for the drama-based arts ministry we were seeking to design. For our purposes, theatre has the ability to reflect the presence of God, Christ, the Spirit, and spiritual principles by embodying or giving flesh to biblical stories and ideals.

We traced the beginning of modern theatre to the enacted liturgy of the medieval church, which started small with select biblical scenes (e.g., the women's visit to the tomb following Jesus's resurrection). The drama moved from presentations during Mass to large, elaborate productions too big to be performed inside of the church buildings. We discussed how some Catholic clergy began to have disdain for religious drama as it grew out of their control and how, with the onset of the Reformation, Protestant leaders sought to destroy it, viewing it as a creation of the Catholic Church. Eventually, there was a split between the church and theatre. The church left theatre to the secular world. The twentieth century saw a turning point where churches began to embrace drama once more. Additional details that were included are contained earlier in this paper under the heading, "The History of Drama and the Church." Participant 4 was especially

appreciative of hearing this history because of their personal involvement in theatre and their being unaware of the strong historical link between drama and the church.

#### Session Two: Drama as a Medium of Ministry to Participants and Audiences

The devotional focus for Session Two was “The Disciples at the Tomb of Jesus,” from Luke 24:1–8. The participants were asked to reflect on what emotion they might have felt if they were one of the women going to anoint the body of Jesus. For Participant 2, the emotion of despair, followed by shock, was strongly felt as they were reminded of losing two family members very close together. Participant 3 would have felt a “sense of anticipation, also being haunted by the fear of it not turning out the way Jesus said it would ... looking, listening for any sign of life.” Three participants were enlisted to perform a brief dramatic scene depicting the women and the angel at the tomb.

During the session, I led our discussion on drama as a means of ministry. Drama is a teaching tool that can help some individuals discover truths when they see them illustrated via the imagination. Drama is a collaborative art that impacts both the participant and the audience. We discussed some of the forms through which drama can be utilized in ministry: skits, plays, storytelling, illustration of texts (Scripture), and calendar-driven programs (e.g., holidays). Participants were allowed to share their personal experiences or observations related to any of the various forms of drama in a church setting. Participant 2 noted, “Skits serve a purpose, [giving] context to something being discussed.” Participant 7 found skits to be “brief [with] only so much depth.”

One common observation that surfaced in the discussion on skits was how they are utilized for young children and provide an outlet for their imagination, but as the children get older, imagination is suppressed. Participant 4 recalled that when they

attended Vacation Bible School, there were “skits for the kids.” However, they felt that skits “did not give kids enough credit ... kids can understand more.” They also lamented that as children get older “youth groups [are] heavy on conversation ... [and] moved to no imagination.” Participant 6 said, “Skits can give you something to think about. Older people say, ‘Children are closer to God.’ Creativity is stamped out of children.”

Participant 3 shared:

Normally done for kids. Vivid and imaginative. [That’s] put to sleep by the time you reach a certain age. Within imagination is the word “magi” as in “magician.” Can we access the invisible without our imagination? If we lose that, how can we connect with the invisible, the intangible? Unless we become as little children, we cannot access the Kingdom of God. As adults, pray to be receptive to that imagination.

Participant 1 spoke of how drama infuses life in the country of Ghana, mixing in both adults and children. Three consistent settings where it showed up in a profound way were “Christmas, New Year [and] Bible camp,” with a “blend of everything.” It “became a way to learn their culture ... communicate and portray values and principles.” The drama-filled events brought different parts of the community together in a way that nothing else did. They continued, “Muslims came to the Christmas celebration. The chief opinion leaders, who were all Muslim, came to the church to see the drama.” The occasions included singing competitions with prizes and spiritual songs with drums. Participant 1 further described how there was dramatization of the “whole gospel,” recalling that at least on one occasion a young lady played Jesus and that “she was slaughtered, portraying death of Jesus as slaughter, reflecting on how wars play out.” Participant 4 offered that “theatre is to disturb the comfortable and to comfort the disturbed.”

The conversation shifted to how drama could be practically used today in ministry. Participant 2 envisioned “working with kids to illustrate Proverbs 1 and 2.” They also suggested monologues, open mic for poetry and singing, and praise miming. Participant 6 suggested improv because some people “don’t want to talk about it [certain subjects] but are willing to act it out.” Participant 4 added “praise dancing and musicals.”

During the discussion, the energy in the room was heightened as Participant 1 spoke once again of the role of drama in the Ghanaian culture:

[At a] traditional funeral, there’s drumming, dancing, passing the coffin around. It goes to each family section.... There’s a ritual around engagement. Groom is the supplicant. Family relieves the cost associated with raising a daughter.... Drama really opens you up. Even among the conservative in Ghana, with drama, anything goes: drumming, dancing, women preaching. Most conservatives have no problem with it.... Most reserved and dignified persons would act foolish[ly].

Participant 7, also familiar with the Ghanaian culture, shared that “drama is a part of everything,” listing births, naming ceremonies, and fishing.

As we closed out the session, two of the participants shared how they were family storytellers, one for their grandchildren and the other for their young cousins. Both were quite animated, and the room remained energized at the thought of intentionally using storytelling and other forms of drama in the church context.

Between Session Two and Session Three, several participants continued to talk and laugh as they recounted family members making up stories for children in their respective households and among extended family. Pausing from that conversation, Participant 6 took a serious tone and asked, “But how does that fit here?” I informed them that we would be exploring that very question in Session Three.

### Session Three: Opportunities within the Treadaway Context

The devotional focus for Session Three was “Flexible Servanthood,” based on 1 Cor 9:19–23. The intent was to highlight the need for flexibility in ministry to be able to serve in different contexts. Responses to the selected text included the value of “meeting people where they are, instead of [being] judgmental” and that the focus should be on the “way you live versus feeling a need to profess your spirituality.” One participant contrasted the difference between winning an argument as opposed to winning people to “a spiritual treasure, insights and wisdom that come from the Gospel.” Participant 5 recounted seeing one of the other participants interact with an assumed homeless person asking for money at a Waffle House. The takeaway for Participant 5 was that the other participant was not condescending or judgmental but instead, by their actions and demeanor, communicated the message “I see God in you” to the person asking for money. Participant 5 felt that the man asking for money was “transformed” and “could be drawn back into church,” noting that the “whole interaction was so powerful.”

During the session, we examined the Treadaway context for ways to best utilize drama in the life of the congregation while considering major aspects of the cultural, social, and spiritual environment. Key aspects of the Treadaway context include that it is conservative, it adheres to an all-male leadership model in corporate worship and in the affairs of the church, and there is a gap between the older and younger generations. Additionally, Treadaway would not have a budget for a new ministry, and the ministry would have to be funded through fundraising. The focus of the session was a review of

practical considerations for a drama-based arts ministry given Treadaway's culture and specific resources.

Before tackling the question of what was possible in the context, the participants spent quite some time reflecting on the state of the church as they viewed it. Participant 4 remembered a time when they had "seen the church thrive with college students pouring into young children," but said of the present that "there's lots of resistance to young people doing things" with older generations communicating the message, "Don't worry about it, we'll take it back over." They saw "no bridge between the generations" when it comes to various ministries. Other participants reiterated a sense of division between the generations and a challenge to overcome an old mindset that was put in place at the time of Marshall Keeble's establishing of the congregation in the 1930s. Participant 3 said, "Church must decide if we are a hospital or hospice care."

As the conversation turned to what is possible, it was suggested that we "focus on kids" and open the building to the students and others to talk and learn new skills and serve meals. Participant 5 reiterated the need to "bridge the gap" between the generations since "it's about helping the other person." They pressed the group to lean into the question "How do we heal together?" Participant 6 suggested a town hall meeting for sharing where we can agree to disagree and focus on healing.

We discussed how drama could fit in classroom settings and special events. At the end of the session, I asked one of the participants who is on the ministry team to take a fresh inventory of who is currently at the church as we consider future possibilities for the ministry. Everyone was asked to reflect, over the following two weeks, on the opportunities that surfaced in Session Three in preparation for Session Four.



