The writer, a pastor and playwright, describes how one congregation uses chancel dramas to connect faith with daily vocations. In drama, the laity — both adults and children — are preachers of the gospel.

In his book Beyond Worship Wars (Alban Institute, 2001), author Thomas Long reflects on how in worship we tend to entertain our way through it in an effort to increase the bottom line. He said that congregations turn to drama as a way to accomplish this. After all, dramas are usually entertaining. If nothing else, the congregation can be amazed at the costumes, how the actors memorized all those lines, or how Mr. Smith transformed himself for the part. Such dramas have been sarcastically called "bath robe" dramas. Let's put a character up front, throw a bath robe on him, give him a stick and call him Moses, and have him reflect on the crossing of the Red Sea.

This approach not only often misses the point in terms of worship but I think it also fails in terms of encouraging the congregation to take seriously how they might connect their faith with their daily lives. These dramas, in other words, fail to connect people with their vocations. Please understand that good possibilities for biblical dramas exist. However, just as every sermon must ensure that the rubber meets the road, so too with dramas. What will the people take with them to apply to their daily lives in Christ?

**Drama and Daily Life**

From my earliest days in the church as a pastor's kid in Pennsylvania, I have had an interest in theater and specifically the use of drama in or for the church's ministry. Since then, I have sought ways to use drama as an effective ministry tool. We have had drama camps for at-risk youth; a monthly ministry called Bible Playday, where the children of the church work on a short skit to be presented during the children's sermon; Christmas pageants; and an ongoing Lenten drama program.

I insist upon writing these plays for several reasons. One is because I like to. I also want to ensure the drama's quality and, more importantly, the integrity of the play's theology. (I realize that most people cannot write their own plays. But many resources are available online, and several mainline denominational publishing houses have dramas available.) We are lucky (or perhaps cursed because our actors and actresses often get their scripts at the last minute) to be able to write our own scripts. What our ministry tries to consistently emphasize is the vocation of all believers.

What difference does the message make in the daily lives of all who experience the drama? There is a strong history of religious dramas seeking to do just this. In medieval times, mystery plays were performed by professionals and amateurs alike. Gradually, guilds — unions, if you will — took over, with each one taking responsibility for a particular piece of scriptural history. The term "mystery play" or "mysteries" comes from the
Latin *mysterium*, meaning "occupation." As Nelvin Vos indicates in his recent book *Interactions: Relationships of Religion and Drama*, "In a major town such as York [England], each guild presented a particular segment of the biblical drama. Frequently, the particular guild would be responsible for an appropriate scene, for example, the Shipwrights for the Building of the Ark, the Goldsmiths for the Coming of the Magi, the Bakers for the Last Supper, and the Butchers for the Mortification of Christ. Thus the drama was a lively vehicle to convey that the Christian commitment of the participants was integrally tied to their occupation" (University Press of America, 2009, p. 83).

**Real People, Real Places**

Today we speak of many occupations. Those coming to church are occupied in daily life on the job, at home, in play, and much more. One way to think about liturgical dramas is as occupational therapy for the soul. So, instead of focusing on biblical characters or simply retelling the story, our Lenten drama series usually considers people in real places, in contemporary life, encountering God and each other in surprising ways.

One of the first that I wrote is called *The Waters of Baptism*. It explores in five very different daily life situations how the waters of baptism do or can shape us. The second is called *Crossroads: Where the Cross Intersects the Paths of Our Lives*. This series examines a variety of real-life themes, including racism. It ends with a play that simply shows a day in the life of a real family, with the shadow of the cross hanging over all of it. Real life. Daily life. In the shadow of the cross.

Another series, *Half Baked Lent*, was inspired by a Raymond Carver short story titled "A Small, Good Thing." The play centers on a baker and the visitors to his shop. This baker has had tragedies and sorrows in his life; nonetheless, he in his way ministers to others, even though he himself has fallen away from the church.

An earlier series, called *What I Lost for Lent*, takes place in a restaurant. All five plays in this series take place in the same restaurant with the same waitress, who embodies or is the Holy Spirit. In each play, the congregation encounters people who are suffering through some sort of loss in their everyday lives.

**Bible Stories**

We have also explored some biblical themes in Lenten and other dramas. For instance, two years ago in a series titled *Parables of Judgment*, "John" shows up at the Pearly Gates. Peter was away fishing, so a strange and silly angel was filling in. He could not decide what to do with John. He checked the Bible. While it includes many stories of grace and mercy that Jesus told, this angel struggled with the numerous parables of judgment. Each play presented one of these parables in a lively fashion by other angel helpers. The parable confronted and challenged John. Meantime, the congregation was kept interested by the question, Will he get in? It was answered in the final play, when the congregation discovers that John was dreaming. We cannot relieve the tension or answer the question about living between grace and judgment, nor should we.

During Advent we have used plays in place of the sermon. One of these has biblical roots, involving a visit Joseph had with his rabbi after the angel's message that Mary was expecting. Another involved a young woman who, wherever she turned, was confronted with the words of John the Baptist: "Who told you to flee the wrath to come?" These plays fit into the flow of the service after the reading of the Gospel and in place of the sermon.

Many congregations have used dramas to introduce themes. For our Lenten drama series, the pastor would reflect upon what the congregation was about to see and set the stage biblically as well as dramatically. The plays always are connected to Scripture. If they are to preach the good news, they must flow from the Word. I personally believe that the drama should never come after the offering, that is, once the meal has begun. The meal is the climax of the drama of worship and should not be supplanted. But dramas can be a very effective way to introduce a theme at the beginning of worship.

The term 'mystery play' or 'mysteries' comes from the Latin *mysterium*, meaning 'occupation.'
One critical point to make is the monthly involvement of our young children in dramas. We write our own, and I think many others could craft similar plays. Each month our young children stay after church to eat, practice their acting exercises, and then rehearse a "play" based upon the next Sunday's Scriptures. That Sunday they present this drama as the children's sermon. Those children not in the play sit on the floor to watch, and when it is over all the children gather as I discuss with them what they saw. This is a wonderful way to use the children in a meaningful capacity in worship. They lead as they act. The drama takes place before the reading of the lessons and often introduces the theme of the day.

**Simple But Complete**

At no time do these plays seek simply to entertain or build up the institutional church. In fact, they often poke a little fun at the church's preoccupation with itself and call the church to greater recognition of the ministries done in God's name outside its walls.

Of course another element is the laity's leadership in performing these dramas. As indicated earlier, in medieval times the plays were done by a variety of professionals and amateurs. In our drama ministry, we have found this model useful in encouraging the gifts of the people. Often these plays will incorporate one or two actors of a professional quality. Some congregations have these people in their pews while others may not. This gives each play a solid backbone, and the other people involved feel more secure in their parts. They are proud of their efforts.

We make a point of not overdoing any of the sets or using any special lighting. The productions are intentionally simple in order that we not pretend we are recreating Broadway in the sanctuary. It is not about the production but rather about the worship. Sometimes people hide scripts behind a newspaper or a menu, but in general we have found it important to do these as fairly complete productions. Why? For the same reason that you would not want the preacher to have a half-prepared sermon or for the communion table to be partially set. If you choose to do a production with scripts, then go that way completely. Or make it a readers' theater and don't be shy about it.

Liturgical drama is not only a marvelous tool to encourage the gifts of the people, and incorporate the people as preachers in worship, but also and, most important, it is a way of exploring and lifting up ministry in daily life. Instead of only setting plays in religious settings with biblical or religious characters, let the congregation focus on stories which are part of their daily lives yet also are integrated with God's drama in Jesus Christ.

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