ArtsPraxis
Volume 12 Issue 2

An Unlikely Sanctuary: Examining the Impact of Church-Based Youth Arts Programs in the Current Educational Theatre Landscape

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ABSTRACT

When school leaders opened the doors to greet students at the start of the 2025-26 academic year, they also encountered a new set of circumstances impacting public education. Stakeholders across the country are engaging in conversations about the potential ramifications of decreasing student enrollment due to population decline, the end of COVID-era relief funds, and shifts in governmental policies that could deeply impact school funding.

For many arts educators, however, these conversations debating school budget cuts, as well their potential implications for arts programs, are all too familiar. Yet even in these times of uncertainty for arts education, some students are finding opportunities to take the stage in an unlikely place—the evangelical Christian church.

In this essay, I examine the way some evangelical churches provide spaces for children and teens to engage in the arts, especially focusing on large-scale Christmas spectaculars and innovative arts festivals. These faith-based performance opportunities hold the potential to shape how young people think about the nature, scope, and purpose of theatre in ways that could impact these future artists and theatregoers.

In 1995, Hollywood Pictures first released *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a film about a composer-turned-public school music teacher who faces an untimely end to his teaching career as budget cuts forced the elimination of the school's music and theatre programs.[1] The film was a box office success, grossing approximately $106 million in ticket sales and garnering a Best Actor Oscar Nomination for Richard Dreyfuss, who portrayed the titular character (*Mr. Holland's Opus,* 2025). It also sparked the founding of the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation, an organization that continues to support underfunded music programs around the country and brought attention to the state of arts education in the U.S. Yet, even as the film celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, the same struggles still exist in many U.S. schools. In spring and summer of 2025, U.S. news headlines rang out with warnings about the current financial state of public education.[2] Given the longstanding history of these budgetary shortfalls, some educators, especially those within the arts, might dismiss these headlines as another ubiquitous part of the educational conversation.

[1] The film opened in limited release on December 29, 1995 with wide release in the U.S. beginning on January 19, 1996. *Mr. Holland's Opus* was produced by Hollywood Pictures, Interscope Communications, and Polygram Filmed Entertainment and distributed by Buena Vista Pictures (*Mr. Holland's Opus,* 2025).

[2] Some examples of these reports include "U.S. Public Schools Brace for 'Fiscal Cliff' After Surge in Hiring Meets Budget Shortfalls" (2025, April 22) from CNBC and "School Districts Face Uncertainty Following Budget Cuts, But Some Welcome Re-evaluation of Funds" (2025, July 23) from ABC News.

ENROLLMENT CLIFF

However, some of the causes behind this recent wave of anxiety depart from the typical reasons given for financial struggles in U.S. public education. Schools nationwide are bracing for an “enrollment cliff” due to declining birthrates in the United States. According to data from the CDC, the number of births in the United States declined 16% from 2007-2023, and the general fertility rate dropped 22% from 2007-2024 (Martin et al., 2025). Furthermore, a 2025 report from the Brookings Institute claims this birthrate decline, coupled by an increase in families opting for homeschooling and private schools in the post-COVID era, has led to growing concern for public schools. Because most state and federal aid is dispersed on a per-pupil basis, declining enrollment directly impacts the amount of money schools receive to fund their buildings, staffing, and programming (Council et al., 2025).

END OF EMERGENCY FUNDING

The end of COVID-era emergency relief funds for education also heightens the impact of declining student enrollment. According to a 2023 report by the National Association for Music Education, when Congress approved $193.2 billion for the Elementary and Secondary Education Relief (ESSER) fund in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were able to use those funds to support all aspects of a well-rounded education—including arts programs. Now that relief funding has ended, schools are experiencing budget gaps. Furthermore, according to a recent webinar from Georgetown University’s Edunomics Lab, the ESSER fund allowed for additional school hiring in various positions, increasing the amount spent on payroll. As this emergency funding ends, school districts are faced with unfavorable decisions, weighing the choice of closing smaller schools amid declining enrollment or shouldering budget cuts by other means—including “tradeoffs” such as cuts to electives, athletics, or school specialists (Edunomics Lab, 2025).