## Session Four: Reflection, Feasibility, and Assessment

The devotional focus for Session Four was “The Road to Emmaus,” based on Luke 24:13–32. We discussed how the disciples’ “eyes were open” to a new level of knowledge and experience when they encountered Jesus directly. We took a few moments to reflect and compare the impact of the choice of media for communication with friends and family. We acknowledged that there are times when a text will suffice to deliver a message, when a phone call is more appropriate, and when an in-person visit is the only reasonable medium of response to a given situation, highlighting the value of presence.

In the session, I asked the participants to reflect on the information shared in the first three sessions as a beginning point for the planning process. I asked them to share anything from the first three sessions that stood out to them and that we should reflect on or keep in mind. I emphasized that this was to include both what stood out to them during the sessions and what they found themselves talking about after the sessions. Responses included the following:

1. Whether people will feel free to engage with the ministry given the prior conversation about the older members and Marshall Keeble
2. The historic aspect of drama and the church
3. Discernment
4. The disconnect between the generations
5. Utilization of talented people within the congregation
6. Gearing the ministry toward children with college students teaching them

I led a discussion on the feasibility and the pros and cons of a drama-based arts ministry at Treadaway. One participant said a pro was that something is needed for “involvement, connecting, and attracting students and others.” Another participant identified the presence of “some extremely talented people” at the church as a pro. In lieu of a con, a participant noted an obstacle: “one-sized stage fits all ... everybody got to fit that stage that was built back in 1935.”

Once everyone had been given an opportunity to voice their pros and cons, we discussed what could happen in the Treadaway context “given the givens.” The team discussed a potential annual timeline for the ministry and brainstormed several approaches to the ministry’s design.

#### Session Five: Brainstorming the Plan

The devotional focus for Session Five was “The Burning Bush,” based on Exod 3:1–5. I asked participants what they believed would be their emotion as they imagined that they were Moses and that God had invited them to stand on holy ground in his presence. Participant 5, who read the passage aloud for the group, spoke of being “curious” as “God appears in way[s] not necessarily conventional.” Participant 7 spoke of “fear” from the perspective of Moses having run away before, but “God comes to him where he is, even in the wild. So, I think he’s realizing that ‘I can’t run. God’s gonna meet me wherever I am. I’m responsible.’” Participant 3, reflecting on God speaking “from within strange things that ain’t supposed to speak to you,” envisioned that they would have a “nervous breakdown.” I keyed into the concept of curiosity and noted that a drama-based arts ministry may be the very thing that creates a sense of curiosity for the

community, which might wonder “what are they doing over there?”, and feed into the idea that “God is showing up in unexpected places.”

Participant 1 shared that they had been studying and teaching a lot about the comparison of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They spoke of how the story of Moses is shared in all three of these faiths and how each has “the contemplative side of the faith, the mystical side of the faith, and this story is at the heart of mysticism ... the mystical side of faith looks at it as this is the story of faith, that we have to go out and meet God somewhere and it will be unexpected and like [Participant 3] said, ‘God is everywhere’ ... this encounter with God is always risky ... there’s this concept of the journey of going to an experience, being transformed and then coming back from that experience...” They continued:

and so, for the ministry we’re talking about, there has to be this spiritual transformation and empowerment for a purpose, you know, and it’s always that journey of going to and coming from. So, the drama-based arts ministry is trying to provide opportunity and platform for the Spirit of God to do this, and in every group that might attend a performance, for example, there may be one person in that particular group, audience, or actors, or whatever, probably more than one, but sometimes it may just be one person out of 1000, that that becomes their burning bush.

Following the devotion, the group brainstormed the various elements of a proposed plan with the idea that the notes taken during Session Five would become the building blocks for the first draft of the drama-based arts ministry document that was to be produced in Session Six. I distributed a worksheet with the following plan elements to be discussed:

1. Needs/Problems
2. Goals/Objectives
3. Procedures/Scope of Work

4. Timetable/Calendar
5. Budget/Potential Support Sources
6. Key Personnel
7. Potential Partners
8. Next Steps

For the first item, I invited the group to discuss what needs and problems a drama-based arts ministry at Treadaway would address. The ministry design team thought deeply about the question. They shared ideas directly relevant to Treadaway and ideas relevant to big-picture implications of the value of arts ministry to Christianity overall. Participant 6 stated, “One of the main needs is getting people here, children and college students.” Participant 1 reflected on his reading of Charles Taylor’s book, *A Secular Age*. The participant spoke of how the author describes the decline of Christianity and, considering the decline, what three things Christianity needs to address: ethics, lifecycle rituals, and aesthetics. Participant 1 shared:

You know when you look at history, when Christianity, as a religion, as a movement, incorporated and adapted a sense of aesthetics and [the] beauty of the arts, it flourished. But when we neglect it and just consign that to the secular world, we’ve cut ourselves off from what it means to be human ... and so from that big broader picture, you know, an arts ministry, an arts-based ministry is absolutely spot on. In all these categories, you can deal with ethical issues, aesthetics, you know, and aesthetics is the sense of what does it mean to be human ... not just what does it mean to be Christian. What does it mean to be human? If we start at that level, you know because, mercy, our babies are out here killing each other, and we want to talk about one true church.... Where do we begin? Let’s go back to the basic roots. What did, how did, Jesus teach?... He told stories and then these were dramatized.... Nothing makes a better drama than the good Samaritan story.... We should heed the young talents amongst us ... and we need to empower them.

Continuing the discussion of needs and problems, Participant 4 offered, “I think there’s a lot of religious trauma in the city as well.”

In speaking of the lack of emphasis on the “spirit life,” Participant 3 lamented:

It’s almost [like] good people walked past a window and saw a mannequin in it and mistaking [it] for a real human being and fell in love and took it home and started treating it as if it was a real human being, and soon discovered that there’s no life, but they refused to acknowledge that ... people have a greater appetite for that which is unreal ... and that’s why we can’t connect with each other at the level of being, at the level of spirit.... Everyone [should] be surrendered to the Creator and then out of that, all of the other things flow. If you don’t..., I’m afraid it will be, you know, helping people [find] another mannequin with a different set of clothes.... Anything that you start going forward has to grow out of our own individual surrender, absolute surrender, to the will of the almighty and to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and I think out of that will come new growth.

In a similar vein, Participant 1 emphasized the need to see the ministry as existing not to serve the church but “to provide a platform for the Spirit of God to work.” The discussion on needs and problems to be addressed by the ministry landed on the need to provide opportunities for the “spiritual formation of college students and children.”

I shared with them that I felt the goals and objectives were embedded in our discussion of needs and suggested we move the discussion along to procedures and scope of work. Prior to starting the conversation on the procedures and scope of work, I mentioned to the ministry design team that resources were thin at Treadaway and that we should aim for a net zero impact on the church [finances]. I reminded the team that discussions in prior sessions entailed the use of Wednesday night class time and Sunday school for the college students and other young adults to work with the children leading up to a summer camp.

Under procedures and scope of work, the team talked about utilizing Sunday School and Wednesday night Bible class time for working with the children through activities such as showing movies or any media that carry a message, providing them with Scriptures to keep in mind as they watch, and leading a time of reflection. Further

discussion highlighted the need to create space for the children to talk about themselves, noting that when children “see care and concern, they’re more open.”

Participant 3 took a few minutes to share his concerns about the value of spiritual formation among congregational leadership, suggesting that the ministry design team spend some time at a spiritual retreat with them prior to delivering the proposed drama-based arts ministry plan to them. We tabled the discussion as the session ended.

#### Session Six: Initial Drafting of Document for Leadership Review

Going with the momentum of Session Five, I did not conduct the listed devotion, “Share Your Gifts,” based on Rom 12:3–8 and Col 3:17. I informed the ministry design team that we had “a huge task in a short period of time and that [was] to come up with our first draft of the proposal.” I reassured them though that whatever we ended up with by the end of the session would be fine because we had the next two weeks “to continue to plug away and feel like we have something.”

