



## PART 1


# FOR PASTORS AND LEADERS

---

*Alison Siewert*

Would to God that I could persuade the rich and mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it.


MARTIN LUTHER



**S**ometimes people want drama to happen but don't know how to supply resources or advocate for the people doing it. Listen to one person's story:


I wrote and directed several theater pieces for a national church event. Two of the actors were delayed by a late plane and arrived parched and hungry. I went to the event's command center where there was food left on the lunch table, explained the need and asked if the actors could make themselves sandwiches. The manager said, "No. That's just for our setup team." When I asked if we could at least procure a couple of bottles of water, his answer was, "No. That case has to last our team for the whole conference." Hospitality had to be found a long walk away at the coin-op soda machine.

And over the course of the week, there was more difficulty. The drama team was housed far from each other and far from the meeting site. There was never time to go back to our rooms, even for a quick nap. The small rehearsal space we used before the event



was needed for other meetings—and without notice we found our scripts, props and other belongings stacked outside. There was literally nowhere to rehearse, nowhere even to gather for prayer. We had to circle up in public. Someone suggested we could rehearse in the hallway behind the stage. It turned out to be the garbage area for food services. We tried, but it was so dark and smelly, it proved useless. In the end, amazingly enough, the drama went beautifully, and people felt it was a resounding success. There were some really powerful moments. Yet afterward, we received fewer than five pieces of direct feedback, though they were all positive, from the church leaders and event organizers.

Drama is a new phenomenon in many Christian contexts. It's not something we've embraced, or even allowed, for very long in recent history. In every situation we can probably assume people want to be helpful and encouraging but in many instances don't know how. I'll outline some of the things that church leaders, staff workers, pastors, speakers and



others can do to work well with a drama team and to help drama ministry grow strong.

### HOW ART AND ARTISTS FUNCTION

Art does its best work when it is allowed to flourish, and when artists are allowed to flourish, in a community of trust. When artists are given space and told, “We believe you can help us by telling this story,” they can evoke both life as we know it and life as it shall be in the kingdom’s fullness. The invitation creates an opportunity for artists to engage.

Drama evokes what’s unexplainable. Theater artists help us discover what’s beyond our perception. Artists can get out on an intuitive edge, looking ahead to things which we find hard to describe but which we know are true and real. But this doesn’t happen without nurture: artists must be raised up, disciplined, trained. This is crucial because theater leads people, especially when it takes place in the context of gatherings and worship. In order to serve well, artists need to understand and be helped into the holiness and responsibility of their role.

### ENCOURAGING ARTISTS AS LEADERS

Figuring out how to shape, encourage, challenge and bless artists is a challenge for leaders who work with them. Our investment in artists as followers of Jesus is the single most important way we build art and open space for artists. There are regular life issues with which artists, like anyone else, need help. Developing disciplines of prayer, Scripture study and character is key. Artists need some input about leadership too. They need help answering questions like, *As a performer, how do I think about being “up front”? What can I do to receive both criticism and praise without having either one topple my heart? Can I find courage to perform from a vulnerable place?* Drama team members need to work through many of the same questions as more typical

up-front leaders in a fellowship. But sometimes we don’t consider this because they are not doing traditional leadership such as preaching. If you want to develop a good drama ministry—or any other arts ministry—disciple artists.

### DISCIPLINING ARTISTS

Art is not just about self-expression. In fact, one of our primary calls as artists is not to focus always on ourselves. However, performers in particular are actually taught to focus on themselves, to draw attention to themselves. They have been rewarded for this. They are good at it. They are often attractive, interesting people—it makes sense for others to direct attention their way. When you add to that the way our culture treats well-known actors and the way it exalts self-expression, you can see how quickly and easily performers can develop prima-actor complexes.

Drama teams need help developing the daily, human, outwardly focused sides of ministry: basic servanthood, communal experiences of hearing God in Scripture, love for the lost, intercessory prayer. It’s good for performers to commit to regular, unglamorous service. Some of our team members did laundry for others in their dorms, tutored kids in urban after-school programs, made food for new students during finals weeks. Basic, hands-on work is good for the souls of those who deal most of the time in the abstraction of ideas. One team did several ministry projects together in order to learn ministry, experiencing great community and connection as a bonus. Pastors and other church leaders can model, and support drama teams in developing, this type of communal spirit.