NEA FUNDING CUTS

Compounding these factors, the recent shift in political power after the 2024 election has led to changing budgetary priorities in the federal

government. In July 2025, the House Appropriations Subcommittee proposed a $75 million cut to the National Endowment of the Arts, which equates to a 35% budget cut from the previous year (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, 2025). This proposed cut holds the potential to impact educational theatre programs, as the NEA's arts education program provides pivotal funding for school and community arts programs (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.).

UNEVEN ACCESS TO THEATRE EDUCATION

These shifting dynamics in U.S. public schools come at a time when curricular theatre programs have already been considered expendable in some school districts for decades. In 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics found that the percentage of elementary schools that offered theatre classes dropped from 20% in the 1999-2000 school year to only 4% in 2009-2010. Secondary schools experienced a 3% drop in the same 10-year period. (Parsed et al., 2012). Today, although curricular theatre programs exist in 69% of public high schools, access does not extend to all schools and all grade levels (Educational Theatre Association, 2024). In its 2024 State of Theatre Education Report, the Educational Theatre Association states that although "the Every Student Succeeds Act mandates arts as part of a well-rounded education … only 35% of schools offer curricular theatre," and they subsequently issued a formal recommendation asking school districts to expand access to theatre classes during the school day (Educational Theatre Association, 2024, p. 11). This recommendation highlights that theatre education opportunities continue to be unevenly accessible across the educational landscape.

AN UNLIKELY SANCTUARY

But even as U.S. schools experience this time of precarity, some students are finding opportunities to engage with the arts in unlikely places—U.S. evangelical churches. These churches provide arts training through spectacle-laden productions, youth drama teams, and church-based performing arts academies, sometimes in state-of-the-art auditoriums filled with the latest theatrical technology. But why might

evangelical churches be considered an unlikely haven for theatre education? First, a long-standing historical chasm has often existed between the worlds of Christianity and theatre. And when Christians do engage in the performing arts, these faith-based performances and films are often derided as subpar, even by those within the evangelical Christian community. For example, as early as 1949, George Eastman (1950), an advocate of the transformational potential of church drama, delivered a speech that was later published in the *Educational Theatre Journal.* In his address, Eastman said:

> Anyone familiar with the use of drama in churches today knows that much of it is still on the level of mediocrity and that its religious effectiveness suffers accordingly. The reason for this mediocrity lies in poor selection of plays, inadequate discipline of directors and players, wretched equipment, low standards of dramatic art, and confused thinking about the purpose of drama in the church. (p. 123)

This reputation has frequently persisted into the 21st century, sometimes attributed to the perceived utilitarian or moralizing nature of some Christian theatrical work.[3]

In addition, the conservatism often attributed to U.S. evangelicals can seem at odds with the theatrical world. For example, some prominent U.S. evangelical leaders espouse the same conservative political ideology that embraces cuts to public arts funding. But many of the students who engage in these church-based arts programs are also enrolled in embattled public schools. By working to understand the divide between secular and faith-based theatre for youth, arts educators can gain a broader perspective of the way some young people are engaging in theatre during these turbulent times, as well as the potential implications of the way these young artists conceptualize the performing arts.

This essay originated as a larger dissertation project called “Mini-Actors, Mega-Stages: Examining the Use of Theatre Among Children and Youth in U.S. Evangelical Megachurches” (Lahey, 2019). Through

[3] For examples of 21st century discussion regarding the reputation of Christian theatre and film productions, see Celia Wren’s (2000) “Pilgrims’ Progress” in *American Theatre* magazine and Emily’s Brown’s (2025) “The Christian Film Boom is Finally Here” in *Relevant* magazine.

this study, I explored several key questions:

1. In what specific ways are twenty-first century churches employing theatre in their ministry to children and teenagers?
2. How do churches aim to shape the burgeoning faith of young churchgoers through these performances?
3. Conversely, in what theoretical ways might these early evangelical performance experiences shape the way a child views the purpose and conventions of theatre?
4. How are church-based youth theatre programs extending beyond the church walls into schools and other public spaces?
5. What role might these church-based arts entities play in the future of the arts and arts education?