I acknowledged the tabled discussion of the team possibly planning a spiritual retreat for the congregational leaders from the end of Session Five. Participant 4 observed that since the congregational leaders would not be the ones leading the ministry, “the training would be better served for the college students who are actually going to be like working with the children because it’s spiritually forming them and preparing them to be leaders and they want that type of info.” No one on the ministry design team pushed back on the idea of shifting the spiritual development activities to the college students.

Participant 4 transitioned into giving input on the proposal, speaking of the scope of work. They envisioned a production in the fall, a production in the spring, and a summer film camp. They suggested a fall planning period during which the ministry team

would pick a theme, a show, and Bible verses that directly correlate with that show. Children would be assigned a Bible verse each Sunday with the intent that the following Sunday the children would share how the verse tied into their lives throughout the week. Wednesdays would be used for show rehearsals as needed.

The remainder of the session was used to create the first draft of the drama-ministry design document through dialogue, note-taking, and editing. We discussed each of the categories outlined in Session Five: Needs/Problems, Goals/Objectives, Procedures/Scope of Work, Timetable/Calendar, Budget/Potential Support Sources, Key Personnel, Potential Partners, and Next Steps. Under Needs/Problems, the group agreed on the lack of opportunities for college students and other young adults to be involved in ministry at Treadaway and the lack of a consistent, programmatic process to serve children, both within the church and outside of the church. Goals/Objectives reflected much of the prior discussions within the intervention sessions and included “to establish a drama-based arts ministry that enlists the talents and interests of college students and other young adults to serve.” We discussed each of the categories and determined that the calendar would incorporate the ideas enumerated by Participant 4 earlier in the session; funds would be raised to avoid burdening the church financially; the ministry would be team-led; and older members would serve as spiritual guides (mentors) for the college students and young adults involved in the ministry. We also identified a few potential partners. I committed to providing a draft of the ministry design plan based on our exchange during the session, which I would send to them by the following Saturday for their review. I also agreed to include an introduction as part of the document for their feedback. Session Seven was planned for two weeks after Session Six.

## Session Seven: Editing of Final Document and Group Interview

Session Seven began with an extended devotional time, utilizing *lectio divina* to focus on John 1:1–4, 14 and Matt 5:14–16 and exploring the topic “Let Your Light Shine.” In line with *lectio divina*, we included extended periods of silence.

Following the devotional time, we reviewed the document that I had sent the group between sessions. The document was given the title “Proposed Ministry Design Plan for a Drama-based Arts Ministry at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ.” The team offered a high level of approval for the document as we prepared to discuss edits.

Initially, there was only one goal: “to establish a drama-based arts ministry that enlists the talents and interests of college students and other young adults to serve the congregation and the surrounding community.” The team decided that it was important for the document to reflect a concern that this would not be a new ministry operating in a silo but that the congregation would be intentional about its commitment to being a holistic place of healing for everyone. To that end, the team added the following goal: “to open dialogue with the leadership regarding the church’s commitment to and vision for being a thriving congregation that engages with all generations.”

Other changes were more subtle, such as changing the fourth need from “The need for additional congregation-wide activities to build and enhance stronger multi-generational relationships” to “The need for additional congregation-wide activities to build and enhance stronger relationships among all ages.” The team decided to combine the timetable with the scope of the ministry and to increase the budget from \$2500 to



\$3500. Several items were added to the “Year One Ministry Goals,” and all agreed on the “Next Steps” that included a presentation to the congregational leaders.

Once we finished reviewing the document, I conducted a group interview to gain feedback on whether the ministry design team felt the intervention was a success. Their answers in relation to the strengths of the plan included “specific goals, but really open to what we might do with it,” “new path forward for the church,” “well thought out,” and “spiritual leaders ... connected with the young people.” The two weaknesses noted were the choice of months for the run of the calendar (June to May) and the need for success measurements. The team felt it better to simply say the calendar would run parallel to the academic calendar without specifying the months. One participant observed that “there’s no mention of how important art is for young people’s development,” and another noted the need “to really highlight the spiritual formation piece.” Other thoughts on the strength of the plan included “All of it’s strong,” “There’s space for everyone,” and “the process by which you led us through to get to the proposal, I think was really strong.”

All agreed that the document was complete and that adequate attention had been given to the available congregational resources related to implementing the plan. For the latter, one participant exclaimed, “We have beaten that horse!” Participant 6 summarized the group’s response to whether the plan provides clear next steps, intermediate steps, and long-term actions necessary for successful implementation, when they replied, “I think it’s very effective, with the idea of flexibility to change or to add or whatever.”

I asked, “Are there any elements of the plan at odds with the culture of the North 10th and Treadaway congregation as you understand it?” In response, participants talked about “women’s roles” and “creativity in general.” Collectively, the team noted that there

may be some resistance to those elements of the ministry but quickly included evidence of openness within the leadership of the congregation. The team said “yes” in unison to the question of whether the plan clearly identified persons with authority and responsibility for implementation.

When asked if they saw “the proposed drama-based arts ministry as a viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation,” everyone said “yes.” Participant 6 said, “it’ll bring young people.” Participant 4 added, “The colleges as well ... there may be a partnership ... with college students coming over and doing workshops.... There are a lot of different avenues.”

Participant 2 shared:

There’s just a section of the population in the theatre department that really ... is not enriched in a performance capacity at all, and so it fills a need in the community, even just for them, even if they don’t come here to be members, if they just have a place to be filled and to be not only accepted, but encouraged to explore their art that way, I think it’s viable for that.

Finally, I asked the participants, “Do you feel that the project accomplished its goal of creating a written drama-based arts ministry plan suitable for presentation to the congregational leaders? Why or why not? All participants said, “yes.” Participant 3 commented, “clearly written, substantive.” Participant 1 said, “flexible.” Participant 5 said, “Thankful to your process.” That ended the group interview. I expressed my appreciation for their time and commitment and closed out the session.

### **Evaluation Methodology**

The evaluation consisted of data collection and data analysis. Data were collected in three ways:

1.) The insider evaluation was obtained via a questionnaire administered to the participants during a group interview at the final session (See Appendix A).

2.) The outsider evaluation was conducted by review of the final document by an outside expert, Eric Little. The outside expert is an actor, teacher, director, and writer based in Atlanta, Georgia. He is an instructor of theatre arts at Clark Atlanta University. He has served as an artistic associate with Theatrical Outfit and as the artistic director of the EBC Players Drama Ministry at Elizabeth Baptist Church. He is a member of the Actors' Equity Association, the union for professional theatre artists. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Louisiana State University.<sup>7</sup>

3.) The researcher evaluation was conducted by recording and reviewing field notes taken by the researcher and an observer (see Appendix B).

The data were analyzed through coding<sup>8</sup> and triangulation.<sup>9</sup> Coding “assigns units of meaning to descriptions, quotes, texts, etc.,” as “a way of getting a handle on raw data” collected during qualitative research. Key words, phrases, and ideas to be coded came from two sources: 1) themes and words identified as a part of the theological framework of the research project, and 2) themes and words that emerged in data collection via the group interview, the field notes, and the feedback given by the outside expert.

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7. “Staff Directory-Eric Little,” Theatrical Outfit, <http://www.theatricaloutfit.org/staff/eric-little/>. (Archived since originally accessed. The individual is no longer on staff at Theatrical Outfit, and URL is no longer active.)

8. Coding: Sometimes called “indexing,” “tagging,” or “labeling,” coding “makes raw data more accessible for interpretation.” It categorizes words, phrases, and events that appear to be similar into groups to allow for analysis. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 202–3.

9. Triangulation: Multiple data-collection technologies designed to measure a single concept or construct, a way to cross-check data and provide breadth and depth to analysis and increase trustworthiness of research. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

The field notes, the participants' responses to the questionnaire, and the feedback from the outside expert were triangulated. Notes compiled from each area of data collection were examined for patterns, silences, slippages, convergences, and divergences in the data. The final document prepared for presentation to the congregational leaders was reviewed to determine if it accomplished the goal of the project, asking the question "Did the intervention result in the design of a drama-based arts ministry as an avenue to enhance involvement among college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation?"