Dramatists need help knowing and trusting that God really loves them. Many performers struggle with poor self-image—that is, with the notion that they should, by their own effort, power and talent, be able to do everything set before them, and do it right. Many artists wrestle with a perfectionism that tells them they’ll

never be adequate. These wrestling matches nearly always leave them less certain of their call, gifts and passion. Of course, we say, “You don’t have to pull it together by yourself.” But artists will still feel an obligation to make beautiful, useful art. You can help them come to know God’s love and the freedom of the gospel on a deeper level. Most of us will soak encouragement right up because we don’t often get it. (Of course, that was before we knew you, but knowing you’re reading this book gives us hope!) And the good news is that regardless of our artistic performance, the God who thought of us and art and life considers us worth his life. Feel free to remind us.

Artists also need challenge. Think of it this way: leaders can support people, holding them up from behind. They also challenge people, urging them to greater things from the front. If the levels of support and challenge work on more or less equivalent terms, people are faced with new and sometimes difficult things to work through but also find the strength to face them. Challenge without support can leave people defeated; support without challenge creates stagnation. Artists need reassurance and encouragement; they also need to be urged on to more. People grow when others press on to more. People grow when others press on them. “Iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17 RSV). Do not, for fear of hurting feelings, avoid telling dramatists the truth. They need to hear it. Remember when you were in junior high and your friend told you about the orange thing hanging off the end of your nose—after the dance was over? It’s never happy to hear the truth way after the fact. Tell people what they need to know right away and while they have power to make adjustments.

### TALKING TO GOD AND EACH OTHER

Drama teams need people to pray for them, to bring them before God. Consider developing a prayer team to work either just with the drama folks or perhaps with all your artists or

worship leaders. A wise mentor once told me, “Get prayer before *and after* public ministry.” Praying before seems obvious, and many of us have always done this. But afterward? Ah, she was right! It is often after performances that we feel most uncertain. Having exposed our deep inner selves to a roomful of people, performers (as well as preachers and worship leaders) often come away feeling raw, tired and shaky. It’s tempting to regret every second that didn’t go as planned, to second-guess every move we made or to gloat in our apparent success. But it’s unfruitful and only leads to a kind of spinning self-defeat and poor self-image or inappropriate self-adulation. It is wise, indeed, to find some people who will agree to meet with the team before and immediately after a performance. Prayer can be brief, but you will see the effect of getting folks to God. Team members may also find deeper issues coming up as they work. Acting, particularly, taps into some vulnerable places in our hearts. Be on the lookout for people who need pastoral attention, prayer and encouragement.

Performers need feedback. That might sound completely obvious, but you’d be surprised how infrequently we hear much in response to our work. A church that wanted one of my sketches contacted me. I asked clearly, in writing, that they let me know how it went—that’s how I learn to write better! I never heard another word. Even when I sent a second note asking about it, I got no response. Sometimes pastors and speakers are so focused on teaching, preaching and administration that they lose sight of art, even if they’re enthusiastic about it. When drama is a newer component of ministry, people tend not to know how to evaluate it or what to say. Audiences sometimes love what they just saw but feel awkward letting an actor know they appreciated the performance. Fellowships need help learning how to speak encouragement, reflection and correction back to artists. Teach folks how to do this, and while they’re learning, you can help your team by giving your feedback.

## OFFERING SPACE AND SUPPORT

For their temple project, Ezra and Israel received a decree from King Cyrus:

Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven. (Ezra 6:9-10)

Think of yourself personally or communally as King Cyrus.

Drama teams need several kinds of space in which to do their work. Physical space for rehearsals is an absolute necessity. The best situation is a room that can be set up for rehearsal and left undisturbed from week to week. Of course, this is not always possible. But if a team can use the same space for all its rehearsals, this is most efficient. Moving equipment from room to room, marking off a floor plan and re-orienting everyone takes a bite out of already tight time. It's also important for rehearsal rooms to be closed to public wandering and visitor viewing. Teams need to be able to work where they feel safe trying things without pressure to perform. Finally, a rehearsal room must be relatively comfortable: adequately heated and cooled and well lit.

