



## **Mission Statement**

First Presbyterian Theater is a community theater, an extension of First Presbyterian Church, whose mission is to present an entertaining seven show season, which will both examine and celebrate our lives. In presenting this season, we give both audiences and volunteers in the theater opportunities to explore and enrich their lives.

## **Statement of Purpose**

The contemporary church invites participation and witness in a variety of ways: through worship, through singing, through service on boards and committees, through material gifts, through teaching, through prayer, through visitation and chauffeuring, and through sundry other actions. Church programs should be judged, not entirely by their effects upon those served, but also partly by the effects upon those serving. A dollar contributed is not measured solely by what it purchases in maintenance and charity, but also by the faith and renewal of faith that it represents in the giver.

A church arts program, similarly, must be evaluated not just by the response of the audience, however important that may be, but in part by the fact that for the artist-musician, painter, playwright, actor, the expression is made of witness. If it is true that art speaks to many more effectively than sermons or lectures or study courses or fellowship circles, then it may also be true that, for many, artistic expression is the most natural and eloquent mode of speaking about the meaning of their faith. The church arts program, then, like the church's educational program, the church's worship program, the church's benevolent programs, and the church's governance, is shared by its professional and lay members.

Any frequenter of our culture's great museums and cathedrals knows how intertwined are the development of the Christian religion and the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, drama, and literature. The scriptures were recreated in paint, stone, wood, metal, and language, detailed narratives of Genesis to Revelation, silent or spoken sermons of faith and martyrdom. These works have been through many centuries among the chief tools of the church to inspire and educate the general populace, just as Jesus used the dramatic art of parables to teach His listeners.

Religion and art developed simultaneously in the awakening spirit of our primitive ancestors; both derived their concrete symbols from nature and experience; both demand emotional expression. The primordial animal symbols of the serpent, the bird, and the lion, the geometric symbols of the circle, the cross, and the mandala belong to all people of all times. All peoples develop music and dance from the rhythms of life and the movement of the universe - the pounding of surf, the singing of birds, the beat of the heart, and the rhythms of breathing, of the tides, the moon, the reproductive cycle, day and night, and the seasons. Drama has its roots also in myth and the symbolic significance of gestures common to people in every time and place. People have always communicated about the ultimate through rituals, myths, symbols, and gestures rising from the very nature of life (Jung's archetypal awareness) and synthesized by the creative imagination.

Art and religion share many common attributes. Both have roots in that dimension of selfhood which reaches beyond itself to something larger. Religion and art are akin in their examination of values, their concern for the quality and meaning of human life, their examination of being and becoming, and in their protest against and failure to see life truly. Like religion, art is an expression of ultimate concern. Aesthetic experience shares with religious experience in that both reveal our underlying unity with each other, with the world and with Ultimate Reality. Thus, true art, dealing with the quality and meaning of human life, while not necessarily Christian, is necessarily of religious significance.

Each of us - and the church, as one of our institutions - tends to fall into easy, unthinking patterns, but our religion and our art should expose to us the pretentious, the false, the empty, the cheap; should prod the indifferent and the unconcerned; should condemn disorder, disintegration, dehumanization. They should pass new meanings, unconventional values, unpopular alternatives, and then ask the audience to choose, thus revealing the eternal verities in new ways. The audience of either the church or the theater is then responsible for recognizing and valuing the revealed truth.

Because of its pagan antecedents, the drama, except in the form of the mass, was not used as an agency for Christian ministry until the tenth century, when simple dramatic episodes were first incorporated into the liturgy of the church's services. In the twelfth century, church drama moved outside to stages, porches, and wagons for performance as part of the religious holidays. Presentations in the vernacular languages about 1350 AD anticipated the development of the elaborate cycles and the more sophisticated morality plays and allegories of the Middle Ages.

In the Renaissance, the scientific, economic, and religious revolutions precipitated a new relationship between the church and the artist: the new esteem for each person and trust in human intellectual powers, to explore and explain what had previously been attributed exclusively to divine mystery and to revelation through the church, weakened the influence of the church. Religious reform movements, first aimed only at cleansing a corrupt church, stripped it not only of its administrative hierarchy, but also of many of its rituals, customs, symbols, artifacts, and modes of expression. Forced to make their way in the secular world, because a corrupt church made confining demands upon their integrity and because puritanical reformists stripped the church of the traditional use of art, artists found that the new economic system had created a means of support for them outside the church. Too often in modern times, the church has considered the arts only a "handmaiden" to be used but rigidly controlled for its own purposes. Too often in modern times, the church has been content to repeat performances of classical composers and writers and to rely on copies of "approved" art and architecture.