CHAPTER IV  
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

**Insider Evaluation**

On the last day of the intervention, I conducted a group interview with all participants. Several participants openly expressed excitement for the document that resulted from the intervention. The group unanimously agreed that the intervention had reached its goal of “creating a written drama-based arts ministry plan, suitable for presentation to the congregational leaders.” Participant 4 noted as a strength the emphasis on creativity and openness, and Participant 3 offered that the whole plan was strong. In support of the strength of the document, Participant 2 stated, “there are specific goals, but it’s really open to what we might do with it” and said that the process utilized to get to the proposal was “really strong.” They added, “I’ve never seen anything like that, and I think that the process of it was very Spirit-led, very linked to Scripture, was incredibly intentional and it ignited the fire for the rest of the proposal.” Observed weaknesses that surfaced were related to not mentioning how important art is for young people’s development (“why we chose theatre and drama”), not highlighting spiritual formation enough, and not being able to identify measurable success marks. The two elements of the plan that were seen to be at odds with the culture of Treadaway as the culture is understood by the respondents were its creativity and its lack of distinction between women’s roles and men’s roles for participation in the ministry.

Participants unanimously responded affirmatively to the questions of whether the planning document was complete, whether adequate attention was given to resources available at the congregation, whether clear future steps were established, and whether persons with authority and responsibility for implementation had been identified. Key to the purposes of the study, all agreed that they saw the proposed drama-based arts ministry as a viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation.

### **Outsider Evaluation**

As noted above, Eric Little served as the outside expert. Little is a theatre professional and educator with years of experience and training. He is also a former drama ministry artistic director for the Elizabeth Baptist Church in Atlanta. Little reviewed the final draft of the proposed drama-based arts ministry plan and offered his observations. When asked about the strengths of the document, Little stated, “It is very detailed. It is very clear. I think the way that it is broken down into various sections and categories is very clear.... I think it’s easy to understand, easy to follow. I love, love, love the clarity there. I love the details. And I think it’s very strong.”

In answering the question about the plan’s weaknesses, Little decided to change the term “weaknesses” to “improvements” and suggested that the plan could offer more examples when speaking of productions that may be performed (e.g., *A Raisin in the Sun*). He further suggested that we include numbers related to ministry goals, such as how many students will be reached and how many students will get involved. Little also noted that the one thing that the plan needs for it to be complete is how we would market to the students. Beyond that, he felt the plan provided clear future steps and clearly

identified persons with authority and responsibility for implementation. He answered “definitely” to the idea that he saw the proposed ministry as a viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation. He also answered “definitely” to the following question: “Do you feel that the project accomplished its goal of creating a written drama-based art ministry plan suitable for presentation to the congregational leaders?”

### **Researcher Evaluation**

During the intervention, I, along with another participant observer, took field notes. Field notes and session dialogue were coded and examined for emerging patterns and/or themes. Coding revealed several expected and unexpected results. As expected, variations of the word “drama” (“drama,” “dramatize,” “dramatic”), and the words “college,” “young,” and “ministry” had high frequencies of occurrences. Several unexpected code frequencies appeared. They included various descriptors for “children” (“children,” “child,” “youth,” “kids”). In the context of the intervention, children were mostly spoken of as the persons to be served via the ministry. Another unexpected notably frequent recurring code was “generation(s)” as it related to an ongoing generational divide between old and young in the congregation. Although the appearance of the word “generation(s)” was no surprise, I found the high level of interest in the ministry being intentionally used as a source of healing for all members to be a positive development. Other codes included: “spiritual formation,” “serve(s),” “activity(ies),” “ministry,” and “Holy Spirit.” The word “incarnation” was explicitly mentioned only a few times.

Much of what emerged was reasonably anticipated based on the examination of the congregational context during the preliminary study. However, there were some surprises. In line with the above, several themes prevailed:

1. Community for College Students
2. Connect to the Spirit of God through Spiritual Formation
3. Drama and Theatre Afford Involvement
4. Holistic Healing across All Generations
5. Serve the Children with the Ministry

### **Emerging Themes**

#### Community for College Students

With Treadaway being in a college town, it is no surprise that a drama-based arts ministry was viewed as a possible way to engage college students and other young adult adherents and to offer them community and opportunities to be mentored at the same time. The value of belonging to a community and community-building were noted on more than one occasion, sometimes without explicit use of the word community. This included the idea of providing adult mentors for college students and supporting a “home away from home” environment for them.

The idea of being a part of a community in the spiritual sense ties in well with the recognition of fellow believers and, in this case, adherents with the theological concept of the whole people of God and the idea of “church-as-family,” leaning into the benefits of fictive kinship. Traditionally, it is the norm in many predominantly African American Churches of Christ that members replace the titles of “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Ms.,” and “Miss” with relational titles of “Brother” and “Sister.” Thus, “Mr. Jones” is known as “Brother



Jones.” While this signifies a certain level of “church-as-family” relationships, it does not automatically mean that there is a close relationship between any given set of members. However, a distinction can be made when through deeper, individual relationships, members and/or adherents claim one another as a parent or child, substituting such terms as “Mother” or “Mama” for “Sister,” with the younger of the two being called by their first name without a title. Not all college students will seek out that level of relationship, but for those who desire it, it is a welcome experience.

In addition to the community that would feasibly develop for college students and other young adults with the whole congregation, there was conversation around how the drama-based arts ministry could fuel greater community among college students and other young adults. One participant made specific note of college students in ACU’s theatre department who are in need of more performance opportunities, stating, “and so it fills a need in the community, even just for them, even if they don’t come here as members, but if they just have a place to be filled and to be not only accepted, but encouraged to explore their art that way, I think it’s viable for that.”

When one considers the big picture of the whole people of God, ultimately no one is considered less important than the other and what may be points of division for the world are not points of division among believers. Each person has a role to play in this community of God’s people. The term “the whole people of God” hints at not attempting to claim full knowledge of how God relates to others whom we may not see as part of our tribe. The Catholic Church made an interesting ecumenical move in this regard during

Vatican II when they looked beyond themselves to view non-Catholic Christians as “in communion” with the church and non-Christians as being “ordered” to the church.<sup>1</sup>

Without an attempt to resolve the age-old discussion of the Christian and Muslim relationship, Participant 1 shared the following observation about how the arts impact life in Ghana, “Muslims came to the Christmas celebration. The chief opinion leaders, elders who were all Muslim, came to the church to see the drama. It became a time of communication to the community. The chiefs would ask for the productions.”

Reflecting on the inability of the disciples on the road to Emmaus to recognize Jesus and on the phenomenon of TikTok, Participant 4 noted, “Everybody wants a community ... it [TikTok] is this weird space where it feels like you’re fostering community, but it’s really not the community that is needed or should be had ... we expect other people to be that community for us instead of fostering it within ourselves so we can see his presence.”

#### Connect to the Spirit of God through Spiritual Formation

The value of keeping a focus on the Spirit was highlighted early in the intervention process. One participant reminded the group of the importance of having “a connection to the Spirit both individually and collectively.” While the emergence of this theme as a point of discussion was not a surprise, the amount of time spent emphasizing and reiterating it was. I feel this is an area that warrants further research and exploration. Historically, the Churches of Christ with which I am most familiar have not invested a lot of time in developing a robust understanding of the present activities of the Holy Spirit and its ongoing work in the believer’s spiritual development.

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1. Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II.”

There appears to be a tension between the idea of the Holy Spirit's past and present work in the church and in the world, the embrace of spiritual gifts that come from the Holy Spirit, and the ongoing need for spiritual formation beyond the weekly worship service. I remember as a child being taught that once the Bible was complete, the Holy Spirit had done its work and that the only way we interacted with the Spirit was through reading the Bible. Although there has been no official declaration that Churches of Christ have moved from this position, it is clear in sermons and in dialogue among other members that much more room has been made for understanding the Spirit as an active and present agent in the Christian journey.