I began my research by visiting church-based theatrical performances for or by young people, including large-scale theatrical spectacles, youth drama teams, and performing arts academies created by some of the largest congregations in the U.S. Through these observations, I documented and analyzed the various ways theatre serves as a ministry tool within these church settings, empowering young people in a form of Theatre for Change while also equipping them with the tools of an artist. I argue that these formative church-based theatrical experiences for youth are valuable for arts educators to recognize, especially in these unsettled times, because these theatrical entry points may hold important implications about the way some youth come to understand the nature, purposes, and scope of the performing arts.

SPECTACULAR SPIRITUALITY: WHEN BROADWAY GLITZ GOES TO CHURCH

I still remember the awestruck feeling I experienced the first time I walked into Prestonwood Baptist Church in the Dallas suburb of Plano, Texas. It was December 10, 2016, and I was ready to experience my first taste of *The Gift of Christmas,* the church's annual holiday production. The building had many of the hallmarks of a traditional church—a large belltower with chimes that welcomed people into the space and long pews stretching from wall to wall in the large auditorium. But once a red-jacketed usher led me to my seat, all

comparisons with a traditional church service ended.

Leading up to both the 2016 version of *The Gift of Christmas* that I attended, as well as the upcoming 2025 iteration, the production's website claimed that audiences will experience a performance complete with "elaborate staging and lighting, state-of-the-art, high resolution technology with a massive LED screen, live 50-piece orchestra and nearly 1,000 member cast and choir, brilliant musical scoring [and] flying angels, live animals, the Living Nativity and much more!" This experience began immediately upon entering the performance space. The stage featured 16 floor-to-ceiling projection panels prominently announcing the production's title. The performance I attended unfolded in three acts. The first act featured a secular theme; highlights included Rockette-style dancers, an army of soldiers rappelling from the ceiling, live horses prancing across the stage, snow falling from above, and Santa flying over the heads of the audience in his sleigh. From a theatre technology standpoint, the first act felt on par with some professional Broadway productions in a way that almost made me forget I was in church.

It was also within this first act that children became a central facet of the show. According to a profile in *Church Production* magazine, the million-dollar production involved approximately 600 children in multiple choirs (CP Staff, 2014). In "Christmas on the Polar Express," many of the children arrived from the house, singing and dancing in the aisles dressed like giant cups of hot chocolate. The song "When Christmas Comes to Town" from *The Polar Express* featured a trio of children. It served as a unique moment in the show because the three children were alone in front of the large projection screens, instead of appearing on the full stage backed by the adult choir like they had in the production's previous musical numbers. This pared-down moment and sweet, nostalgic song allowed for a brief tonal shift in the arc of the show. That break came to an end with the finale of the kids' section of the performance. The song "Rockin' on Top of the World" included Santa playing guitar with a small group of children in a scene that felt reminiscent of the Broadway show *School of Rock.*

The performance segues into a more worshipful mode in Act II, guided by a narrator in a series of professionally produced video segments. Entitled "The Worship of Christmas," this section served as a transitional phase between the secular first act and the live nativity of the final act. In this section, a narrator projected on the giant screens

explained not just the Christmas story itself, but its significance to the world (and the audience). After an energetic version of "The Little Drummer Boy" complete with glowing drummers suspended with their instruments above the heads of the audience, this section took a worshipful turn, featuring a trio of men singing "O Holy Night/Silent Night." Overall, this segment offered an introduction to the meaning and spiritual implications of the first Christmas for Christian believers.

The final act serves as the pièce de résistance of the performance, featuring the "Living Nativity" with elaborate costumes, flying angels, and a menagerie of live animals. A different narrator provided the gospel account of the Christmas story as actors representing the shepherds walked across the stage with their live sheep, and three wise men came one-by-one through the house, accompanied by a host of live animals, including camels and zebras. During the scene with the birth of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were placed upstage center at an elevated level. At this point, scores of people in biblical-era robes began walking through the aisles of the church as they made their way toward the baby, ultimately creating one of the most beautiful stage pictures in the show.

