

## INSIDE

[Home](#)  
[About Us](#)  
[Contact Us](#)  
[FAQ](#)  
[Letters to Editor](#)  
[Discussion Board](#)  
[Archive](#)  
[Subscriptions](#)  
[Classified Ads](#)  
[Donations](#)  
[Other Links](#)  
[National UM Organizations](#)  
[Annual Conferences](#)  
[Related Organizations](#)

## UM churches stage secular productions as outreach

**By Laura Bray**  
*Special Contributor*



*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. *Working* by Studs Terkel. *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry.

Not your typical church-fare titles, to be sure. Yet United Methodist churches across the country are spending their limited time and resources on secular productions such as these.

Actually, they fit right into the United Methodist slogan of "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors." Churches who mount secular productions do so as an outreach opportunity.

Lynda Ryan, director of theatre arts for University UMC in San Antonio, says some people who find churches to be forbidding or intimidating places might find attending a secular production more accessible.

"Plays like *Inherit the Wind* are a safe way to get people in through the side door," Ms. Ryan said.

Robert Douglas, director of the Hope Repertory Theatre in Southfield, Mich., said, "Sometimes you have to use non-traditional ways to reach people. It's all about bringing them to Christ."

Secular productions are a way for church members to discuss wider issues within the community.

"These productions let people know that we talk about more than just God here. You can find God in secular things," Ms. Ryan said.

Kevin Ash, artistic director of the Labyrinth Theatre, agrees. "Our purpose is to get people to think and talk about what they believe, their ideology and morality." The theatre is an outreach ministry of Arapaho UMC in Richardson, Texas, a suburb of Dallas.

### Touching lives

Carefully selected productions can deliver subtle messages to an attentive audience.

"The message of *Peter Pan* is that none of us are 'lost boys,'" said Karen Andrews, University UMC's associate director of music.

"Our productions are positive in message and very effective at touching people's lives and uniting families," said Mr. Douglas. After seeing Hope Repertory's original production of *Bringing the Word: The Legacy of Black Preachers in Detroit*, two people decided to enter the ministry.

Secular productions also reach out to the artistic community, many of whom feel "church" is a place where they will be unfairly judged and where their gifts aren't wanted. "This allows us to show them that we value them and welcome their participation," Ms. Andrews said.

Once a theatre-going audience arrives, directors take the opportunity to share more information about the church and its programs. Some theatres have information packets about the church and flyers about upcoming events. Mr. Ash said, "In a number of cases, audience members have come back and joined, or shared the experience with their friends, who then attend our next production."

The directors also said that such productions allow their churches to get people involved once they walk through the door. Secular plays and musicals provide yet another avenue for God to work through a ministry area, changing lives in the process. Ms. Andrews said that during last summer's musical, one of the principal actors accepted Christ during rehearsals and subsequently joined the church.

Some churches tie sermons to a production's themes; others organize Sunday school classes or other small groups to discuss issues raised, particularly if those issues are controversial. "The best plays or musicals start a discussion, they don't end it," said Ms. Andrews.

All the directors obtained support from the existing congregation and church leadership before beginning their programs. "Some members of the church won't 'get it,'" said Mr. Douglas. "You need to explain that it's a form of evangelism; it's just a different way of reaching people." Both Mr. Ash and Mr. Douglas said that they and their pastor had a vision on how to make this non-traditional activity an outreach to the community.

#### Appropriate messages

These successful theatre arts programs carefully select thoughtful plays or musicals with appropriate messages, but ones that will make people think. "If you're going to select something with a controversial theme, do it for a reason," said Ms. Andrews. They prepare their church leadership on how to support discussions of difficult issues.

All the directors have a professional or educational background in music or theatre arts. Mr. Ash was a stage producer and actor in New York before moving to Texas. Mr. Douglas is a professional actor and playwright. He said, "It's important to find someone who knows theatre to run the program, so it's a quality product."

"With theatre, you can inspire, educate, inform and uplift," said Mr. Douglas. "It helps people to see themselves in situations on stage. Theatre is life."

*Laura Bray is a San Antonio-based free-lance writer.*

Posted on Thursday, February 16, 2006 @ 4:52:55 PM (Archive on 3/18/2006)  
Posted by rrussell and contributed by rrussell

#### **Return**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Last Updated</b>	<b>Size (Kb)</b>
--------------	--------------	-----------------	---------------------	------------------

**[Copyright 2002-2006 UMR Communications](#) [Privacy Statement](#) [Terms Of Use](#)**