Participant 6 stood out as the team member who would help us keep the need for a connection with the Holy Spirit a top priority in the development of a drama-based arts ministry and any other work of the church. During the devotion period of Session One, they noted that John 1:9–14 reminded them of the parent/child relationship and illustrated the need for connection to the Spirit world: “as children need their parents, we need God, we need that Spirit.” Another of the participants mentioned that “we don’t talk about the Holy Spirit” and noted that “anything that you start going forward has to grow out of our own individual surrender, absolute surrender to the will of the Almighty and to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.”

There appears to be a great acceptance of the idea that the Spirit is credited with the distribution of spiritual gifts that are given to facilitate the ministry of the church and to support practical activities that build up the entire body. At the same time, there also appears to be a lingering skittishness to corporately immerse into the idea that the Spirit is an active agent in the lives of individual members, congregations, and the world at

large. Churches of Christ overall do not have a strong history of robust pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit. As previously noted, this warrants further research to determine how views and practices have evolved. It stands to reason that since the Spirit is held as the provider of spiritual gifts, for many, the work of the Holy Spirit is now viewed as more than just providing the inspiration for the Bible.

The participants were mindful of the mistrust that may still be embedded in Churches of Christ when one speaks directly about the workings of the Holy Spirit. It was agreed that spiritual formation was an agreeable term, and there was a consensus that the ministry would be intentional about spiritual formation of college students and children. The employment of spiritual formation allows space for spiritual disciplines such as silence, *lectio divina*, meditation, prayer, etc. As the team spoke about spiritual formation, Participant 6 shared, “when we say spiritual formation, then when the solitude for the children starts showing up in the retreats or whatever ... it’s in the context of this spiritual formation.”

One participant spoke of the need for “spiritual transformation and empowerment.” They see the ultimate goal of the ministry as to “provide a platform for the Spirit of God to work.” Without a purposeful lean into the Spirit, we run the risk of providing adherents with what another participant called “another mannequin” instead of a lively faith.

#### Drama and Theatre Afford Involvement

In theatre circles, it is not unusual to hear someone say, “all you need for theatre is two planks and a passion.” This is meant to express how theatre can happen with minimal resources and/or people. However, the truth is there are many people involved in

almost any given theatrical endeavor. One need only look at the printed program for local or national theatrical productions. This will reveal numerous people who were never visible during the production but were crucial for its fulfillment. Theatre, by nature, is a collaborative endeavor. As Treadaway considers the implementation of a drama-based arts ministry, it opens the door to the employment of a wide range of talents and skills needed for its success.

Based on the intervention, we included the following statement in the plan prepared for the congregational leaders: “The establishment of a drama-based arts ministry would expand the opportunities for young adults to utilize gifts in writing, acting, directing, singing, visual arts, technical support, and instruction that could culminate into artistic presentations to serve other members of the church and surrounding communities.” The list of gifts was not meant to be exhaustive, and the ministry allows for other skill sets that could support the ministry. Theatre without an audience is not theatre. Thus, theatre and drama make room for the entire congregation and the community at large “to be involved.”

Theatre’s call for involvement is reflected in its history. As discussed earlier in this paper, theatre as we know it today had its humble beginnings in the Mass services of the medieval church with a few priests and a few words. Because it is so engaging, it soon outgrew the church building and eventually outgrew the church. What started off small, led to elaborate, larger-than-life expressions of the whole Bible. Needless to say, many more people were involved as the genre evolved.

Given all of the above, opportunities expand for participation in the life and the ministry of the church. While not everyone will find their space in a drama-based arts

ministry, it could very well be the thing that allows some individuals to feel connected to the congregation as they operate in their gift, whether on stage or behind the scenes. During the group interview, one of the participants pointed out that “it’s not like the pressure to feel like you have to be on stage or in the spotlight, like there’s space for everyone.” Earlier in the intervention, one of the participants observed that something is needed for “involvement, connecting, and attracting students and others” and then later stated, “Theatre and drama create a lot of opportunity for involvement.”

Participant 5 shared:

I think we have all the ingredients to make something truly life-changing in a way that is compelling, like I mentioned last time, *A Time to Kill* really changed my life. It may not be exactly that ... I think we have a lot of expertise and knowledge in this room, a lot of wisdom here ... I feel like if we all come together, we can really make something life-changing ... that would get people involved, everybody.

Duck outlines how children and youth at different ages learn differently. She notes that older children and youth (age thirteen and above) should be allowed to participate in activities typically carried out by adults and that these children are particularly attuned to imagination and narrative.<sup>2</sup> Along the lines of participation and the older children’s attraction to “imagination and narrative,” drama is a natural way to involve them in their own learning process. Participant 4 talked about the positive impact of having college students engaged in the church’s Vacation Bible Schools when they were a child and recalled the use of skits as one form of teaching that occurred. They added that some information was better received from college students than adults because of how the children related to them.

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2. Duck, *Worship*, 29.

## Holistic Healing across All Generations

The generation gap that exists in the congregation was talked about in the preliminary study, and it was no surprise that it was mentioned during the intervention. It was fairly predictable that there would be some discussion of how to work around it or, at a minimum, how the ministry design team might still get the work of the ministry done in spite of the divide, perpetuating the notion that there are at least two congregations operating in the space. What was not as predictable was the deep level of concern for the proposed drama-based arts ministry to play a major role in the healing of all members across all generations, especially the older generation. Noting the group's resignation that a generation gap was inevitable and there was nothing that could be done about it, one of the participants reminded the group that there was a need to "bridge the gap," that "the older generation was once younger," and that "it's about helping the other person." They posed the question "How do we heal together?" From that point forward, the exchanges became more holistic and cross-generational in their tone.

This desire to see everyone healed harkens back to the idea of church-as-family discussed previously in the context of the whole people of God. Without proper care and intentional actions, the elder generation may find itself dismissive of the younger generation and the younger generation may find itself simply tolerating the older generation, both hoping the other does not interfere in their rhythms and that they can find their peaceful coexistence without having true connection and deep relationships. However, the church-as-family connotes no one being left out or disregarded.

Embracing church-as-family has its challenges. Participant 4 recalled getting the sense that the older generation did not trust passing responsibilities along to the younger

generation, reciting a time when the sentiment they perceived from the seniors regarding a particular church activity was “Don’t worry about it, we’ll take it back over.” They declared that there’s “no bridge between the generations.” Another participant observed that the culture of a congregation can be extropic (open) or entropic (closed). When a church is “entropic only to family, no one can penetrate ... ‘we don’t have to relate to anyone outside the group.’” One can be in the same location and still outside the group. The participant added, “A congregational study by a professional group discovered that North 10th and Treadaway is a Sunday morning church.” That factor, signifying limited to no contact throughout the week, contributes to the difficulty that may lie in moving toward the church-as-family model.

The challenges were acknowledged, but there remained a strong interest in bridging the gap and seeking healing for all generations. Two participants suggested a town hall meeting to facilitate conversation among everyone. Participant 6 put an emphasis on “listening” and saw a town hall meeting as a time of “sharing,” with those present being okay with agreeing to disagree. The main objective would be to “hear” one another and start the process of “healing.” Participants recognized that each generation has its own trauma and saw the town hall as a safe environment for conversation. One participant suggested that they, as a young person, “connect with the trauma” of the older person and that they “listen to build that relationship.” Finally, the drama-based arts ministry was seen as an opportunity to provide “a platform for older members to share their stories.” The sense of healing across all generations was not limited to the older generation. The entire project presumed a healing effect on college students and other young adults as they are drawn deeper into the life and ministry of the congregation. The



idea of setting a foundation for securing the well-being of the children is discussed next as the final theme: “Serve the Children with the Ministry.”

### Serve the Children with the Ministry

An unexpected theme to emerge was the desire to focus the ministry consistently on serving children while engaging college students and other young adults as teachers and spiritual servants. Over the course of the intervention, the focus of the conversations moved to seeing this as an opportunity for the college students and other young adults to very systematically and intentionally pour into the lives of the children, taking advantage of the relatability between the two age groups.

The idea of focusing on the children first surfaced in the context of discussing what elements of drama ministry the participants may have previously experienced in the church context. Participant 4 recounted attending Vacation Bible School where skits were used to engage and teach the children. They added, though, that the use of skits didn’t give kids enough credit, stating that “kids can understand more.” They shared that as they got older, the kid life was “cut off,” and “youth groups [are] heavy conversation [and] moved to no imagination.”