So how are these high-flying, spectacle-laden theatrical feats with over 1,000 performers even possible in a church space? Although some churches have long incorporated theatrical elements within the service, the theatrical bent within Protestant Evangelicalism escalated during the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of the megachurch during the church growth movement in the United States.[4] According to Jeanne Halgren Kilde (2002) in her book *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*, one trademark of these megachurch spaces is the inclusion of theatrical elements, incorporating large video screens, moveable scenery, props, projections, and theatrical lighting to enhance elements of the service. In some megachurches, leaders strive to create "seeker sensitive" environments by creating an atmosphere that would be less intimidating and more familiar to people who had never been to church, as these services often resembled rock

[4] According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, citing sociologist Scott Thumma, a megachurch is defined as "as a congregation with at least 2,000 people attending each weekend. These churches tend to have a charismatic senior minister and an active array of social and outreach ministries seven days a week." (*Fast Facts about American Religion,* 2024*).*

concerts and other popular performance spaces, as detailed in books like Kimon Howland Sargeant's *Seeker Churches* and Thumma and Travis's *Beyond Megachurch Myths*. Because many megachurches already used advanced theatrical technology in worship services on a regular basis, they already have the basic groundwork in place for staging these large-scale spectacles.

As a person interested in Theatre for Young Audiences, I considered the show from the perspective of the youngest on-stage participants and audience members. This viewpoint provides a unique lens from which to reflect on the performance, particularly in terms of its potential impact on young performers' horizon of expectations, access to performance, and views on the purposes of theatre. From a performance perspective, young actors who participate in these productions perform on stages far larger than the stage at the average public school with far greater technical capability. If these Christmas pageants serve as a child's first introduction to theatrical performance, how does this experience impact their horizon of expectations of theatre in typical school venues? Does singing and acting in a megachurch show generate excitement about finding additional performance opportunities and attending more productions, thereby benefiting local school programs by introducing students to theatrical arts? Or does the experience make participating in other shows—without the pyrotechnics and flying soldiers—somehow pale in comparison?

From an audience perspective, since the show was billed as holiday family entertainment, many children attended the performance as audience members. I suggest these shows could provide a valuable entry point to creating a long-term relationship with theatre for these young attendees. During the 2019 Theatre Communications Group National Conference in Miami, Lindsey Buller Maliekel, director of education/public engagement at New York City's New Victory Theatre, revealed preliminary results from a not-yet-published five-year study about the impact of theatre experiences on young people. The research provides quantitative data showing that theatre attendance helps students with processing and expressing emotion, empathizing with others, and maintaining an optimistic outlook on life (Considine & Halpern, 2019). According to conference attendee and *American Theatre* columnist Emma Halpern, the study revealed "if you haven't seen a show by the time you turn 8, your interest in theatre, or your

belief that theatre could be 'for you,' starts to go down, and that can affect whether or not you'll ever want to go to the theatre as an adult" (Considine & Halpern, 2019). I argue that church performances geared toward young audiences, often overlooked by theatre researchers, can serve as that needed early entry point to engage students in the arts.

But the most significant impact these performances may have on the next generation of theatre-makers lies in the way they encourage students to think about the purpose of performance. Despite the special effects and large production budgets, the primary goal of these performances is not entertainment, but eternity. In many respects, leaders at churches like Prestonwood demonstrate a belief in the transformative power of theatre that rivals that of some theatre practitioners. The production leaders and cast members of these church-based shows deeply believe in the power of their performance to actually "do" something—in this case, to spark genuine life change in the hearts of audience members (with the prompting and involvement of the Holy Spirit).

I suggest these performances can create the type of utopian performative discussed by Jill Dolan, albeit from an opposing ideological perspective. In *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan (2005) explains that "utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotional voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (p. 5). Specifically, Dolan examines progressive-oriented work with the hope that "seeing, through performance, more effective models of more radical democracy might reinvigorate a dissipated Left" (p. 21). But church-based productions might perform a similar function for evangelicals.

Citing the work of J.L. Austin, which details the way performative acts have the power to actually "do" something, Dolan states that "utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable the affective vision of how the world might be better" (p. 6). A recurring feature of the Christmas performances I visited involved some version of an evangelical "altar call" or "invitation" at the end. Since most evangelical denominations place emphasis on a definitive conversion experience, the traditional "altar call" is an invitation for unconverted congregants to formally convert to the Christian faith and receive the Holy Spirit into

their lives, which—from the evangelical perspective—would enable spectators to carry the feelings of peace, hope, and Christian community they experienced within the performance into their everyday lives. In this way, "the experience of performance, the pleasure of the utopian performative, even if it doesn't change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it" (Dolan, 2005, p. 19). This was evident in the Prestonwood performance I attended, for example, when numerous people walked down the aisle at the end of the show, expressing a desire for a life-changing conversion experience. When young people are active on-stage participants in these productions, they witness these individuals coming down an aisle in direct response to the performance in which they played a direct role. In doing so, they may leave the production not only entertained, but also understanding the potential power of performance to make an impact on people in their world.