Your drama folks will also need access to the main staging area. If that's in a church, they'll need to get into the chancel. If it's a community room, they'll need to get inside ahead of time—perhaps even ahead of your regular setup. Sometimes drama teams, musical worship teams and speakers need to be in the same space around the same time—particularly right before the event. Work out a schedule and make sure people can set up their stage area, props, and whatever else is needed, in time to prevent last-minute panicking. If another group precedes yours in a public space, be sure you know what their

contract says about their departure time and ask them to stick to it. Your teams don't need the extra stress of negotiating with other groups and advocating for their own preparation time. This may sound like an unlikely collision—but it's happened to us more times than we can count. Whether it is you or another fellowship representative who negotiates such things, allocating space and time for preparation will be a tremendous service.

## THINKING TOGETHER

A great deal of the team's experience in your fellowship will depend on how and how well you work together to integrate what they are doing with the overall program. One church I know gathered all its program staff—music director, drama director, pastors, children's directors and chief sexton—and worked through the entire schedule of presentation programs a quarter ahead (e.g., they brainstormed about September, October and November at their meeting in May). They brainstormed ideas for talks, art, special media and music for half a day. During the second half of the day, they secured the details for the immediate quarter (e.g., they worked out details for June, July and August at the May meeting). Set yourselves up to create a team atmosphere in which artists can receive meaningful input from, and give meaningful input to, the whole of the process. This will produce a much better end product and a much happier working relationship.

When a group of friends and I planted a church, we were most of the team. We talked constantly about possibilities in a sort of ongoing brainstorm. We also met formally with preachers to discuss worship plans, not quarterly but rather a couple of weeks ahead. As in our case, a smaller team can work more quickly and flexibly than a large one. Our situation dictated compact scheduling. Though in most cases having more planning time will help, you can improve your life together even

with short meetings close to events, if that's what you have available.

The key is to talk things through, understand each other's hopes and expectations, and know together what you believe God is saying to you as leaders and ultimately to your congregation. Artists do much better when they can share their work with the confidence that it will be a meaningful part of what's going on and not simply an afterthought.

When a dramatic piece will be part of a worship service or other event, the planners must work to ensure the sketch will not be cut. Think of this as programmatic space we offer to the drama team. There is nothing so demoralizing as having worked hard to prepare a piece and being told at the last minute, "We'll have to do it next week." (Note: It's an equally bad experience for worship leaders to be told to cut songs. They have worked as hard as anyone else, including speakers, to prepare and, except in highly unusual circumstances, should be honored by having their offerings included as planned.)

Leaders and planners must also work hard to communicate to the team what the talk and/or other presentations are focused on, so that what the team does enhances the overall communication. To do a sketch followed by a speaker who makes no use of the sketch leaves the audience puzzled and the drama team wondering if it has wasted its time. The preacher doesn't have to mention the sketch—under no circumstances should he attempt to explain it—but a dominant image or a quote from one of the characters might be woven into a talk, or the mood or theme might be developed. Art not only enriches communication; it shapes it. There are lots of

"sermon-booster skits" out there, but that's not primarily what we're talking about here. Even if a preacher has a definite angle and approach to a passage, artists may be able through their process to elucidate it—that is, if they have access to the conversation and space to suggest.

### PROVIDING FUNDING

Finally, artists need space in your fellowship's budget. A drama team should have some rehearsal boxes, music stands, stools and lights. These basics will make it possible to rehearse. But you should also consider making money available for

- ◆ purchase of scripts
- ◆ purchase of educational books and subscriptions
- ◆ trips to see professionally produced plays
- ◆ trips to visit other churches and ministries
- ◆ professional training, including voice lessons, acting and directing classes
- ◆ purchase of props and costumes
- ◆ purchase of lighting and sound equipment
- ◆ pay or honorarium for someone who is leading a very active drama team (In other words, consider making it a job for someone.)

Understanding what artists do and how they do it will help you work well with them. If you know how their process works, you'll be able to make important connections at key moments along the way. The right words well placed can make a ministry soar; the wrong words or no words at all keep the jets grounded. Spend time with the team. Get to know individuals. Watch them work. Find ways to express affirmation, encouragement and challenge. And watch as things really take off.