Participant 3 also spoke of skits as:

Normally done for kids. Vivid and imaginative. [That’s] put to sleep by the time you reach a certain age. Within imagination is the word “magi” as in “magician.” Can we access the invisible without our imagination? If we lose that, how can we connect with the invisible, the intangible? Unless we become as little children, we cannot access the Kingdom of God. As adults, pray to be receptive to that imagination.

Participant 6 stated, “Older people say, ‘Children are closer to God.’ Creativity is stamped out of children. Children talk. Where did they get that from? Listen to their imagination.”

When the church is viewed as the whole people of God, children are not left out. In fact, many of them are more faithful in attendance than some adults because they are attending as a part of their parents’ or guardians’ household and, up until a certain age, have little say in whether they will attend. Congregations would be wise to invest in this captive audience, knowing that there is only so much time before the young people will decide for themselves if they will attend church classes and other gatherings. Their experiences during the compulsory years will impact their decision to continue or not when they have a choice. In line with the ministry design team’s instinct to seek ways to serve the children is the recognition that the child’s spiritual development starts very early in life, and it is easier to shape them in ways that lead them to a deeper faith walk while they are young than to recalibrate them once they are of age. This echoes Solomon’s admonition to “train up a child in the way [they] should go: and when [they are] old, [they] will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6 KJV).

Though it varies from person to person, once a child reaches a certain age, it is typical that they want to be involved. Via the drama-based arts ministry, participation in the life and ministry of the church would be extended to the children in a new and invigorating way. Participant 4 encouraged the team to “focus on kids. The older people get, they become less responsive. [We] must focus on them to make sure we don’t repeat the same cycle. [It’s] time to make sure kids are in a position to lead and make changes. Having a building full of children reinvigorates and brings life, energy ... [it] would

behoove us to focus on youth.” Participant 7 reminded the group, “If you lose the youth, you lose the future.”

### **Conclusion**

Viewing the data from the above three angles supports the conclusion that the intervention was successful at its stated goal of “creating a written drama-based art ministry plan suitable for presentation to the congregational leaders.” It is also consistently seen from all angles as a “viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation.” Both of these findings are points of convergence from all three angles.

As the data is examined for slippage, one item that was discussed during the intervention was the need for examples of productions to be presented. In the intervention discussion, it was decided that examples were not necessary and may even be distracting. However, the outside expert was emphatic that giving the readers of the document examples would enhance the attractiveness of the plan. Another slippage was related to the question of whether the document was complete. While the ministry design team agreed that it was, the outside expert suggested additional details on how the ministry would be marketed to college students needed to be included.

A notable silence comes in the form of a question: “What is the congregation doing or planning to do the address the generation gap and the disenfranchisement of young female adherents beyond the possibilities that a drama-based arts ministry may present?” The young people who participated in the focus group earlier during the preliminary research were willing to attend without requesting changes; however, the congregation remains challenged to proactively create space for the God-given talents of

all its adherents. Bridging generational and gender gaps is no simple feat. Much prayer, consideration, and discernment will be required to navigate the culture of the congregation to care for individuals with a widely diverse set of ideas and experiences converging in the same location. It was noted during the intervention that the late evangelist Marshall Keeble, who established Treadaway in the mid-1930s, still sets the tone for the norms and rituals of the congregation. This could pose a challenge for the implementation of something based on creativity, even nearly 90 years later.

The results of the project aligned well with the expectations that I had going into the study. There was an initial sense of caution among some of the participants, as captured in the field notes of the other participant observer. The sense of caution gave way to a high level of engagement by all participants during the first session of the intervention, and that engagement carried forward until the last session. As anticipated, varying levels of expressed excitement for the process, a collaborative spirit, and a sense of camaraderie among the participants developed and increased as we moved through the intervention. All participants and the outside expert acknowledged that a drama-based arts ministry is a viable means to engage a wider cross-section of the congregation, inclusive of college students and other young adults, in active ministry and personal spiritual development. The consensus among the participants, as well as the opinion of the outside expert, was that the final document was suitable for presenting to the leaders and the congregation. The ministry design team scheduled a meeting to make an oral presentation and deliver the written document to the congregational leaders. A presentation to the congregation was noted as a future step, depending on the results of the meeting with the leadership.

I shared the above findings with three of the participants, including the other participant observer, to allow them to respond to the emerging themes and other elements of the evaluations. Two responded collectively to say that it was a “good summary” and that they did not have anything to add or critique. The third participant replied by email and stated, “Just finished reading the document. It looks great! Well written and covers everything accurately.... It provides a fresh opportunity to bring new life back into the congregation! Thanks for sharing this and thanks for leading us through this process and engagement!” As noted in my prospectus, I had also intended to share the themes with the outside expert for feedback. However, his schedule and other obligations did not make that option available. With the feedback received from the three participants, I feel confident that I am representing well the ministry design team’s perceptions of what happened during the intervention.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings enumerated in Chapter IV, I believe the project successfully attained its goal of creating a drama-based arts ministry plan to present to leaders of the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ. A drama-based arts ministry is seen as one avenue to increase spiritual development and congregational involvement among college students and other young adult adherents. To address the need, a group of seven present and former adherents was assembled to complete an intervention project. Data gathered during the intervention were analyzed and determined to indicate the project was successful in its stated goal.

#### **Trustworthiness**

##### Applicability

The North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ is a small, historically African American church in the middle of West Texas with its own history, earned and unearned narratives, positive attributes, challenges, and local players. And yet, so much of what gives Treadaway its identity is shared by numerous congregations across the United States. Local congregations, whether started by a dynamic evangelist like Marshall Keeble or a handful of visionaries who wished to share the Gospel in specific places, often find their past more vibrant than their present. For some, the future looks uncertain as long-time members age, some becoming homebound and others passing away. Many churches have seen young people leave in droves. Even so, some churches have the

benefit of being in college towns where the potential of young people looking for a church home is heightened each fall as the academic year begins. Although the Gospel does not change, congregations are tasked with asking themselves if they are committed to deeply serving all who might choose to build their spiritual lives in their midst. Recognizing the lack of opportunities for spiritual development and meaningful involvement in the life of Treadaway among college students and other young adults, the goal of this project was to create a drama-based arts ministry plan to share with the leaders of the congregation, viewing the ministry as one way to increase involvement among the targeted group.

Having the benefit of two recent college graduates and a current college student participating in the intervention provided insights directly from the demographic target. With the knowledge that there is a wide variety of perspectives among college students and other young adults, their voices provided guidance on what is important to young people when a congregation seeks to make space for their gifts and talents. Additionally, the outside expert, who has many years of professional theatre experience and who recently led a drama ministry at a megachurch, enthusiastically endorsed the resulting written plan and stated that he wished he had had this plan when he was managing a drama ministry. This speaks to the applicability of the research findings in settings both like and very different from the Treadaway context.

### Credibility

Data were triangulated from three angles: insider, outsider, and researcher. A group interview of project participants during the final session of the intervention allowed them to give feedback on the collectively written drama-based arts ministry plan prepared

for the congregational leaders. This served as the insider evaluation. An outside expert, who is a theatre professional, drama instructor, and former drama ministry artistic director, gave a full endorsement of the ministry plan as a viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation. He also affirmed that the project accomplished its goal of generating a document suitable for presenting to congregational leadership. I, along with another participant observer, took field notes. For the research evaluation, I reviewed and coded the notes, identifying themes that emerged in the data. I also conducted select member checking by having three of the participants review the findings, soliciting their feedback on whether what I observed corresponded with what they had experienced. They were quite satisfied with the findings. Their responses included “good summary” and “well written and covers everything.”