"DISCOVER, DEVELOP, DEPLOY:" ASSEMBLIES OF GOD YOUTH DRAMA TEAMS

Like *The Gift of Christmas* at Prestonwood Baptist Church, the youth drama teams that participate in the Assemblies of God performing arts program demonstrate a strong belief in theatre's innate potential to generate life change. But unlike the multi-generational involvement in the megachurch performances, the participants in the National Fine Arts Festival are all under the age of 18.

The Assemblies of God denomination originated toward the beginning of the Pentecostal movement in the early 20th century, making it a relatively new denomination in the historical scope of Christianity (Senapatiratne, 2011). For more than 60 years, Assemblies of God Youth Ministries has sponsored the Fine Arts Festival for the purpose of developing the ministry gifts of young people in the church. Originally known as "Teen Talent," the first competition featured only four categories—vocal solo, vocal ensemble, instrumental solo, and instrumental ensemble (Segrist, 2013). Today, over 65,000 students showcase their creative talents each year through participation in 80+ categories broken into seven broad divisions: Art, Communication, Dance, Drama, Instrumental, Vocal, and Writing (Hedlun, 2022). Some Fine Arts festival alumni have gone on to pursue careers in the arts, including Christian recording artists

and Grammy nominees Francesca Battestelli, Natalie Grant, and Matthew West, as well as the pop group The Jonas Brothers (Segrest, 2013).

The motto of the Fine Arts Festival is “Discover. Develop. Deploy.” In a letter featured in the opening pages of the 2025 National Fine Arts Festival Rulebook, Coordinator Ashton Peters states that the festival’s mission is “to be a movement of student artists who are more in love with Jesus, more creative, more innovative, and committed to spreading the gospel through any means necessary.” The program provides opportunities for students to discover their God-given talent, develop their gifts through participation in church-based arts activities, and deploy their gifts in ministry to others in their communities and around the world. Further emphasizing the goal of using the arts to serve and impact others, the Fine Arts Festival published a guide called “99 Ways to Deploy.” Inside, the guide provides students with ideas for using their creative talents outside of the competitive festival arena, with suggestions ranging from performing at children’s hospitals to entering student films they create for the Fine Arts Festival into local community film festivals (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, n.d.-a). In this way, church leaders in the Assemblies of God denomination reinforce the idea that creative arts, including theatre, exist not only as a form of entertainment but also as a way to serve and evangelize within their communities.

Despite its outward mission, there is also a competitive element to the Assemblies of God Fine Arts program through the annual Fine Arts Festival. In many ways, the structure of the festival strongly resembles its secular counterparts, such as EdTA’s International Thespian Festival. Most Fine Arts Festival participants start at the district level, where they enter specific event categories, such as musical theatre ensemble or drama solo. According to page 12 of the official 2025 Fine Arts Rulebook, presentations are scored by evaluators, and based on the number of accumulated points, participants are given a rating: Fair (Up to 25 points), Good (26-30 points), Excellent (31-35 points), or Superior (36-40 points). Presentations receiving a “Superior with Invitation” at the district level can advance to the National Fine Art Festival, which is hosted by a different city each year in late summer. Through the program, students have the potential to earn more than just a rating; they are also eligible for national awards and college scholarships from participating Assemblies of God colleges,

universities, and church programs across the country (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, 2025, pp. 12-15).

While many festival categories, such as Drama Solo or Drama Ensemble, are also standard events recognized by those familiar with theatre festivals like International Thespians, there are other events that are unique to National Fine Arts. One of the most notable is "Human Video," a theatrical performance form found mainly within the evangelical Christian subculture. A product of the 1980s MTV phenomenon, the origins of human videos are often traced back to Randy Philips, a "fine arts fanatic" who used the music video craze to create a new form of performance (Chace, 2011). Human video performances often combine elements of mime, drama, dance, and lip sync to tell a story set to music.