Often in the past, churches have actually worked to suppress the perceptions of artists and prophets regarding the many varieties of human experience. Because the modern church has been slow to accept their leadership in integrating human lives in our times of turmoil, many sensitive, creative people, including artists, have left the church to find meaning and fulfillment for their lives elsewhere.

In our culture, some ethical values have died while new ones wait to be born. Automation and cybernation substitute the machine not only for muscle, but also for the human mind. Many of the finest creative minds are mobilized for purposes of destruction or exploitation. We trek to other planets while threatening our existence on Earth by polluting and wasting the natural ingredients of life. As in Machiavelli's Italy, the grasping and holding of power and wealth have eroded not only our institutions but our lives and our principles as well. Society adjusts easily to the violence of war and street killings and to the indignity and cruelty of poverty and social injustice, while one dehumanizing new possession after another deadens our concern to understand the meaning of life and death. "Everybody's doing it" can excuse, in the public consciousness, cheating, lying, stealing, corruption, character assassination, and even officially-backed murder.

Today, there is a growing consensus that the arts can help to save the church so that the church can help to save the world. As former President John F. Kennedy said,

"Behind the storm of daily conflict and crisis, the dramatic confrontation, the tumult of political struggle, the poet, the artist, the musician continue the quiet work of centuries, building bridges of experience between people reminding man of the universality of his feelings and desires and despairs, and reminding him that forces that unite are deeper than those that divide."

Drama is one means to reassert the terrible importance of each human soul. Art and religion, twin manifestations of the creative human spirit, must seek to arouse and repair our ability to dream dreams splendid enough to create a world more consistent with our divine image. It is the business of the church to ask its own members and society at large those questions which they would rather not answer, so that they may be free to act on the answers that raise themselves. Endless repetition of the same questions and the same answers will not suffice in a world troubled with new questions and searching for new values.

What kind of theater can serve such purposes? Theater that does not flinch from looking straight at life. Church theater cannot afford to be anything but honest, even ruthlessly honest. Those who select materials for use in such a theater can naturally be expected to use discretion; it would be poor discretion, however, and poor stewardship of a valuable facility, if the presentations in the theater were limited to either polite drawing room comedies or religious pageantry. There is a place for entertainment in any church theater program; however, that alone will never change lives. Drama presented by commercial television or commercial theaters frequently, even usually, chooses not to be honest for reasons of profit, but church theater must protest the artificial values of society and must affirm the instinctual and emotional verities which are too often hidden behind and beneath the sleazy veneer of polite living.

Each of us can commit acts of dishonesty in business, commit adultery, be obscene and profane, and still come to church on Sunday wearing a pious face, sit as an observer in a worship service, tolerate the sermon even if it chastises us, successfully escape any form of guilt feeling, and return home assured of the respect of the community for having been seen at worship. On the other hand, we sit in a darkened theater, see the stage become a mirror of our lives and feel the hair on the back of our necks stand up as we flush with recognition and embarrassment over the double standard which is a reality in our lives. It is part of the business of the church theater to face its own members and society with those things we would rather not face, in order that, once recognized, they leave us free to act and to work for richer relationships, for an interaction of people based on the willingness to deal honestly with what really lies beneath our habits and customs. The church, like drama, has the painful task of bringing that shock of recognition, that ethical offense, which will unsettle and provoke us to wish and to work for some change in our individual lives. God help the church whose members or ministers feel compelled to protect themselves and others from the pain of such recognition.

Some parishioners are visibly shaken at the thought that they may be personally embarrassed by something which takes place in the church theater. Conditioned to accept death on the scale of wartime as the staple of TV news, conditioned to accept murder as the basic television plot, they blanch at a few profane words from the mouths of actors portraying rebellious young people having a fight. Conditioned to accept scantily clad chorines and off-color nightclub routines, they blanch at a player's use of gestures to establish character or the use of sexual encounters or images for expressing the character's condition. Conditioned to hear that Jesus is the answer, they blanch at a play that denies that Jesus is the answer.

Strong dramatic presentations are a revealing test of those who call themselves Christians, especially when the presentations occur in a church theater. They test whether we, as Christians, really believe what we say we believe. If we have the faith that we say we have, we can expose ourselves to a cynical play without becoming cynics, to a nihilistic play without becoming nihilists. And we will not need first to have someone "safe" explain away the pain of the recognition and make just a nice little logical exercise out of the play.

The church is only ready for religion, only ready for drama, when it can open itself to the implications of dramatic revelation; when the congregation can accept the world of the imagination and can risk being excited, risk being frightened, risk being changed. Such risk is near the very heart of the Christian message.

Every city desperately needs a theater that can afford to see devotion to truth as its controlling force. Our theater performs and can continue to perform, even more fully, such crucial services for Fort Wayne.

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First Presbyterian Church  
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