#### Reflexivity and Personal Significance

As an arts professional who has promoted theatre for over thirty years, I must acknowledge my high opinion of theatre and my bias of believing it has the power to change lives in positive ways. This could easily have influenced where I turned the lens as I completed the preliminary research, leading me to give deference to the arts if there were competing possibilities for research. During the intervention, I guided the many conversations and thus influenced what was considered necessary for the process and welcome in the room. Along these lines, I am sure my perspectives and processes influenced the study in ways to which I am blind. On the other hand, I am an empathetic individual who listens closely and pays very close attention to the feelings and experiences of others. I believe this served the process well as I sought to engage the entire group and avoid letting participants' shy behavior prevent the intervention process



from benefiting from what they had to offer. In a very intentional way, I made the discussions as level as feasible, and at least on one occasion when a participant asked me if we were going in a certain direction with the ministry, I redirected the question to them for them to tell us. One evidence that I was able to take the journey with the team without creating obstacles for the work to progress was the turning of the ministry toward utilizing the ministry to create a children's ministry and the determination to utilize the ministry to address the generation gap, seeking healing for all ages. I was not in any way opposed to these developments, but they were unexpected to me, and both were represented in actionable items in the final plan.

In line with the two developments in the above paragraph, the study reinvigorated and reinforced my recognition of how interrelated so many things are. My focus was on college students and young adults, with the potential risk of leading to an insulated and isolated experience for the target group without them being integrated into the full life of the church. Witnessing the way the ministry discussions pivoted to include children was impactful to me. Along those same lines, it would have been easy to see the ministry as separate from the older generation. However, during the very first session, one of the recent college graduates observed that we would be defeating the purpose of the ministry if it is not available to serve and heal everyone. Experiencing the sessions with the ministry design team has caused a deeper understanding of and closer relationship with each of them. My respect for the Holy Spirit and how God moves in unexpected ways also increased.

## **Significance and Implications**

### **Sustainability**

The proposed drama-based arts ministry has several systemic factors working in its favor to be sustainable, covering both process and substance. In relation to the process, the plan was created by a cross-section of individuals representing different age groups and ethnicities from among the adherents. The next steps listed on the plan are as follows: presentation to leaders; upon approval, share ministry information with the congregation; designate the ministry leaders and begin the planning process; and implement the ministry. Once the ministry is implemented, it has a built-in annual calendar that will contribute to the development of rhythms and rituals suitable for sustaining the ministry for the foreseeable future. The presence of personable Abilene Christian University faculty members, alumni, and current students builds a bridge to other current and future students, allowing for invitation to be a part of the congregation. Then, contingent on interest, they may also join the ministry.

In relation to substance, the plan that resulted from the intervention is multigenerational. Although its original intent was to ensure opportunities for spiritual development and involvement among college students and other young adults at the congregation, implementation of the plan entails the creation of a children's ministry and planned efforts to interact and engage with all generations. Many individuals feel strongly about supporting efforts that mean positive and formative experiences for children. Additionally, the tender affection turned toward the older members could very feasibly decrease the likelihood of an "us and them" demeanor when it comes to different

generations. As discussed during the intervention, ideally the ministry will be only one part of the big picture to move toward healing for everyone at the congregation.

### Ecclesial Significance

The most relevant issue of ecclesial significance for me related to this project has to do with the idea of embracing the whole people of God and facilitating the ongoing presence of Christ. On the last day of the intervention, as we finished up the process of writing the plan, a nagging concern filled the room and demanded that it be addressed. We were comfortable with the plan itself, but there was a question about the church's commitment to the college students and other young adults. A ministry can be a good ministry, but if the soil in which it is being planted is hard and rocky, it is bound for failure. This wrestling caused us to add a second goal to the proposal and that was "to open dialogue with the leadership regarding the church's commitment to and vision for being a thriving congregation that engages all generations." In other words, when the young people say "yes" to our invitation, will we be ready to receive them? In a previous session, one of the participants had talked about the "stage" of the church being occupied, with no space for anyone else that did not fit a pattern established around the congregation's inception in the 1930s. During the group interview, the same participant shared that sometimes people become afraid of "freshness."

In a church environment where doctrine is a central driving force, the lines between doctrine and culture can become blurred and things may be blocked, not because they are in violation of biblical doctrine but because they are in violation of culture. As I go forward on my ecclesial journey, I intend to pay more attention to who is being silenced or ignored as I ask myself, "For whom do I make space in congregational

settings?” Closely tied to the same matter is how we as a body of believers create and support platforms that honor the many God-given talents of Christian women. One of the very attractive attributes of theatre is its egalitarian nature.

### Theological Significance

Without much effort, the intervention leaned heavily into the idea of the church as the whole people of God. As efforts to address one demographic group, college students and other young adults, were underway, the cry for “healing” the whole body surfaced as an important component of this and any ministry that may develop at the congregation. Those participating in the intervention concurred that the ministry must be intergenerational. Reflecting on the need to bridge the generational gap, Participant 5 asserted that “It’s about helping other people” and posed the question “How do we heal together?” Recognizing that the generation gap includes differing views that may be termed conservative or progressive, much care must be given to leading gently and in love, accepting that there may be points on which to agree to disagree but still recognizing one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. The deep concern for the spiritual development of children was another value that showed up for the ministry design team, fostering intentional efforts by the group to nurture future generations of believers. Participant 7 declared, “If you lose the youth, you lose the future,” reflecting a focus beyond the college students, young adults, and senior adherents and the present time. The whole people of God are not limited to the current generation, and the plan accounts for that.

At the heart of the project is the idea that everyone has something of value to add to the body. Thus, participation in the life and ministry of the church is central to the

success of this project. On the one hand, college and other young adults are in need of ministry. They are at a critical juncture in their lives as they transition from youth to young adulthood and all the challenges that come with this new territory. At the same time, each of them has been uniquely gifted to contribute to the life of the church. By arranging the ministry as one of service from the college students and other young adults to the youth, paired with mentorship from more senior adherents, the church will create a way for the college students and young adults to gain the benefits of both giving and receiving. As Paul declared Timothy to be his “true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2 NIV), the possibility of nurtured fictive kinships between the mentors and college students and young adults furthers the spiritual formation of those involved in the ministry.

I selected the incarnation as one of the theological lenses through which to process the current study. As stated earlier, it is “the doctrine that the second person of the Trinity assumes human nature, becoming man, in order to bring the salvation of fallen human beings.”<sup>1</sup> In this definition, Christ assumes human nature and becomes man. Theatre can support the sharing of the gospel, and it affords a ready opportunity for the players to assume the nature of characters and to become whatever is necessary to bring healing and communicate the presence of God. Just as Christ was present and acting among the people who were in close proximity to him, theatre allows its participants to be present with those they serve and those with whom they serve. The fact that a viable drama-based arts ministry plan resulted from the intervention puts the Treadaway congregation in a position to lean into being present for God on a deeper level both internally and in the greater community. At a time when the proliferation of

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1. Crisp, “Incarnation,” 160.

communication media is at a dizzying pace, drama, theatre, and other forms of art call upon individuals to slow down and live in real time. Drama and theatre demand presence. The creativity and real-time pace that characterize theatre encourage reflection and serve as fertile soil for spiritual formation. Theatre, at its best, is collaborative and community-building.

### **Questions Not Answered**

Questions that remain unanswered include the following:

1. Will people considered more conservative be able to find a source of healing in the presence of a drama-based arts ministry?
2. Will people considered more conservative see it as a spark to ignite an enhanced spiritual formation journey or will it be seen as strange fire that challenges the well-established hierarchy of the church?
3. Will there be enough time and a strong enough will to soften the ground, if it turns out to be hard and rocky?
4. Will greater space be made to welcome the gifts and talents of children and female adherents?
5. Will the congregation commit itself to bridging the generation gap beyond the efforts of the drama-based arts ministry?
6. Will the congregation commit itself to serving the college student population as an integral part of the church's ongoing rhythm?
7. Does the extensive use of drama in Ghana warrant deeper study and reflection for cultural parallels and possible application in light of the Treadaway congregation being made up mostly of members of the African Diaspora?