I first experienced this event at the April 2018 Peninsular Florida Fine Arts Festival held at Faith Assembly of God, a megachurch in Orlando, Florida. While many festival events took place in smaller classroom spaces around the church building, Friday morning's Human Video Large Ensemble event took place in the middle of the church atrium—a large open area of the three-story building complete with a baptistry and stage area in the center. Chairs were set up for the audience (I estimated around 200). Audience members would come and go between group performances, but the area stayed relatively full throughout the day. In addition, the atrium area functioned like the center court of a large shopping mall, open to the building's multiple levels so that people could watch the action from the balconies above.

"Believer," a human video presented by Glad Tidings Assembly of God, provided my introduction to the event. The performance, like most of the human videos I watched throughout the day, combined the traditional elements of mime, dance, and lip sync (with a few cheerleading-style lifts added in). Many of the performances I observed featured careful audio splicing of songs, sermons, or news clips to present an evangelical message. Some common themes quickly emerged as I watched multiple groups perform. Some human videos retold Biblical narratives like the Genesis account of Adam and Eve or the Gospel story of Jesus's birth. One of the most recurring scenes featured dramatic battles between good and evil with students taking on the roles of Jesus and demonic forces. In most human videos, students used creative lifts to portray Jesus's crucifixion and victory over evil—whether that be victory over literal demons or human sin.

But many other human videos tackled social issues in “ripped from the headlines” fashion. One human video ensemble known as “Essence,” for example, spliced multiple audio clips into their musical selection that spoke of school shootings, ISIS, and same sex marriage, including a speech from former President Barack Obama. It ended with a sermon clip while the group continued their interpretive dance and aerial lifts. Observing from a theatre education perspective, I found that these human video performances seem to align with the curricular goals set out in the National Core Arts Standards in Theatre (2014) developed by members of the Educational Theatre Association and American Alliance for Theatre and Education, particularly in the artistic process of “Connecting.” For example, when middle and high school students create performances about contemporary social issues that are significant to them, they actively “use different forms of drama/theatre work to examine contemporary social, cultural, or global issues” (Standard TH:Cn11.1.8.a) or “choose and interpret a drama/theatre work to reflect or question personal beliefs” (High School Accomplished Standard TH:Cn10.1.II.a.). In this way, even students who are not enrolled in curricular theatre programs have the opportunity to develop the key theatre competencies set out by the creators of the national standards.

But I also suggest the process of creating human videos, such as the one portrayed by “Essence,” provides an intriguing, designated space where issues of politics, culture, and faith can collide for young evangelicals. Many Fine Arts participants likely find themselves existing in a liminal space between the conservative Christian faith taught at church and their generation’s increasingly liberal beliefs. The Barna Group (2018) published the results of a 2016-2017 study of Generation Z that pointed to a huge discrepancy between engaged Christian teens and their non-religious peers, especially on moral issues. Compared to teens of no faith affiliation, engaged teens were four times more likely to think lying is wrong (77% vs 20%), and over fifteen times more likely to think sex before marriage and homosexuality are morally wrong (76% vs 5% and 77% vs 4%, respectively). Politically, young conservatives also can find themselves isolated from their Republican elders; in 2018, less than 60% of Republican-leading Gen Zers approved of Donald Trump in the survey, compared to 85% of Baby Boomer and 90% of Silent Generation Republicans. This is largely attributed to shifting generational attitudes

on factors like social issues and ideal levels of government involvement in society (Parker et al., 2019). By splicing together clips from both mainstream media and evangelical sermons, the soundtrack of some human videos becomes an intense dialogue between the two voices regularly encountered by students both inside and outside of the church walls.

On one hand, some might believe that human videos and similar evangelical performances merely propagate conservative views within the Church in a didactic, uncritical way. Yet, I argue the human video creative process holds the potential to be a valuable space to discuss critical social issues in an evangelical setting, much like the way that sociologist Sally Gallagher (2007) argues some mainline denominations use youth programs to encourage teens to "construct their own opinions and beliefs" (p. 178). Assemblies of God youth leaders acknowledge this potential in one of the festival guides, noting that Fine Arts should be a place where students "wrestle" with questions regarding the way their faith interacts with culture (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, n.d.-b). Theoretically, the creative process of putting together the human video could serve as a viable, valuable avenue for students to ask valid questions and search for answers as they attempt to navigate the tension between their conservative faith and liberal culture.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE SANCTUARY AND THE STAGE

Despite the perceived dichotomy between the theatre world and the evangelical church, there are examples of partnerships between the two that hold promise for making arts education more accessible for students. Some schools lacking adequate on-site performance spaces are partnering with churches to provide a venue for school productions, making use of the theatrical technology found in many church worship spaces. In addition, the inclusion of the arts in church services and special events, like large-scale Christmas spectacles, often means a demand for performing arts training. In response, some churches are using their campuses as performing arts training centers for youth, employing skilled artists to teach students and often preparing these emerging artists for opportunities to perform for the congregation. While often music-centered, some church-based performing arts

academies have created spaces for theatre training as well.

Significantly, these church-based performing arts academies often offer music, dance, and theatre classes at a rate that makes the training more financially accessible to students who might not be able to afford classes in a traditional community theatre setting. These opportunities often offer online registration that is open to all students—both church members and the unchurched community. Some other faith-based training centers are reaching out into the community and forming partnerships with local schools, especially schools that lack any formal theatre education programming. For example, Christian Youth Theatre (CYT), based in San Diego, California, is one of the largest after-school theatre programs in the U.S. with 22 licensed branches in cities across the country (CYT Branches, n.d.). The organization offers a "CYT@School" program, which provides afterschool theatre opportunities and in-school artist residencies, partly in response to school budget cuts for the arts (CYT@School, n,d,).

These partnerships between secular and religious arts organizations, as well as the proliferation of theatrical performance opportunities for youth within Christian churches, make this an area filled with potential questions for further research by theatre educators and scholars. For example, how might a child's participation in church-based productions impact their later involvement in school-based theatre programs, either positively or negatively? How might early faith-based theatrical experiences shape children's likelihood to engage in the greater theatre community as an artist or audience member? How do performances in state-of-the-art church auditorium spaces influence students' expectations about what theatre looks like, as well as its purposes in the world? These are just a few of the questions that invite further inquiry into the impact of student involvement in faith-based performance.

And there is an important postscript: I completed this initial study at the end of 2019—just before the COVID-19 pandemic shook just about every aspect of our daily lives. As I have begun revisiting some of the performances and programs I initially studied, some—like *The Gift of Christmas* at Prestonwood Baptist Church, the Assemblies of God Fine Arts Festival, and Christian Youth Theatre—have continued their strong theatrical programming post-COVID. Yet other arts education programs and performances I initially visited, like the $1.3

million dollar production at First Baptist, Fort Lauderdale featured on ABC News—the production that was such a mainstay that they designed their sanctuary to accommodate the production—is no longer a part of the yearly calendar. This invites the question: Were these changes in arts programming made as a direct result of COVID, or are there other factors causing a shift in megachurch culture resulting in the end of these long-standing programs?

Still, I argue the enduring post-pandemic presence of faith-based theatre for children and teens within some U.S. evangelical churches warrants the attention of theatre educators and scholars because of the potential it holds to shape the experiences and expectations of students in our arts classrooms. In this time of inconsistent access to theatre education in public schools, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, the church may serve as the first point-of-contact many young people have with the performing arts, potentially functioning as an untraditional means of creating a new generation of artists and audience members. Because these performances are not solely intended as entertainment, but as a catalyst for evangelism and life change, they can also shape the way young Christian artists understand the purpose and potential of theatre. By examining theatre opportunities provided in these sacred spaces, theatre educators and scholars can generate a deeper knowledge of the way some members of the next generation understand the nature and scope of theatrical performance, making these faith-based performances worthy of consideration by theatre scholars and educators who could be welcoming these students into our classrooms and professional stages in the years to come.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Lahey, C. (2025). An unlikely sanctuary: Examining the impact of church-based youth arts programs in the current educational theatre landscape. *ArtsPraxis, 12* (2), pp. 154-173.

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