## **Conclusion**

During the first session of the intervention, I shared the history of drama and the church with the participants. Those present, including an individual who had studied theatre, were not aware that theatre as we know it today has deep roots in the church dating back to medieval times or that, for various reasons, the church and theatre parted ways only to recently, in measured terms, come back together. With the implementation of the drama-based arts ministry, Treadaway stands to recapture the power of theatre to transform lives. The intervention and the presence of many voices helped the ministry to avoid being self-centered, instead making it truly an instrument of service that allows for multigenerational healing. As the ministry is embarked upon with the idea of being present with others and with God, it is hoped that one day someone, while participating in the drama-based arts ministry, will be able to say, “Did not our hearts burn within us?” and at that moment realize they were on holy ground in the presence of God.

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## APPENDIX A

### Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



Dear Curtis,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 21-133 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:

- Non-research, and
  - Non-human research
- Based on:

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## APPENDIX B

### Participants' Survey

1. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed drama-based arts ministry plan? Explain.
2. Is the planning document complete? If not, what questions or concerns have not been addressed or fully addressed?
3. Has adequate attention been given to the available congregational resources related to implementing the plan? Explain.
4. How effectively does the plan provide clear next steps, intermediate steps, and long-term actions necessary for successful implementation? Elaborate.
5. Are there any elements of the plan at odds with the culture of the North 10th and Treadaway congregation as you understand it? If yes, please list and explain.
6. Does the plan clearly identify persons with authority and responsibility for implementation?
7. Do you see the proposed drama-based arts ministry as a viable means of engaging college students and other young adults in the life of the congregation? Explain.
8. Do you feel that the project accomplished its goal of creating a written drama-based arts ministry plan, suitable for presentation to the congregational leaders? Why or why not?

APPENDIX C

Blank Field Notes Protocol

**Blank Field Notes Protocol**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

Observation	First Impression	Initial Interpretation
Additional Notes: Pre-session, Break Times, Post Session		

APPENDIX D  
Proposed Ministry Design Plan  
**PROPOSED MINISTRY DESIGN PLAN**  
**FOR A**  
**DRAMA-BASED ARTS MINISTRY AT**  
**THE NORTH 10th AND TREADAWAY CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**INTRODUCTION**

During its nearly 90 years of existence, the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ has consistently attracted individuals with a wide range of abilities, educational levels, and experiences. Being situated in a city with three major institutions of higher learning, including one with a Church of Christ affiliation, has afforded the congregation to be a spiritual home away from home for many young people during their college years. In line with the transient nature of a college town, the levels of engagement among college students and other young adults in the life and ministry of the congregation vary from year to year.

In 2018, research at the congregation was conducted via an asset mapping exercise with the entire congregation and a focus group with college students and other young adults. The research revealed that there was a wide range of interests, talents, and abilities among all generations that were not being taken full advantage of through ongoing ministry opportunities. In the study, college students and other young adults stood out as

one group for whom there was great interest and enthusiasm about deeper engagement and greater contribution to the life of the congregation.

This document proposes the creation of a drama-based arts ministry to serve as one avenue to enhance the spiritual development and congregational involvement among college students and other young adult attendees. The establishment of a drama-based arts ministry would expand the opportunities for young adults to utilize gifts in writing, acting, directing, singing, visual arts, technical support, and instruction that could culminate into artistic presentations to serve other members of the church and surrounding communities.

During a series of meetings with the ministry design team, it was determined that a drama-based arts ministry, conducted by college students and other young adults, could both increase their involvement and serve as a vital resource for a children's ministry at the congregation. More details are provided below.

### **GOALS OF THE PROPOSAL**

One goal of this proposed ministry plan is to establish a drama-based arts ministry that enlists the talents and interests of college students and other young adults to serve the congregation and the surrounding community. Another goal is to open dialogue with the leadership regarding the church's commitment to and vision for being a thriving congregation that engages with all generations.

## **NEED FOR THE MINISTRY**

The proposed drama-based arts ministry plan detailed herein seeks to address the following needs at the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ:

1. The need for more opportunities for college students and other young adults to fully engage in ministry at the congregation
2. The need for ministry programs to serve children within the church and the local community
3. The need for ongoing, robust spiritual formation for college students, other young adults, and children
4. The need for additional congregation-wide activities to build and enhance stronger relationships among all ages

## **TIMETABLE/SCOPE OF THE MINISTRY**

The ministry's activities will run parallel to the academic school calendar. Initially, there will be a period of at least two months of planning before the ministry is launched. The ministry will entail a summer film camp for youth, a fall production, and a spring production. Other activities may also be planned. The ministry's annual planning period will be held the second week following each summer film camp for youth.

College and other young adults will serve as teachers and spiritual servants for children at the congregation during Sunday School and Wednesday night Bible classes. Through its ongoing program, "Spirit and Faith in Action," the ministry will utilize the dramatic arts to encourage participants to grow in their connection between spirituality and creativity



while expressing their God-given talents. Key elements will include Scripture reflection, storytelling & parables, singing, spoken word & poetry, and visual arts.

### **BUDGET/POTENTIAL SUPPORT SOURCES**

The initial budget for the ministry is \$3500 per year. This amount includes a contribution to the church to offset an increase in utilities and supplies. Other items covered in the budget include funds needed to secure licensing, costumes, props, venue rentals, insurance, etc. The ministry will take responsibility for raising those funds. The budget may increase as higher levels of funding are secured.

Potential sources of support include alumni members of the North 10th and Treadaway Church of Christ (especially those who attended during their college years), other individuals who wish to support young people, and local churches with domestic mission budgets. Select sister congregations and the Abilene Christian University Theatre Department will be approached for ministry partnerships. Other potential partners include the Eden Center for Regenerative Culture, to which Treadaway members Dan and Brenda McVey are connected; the Curtis House Cultural Center; and the G.V. Daniels Recreational Center.

Treadaway alumni members that contribute to the ministry will be invited to an annual fundraising brunch that will give them the opportunity to connect with the college students and other young adults engaged in the ministry and to reconnect with the congregation. Alumni who are working in the arts will be afforded an opportunity to share their experiences and faith journey with those in attendance.

## **KEY PERSONNEL**

The ministry will be led by a small team of Christ-centered individuals with applicable skills, interests, and training. College students and other young adults will serve as student teachers and spiritual servants. The minister, the associate minister, and their wives will serve as spiritual mentors to the ministry leaders, the student teachers, and the spiritual servants.

## **YEAR ONE MINISTRY GOALS**

- Pre-launch Planning Sessions
- Establish Ministry Leaders
- Develop and implement Sunday School and Wednesday Night Bible Class Curricula
- Raise \$3500 to support the ministry
- Initiate and build relationships with current local college students
- Initiate and build relationships with ministry partners
- Conduct Summer Film Camp for Youth
- Summer Planning Period
- Present Fall Production
- Conduct at least one intergenerational activity for the congregation
- Present Spring Production

## **NEXT STEPS**

Presentation to Leaders

Upon approval, share ministry information with the congregation

Designate the ministry leaders and begin the planning process

Implement the ministry

## BRIEF VITA

Curtis Alexander King was born in the early 1960s in Ruleville, MS, a hot spot during the Civil Rights Movement. His family moved to Mound Bayou, MS, an all-African American community after experiencing trouble with Ruleville residents who did not agree with his mother's decision to register to vote and to serve meals to Freedom Riders at her cafe.

King holds an Associate of Arts of Business Administration degree from Southwestern Christian College (Terrell, TX); a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in Management and Marketing from Abilene Christian University (Abilene, TX); a Master of Business Administration degree from Howard University (Washington, DC); and a Master of Arts in Christian Ministry degree from Abilene Christian University.

King has been a champion for the arts for much of his adult life, beginning with his involvement at the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center, a multi-arts institution founded as a positive response to the Watts Riots. In Washington, DC, he worked in public relations and marketing at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In Atlanta, King distinguished himself as an innovative leader in audience development as the Community Relations Director for the Alliance Theatre Company and later for Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre Company. Additionally, King has served as the Associate Director for the Siburt Institute for Church Ministry at Abilene Christian University. He

co-founded the Big Country Reentry Coalition in Abilene, TX. He currently serves as the CEO for the Reentry Arts Connection, which he co-founded in Atlanta, in 2021.