

# Production Protocol

## For The Church

A LOOK AT HOW YOUR CHURCH CAN ORGANIZE THEIR PRODUCTION



by Lynda Stein

### Who's in charge?

We begin with who is in charge. This is the person who has final say on budgets—show content, creative concepts, advertising etc. In some churches it is the administrator, the senior pastor or perhaps in your church the music director or the board of directors. Regardless of who carries the title, if possible, it would be

beneficial if this person had some working knowledge of what it takes to present a play, work with actors, singers and technical people. If not it is recommended that a portion of the leadership be delegated to someone who understands these items. Often creative people set their beat to a different drum and if treated like an office worker will feel limited and restricted in their ability to create. So, with all due respect, do your best to have a team player on board who understands the process.

Consider bringing a consultant in from the professional theater community, local high school or college. Most people with theater degrees are aching to help others create theatrical experiences. If the person is unchurched then you may have to oversee rehearsals with them, or have a strong leader in the church escort them around as they show you the ropes, offer ideas to your problems and who knows, maybe they'll find God in the process.

Recently after much praying for a break from directing and producing, I had asked God to send someone my way to help. I found a guy with a master of the fine art in directing who was working as a stage manager at Disney. After conversing with him at length, knowing

he was unchurched, but understanding he was looking for a place to practice his craft, I invited him to direct our next production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I oversaw most of the rehearsals; he did a great job and took a huge workload off. He will be back this spring to direct our next production of *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown* and is slowly putting God back into his life.

In our ever-growing technical society, I have watched productions in the church environment develop into a sophisticated way to reach out and grab souls. People who would never grace the inside of a church building for a service will come see a play or holiday program. The challenges that are faced when creating these programs are often organizational, managerial and knowing how to take all the assets of a play and make them work. Admittedly, we artists are not always the most organized and disciplined when it comes to our craft; however, there are set standards that have been keeping the secular theaters hopping for years. In my experience in consulting, directing, acting and writing for churches, I have found the greatest lack comes in people simply not knowing how to put it all together. I feel the first step to keeping a production from completely falling apart is detailing a very well known protocol that has been around the theater for years. Before you put this down, I have added a bit of wisdom and insight as to how I have found the church adjusts their programs to this protocol.



OK...protocol. All creative people need roots and wings. Structure with freedom is a challenge anyplace where artists are involved; however, it really has its own twists in church where there are so many volunteers and a lot of people who feel it necessary to be in charge. That is why I have found it important to teach our participants production protocol. On numerous occasions, I have experienced a definite lack of respect and understanding for the need and importance of these roles. On the flip side, when a show struggles to be all it can be—people are staying up all night to get things done—they have fallen deep into battles with each other and revert to less than “Christian” behavior, protocol with structured production meetings can help take the slack off the stress. I am a firm believer in this process and have seen it work in my own productions.

Below is a protocol, as I know it in the secular theater. I have used it in my dinner theater events and when volunteers follow it, we have a good rehearsal and show experience. When they don't, let us just say they make it hard for themselves and others.

I do want to note, that there are many ministry and theater wannabes out there, who have had some experience doing one or the other or both. Watch out for them when choosing people to take on any of these positions. They can make you think they know what they are talking about; however, they are “tinkling brass and sounding cymbals.” I have seen these people cause many challenges to a church body and staff because they don't have an inkling as to how to pull a production off.

### Producer

The producer does a lot of the wrangling of money, making a project happen in the secular community. They will manage money, pay bills and generally handle all business matters pertaining to the production. In the church community, the producer does the same and is often the music minister, senior pastor or administrator.

### Director

In secular theater the director is the “big boss” over the entire production team and all performers. He/she is the visionary for the project. Everyone, including the stage manager answers to this person. However, in almost every church production I have worked, the music director is the “big boss” especially in the seasonal programs. Mostly due to the music minister being paid staff. Not to mention that traditionally seasonal programs are choir concerts with some drama built in. It is

very unusual for someone with a theater degree or experience to hold a full-time position as a music minister in a church.

### Drama Director

Due to the music minister taking on the role of director, the church has created the position of “drama director.” I have also heard this called a creative consultant, staging director or drama coach and is considered a support position to the music director/director. The drama director gives the actors and performers coaching in line delivery, character analysis, staging advice and assistance on the non-choreographed numbers. When I have been called to this position, I have also offered creative advice on tech, props, sets and lighting. The advantage for the music director/director to have a drama director is if that person has a completed theater degree, chances are they have received training in all areas of production and can offer a lot to the project. In my experience, the person who fits into this role acts as a coach not only to the performers but the music director.

### Stage Manager

A “must have” support position. This person must be organized, possess the finesse of prince charming, be “wise as a serpent harmless as a dove” and have strong leadership, as I call them, “don't mess with me skills.” Don't get me wrong, they don't have to be an army sergeant; however, all show participants including the tech need to know if necessary they can go there.

The role of a stage manager is better defined as a politician for they are the liaison between the director, actors and technical staff. When the show is running they are responsible for all aspects of the production from calling lighting, sound and backstage cues to pre-show set up, costume, sets and audio maintenance to calling performers and musicians if they are late. In churches I have seen this role filled split and filled by many people. Often the administrative assistants (music ministers secretary) take on a good portion of the administrative portion of this job.

During rehearsals the stage manager is whom everyone reports to. For absences and tardiness, rehearsal room set up, documentation of staging, technical and creative notes, prop lists, set and costume needs.



### Honest Tech Talk

My experience with technicians has brought me to the place where I feel I can say this. Technicians can talk circles around their directors with equipment tech talk; they are often not as organized managerially as they are proficient in their knowledge of the equipment they run. It can appear to someone who knows nothing about the technical process, that they really can produce some great

effects. Which they can do, but technicians are artists with equipment and also need roots and wings. This is where the role of technical director can benefit your program and really take the pressure off the entire process.

Sounds like a huge job and it is. That is where an Assistant Stage Manager is a great idea. In large productions, it is a good for the stage manager to call cues from the tech booth and have the assistant be positioned backstage to keep the set changes, props and actors moving smoothly from scene to scene.

In the church environment, I have seen this role split and filled by many people. Often the administrative assistants (music ministers secretary) will take on a good percentage of the administrative portion of this job. That is workable, if he or she is not also in the production or taking on other daily operational duties at work. I highly recommend you consider the person who is the stage manager just be the stage manager and if necessary find an assistant for them. If you would like you may put your administrative assistant in charge of them; however, I have seen secretaries get overwhelmed with taking care of their music ministers and the entire cast. Believe me, if you can find someone who can take on the role of a stage manager, it will keep peace in your office.

### Technical Director

If you can find someone who is well versed or has a healthy working knowledge of lighting, sound and set construction, can keep volunteer teams moving toward the project deadlines and is able to oversee the loan-ins and load-out (tech talk for hanging lights, installing the sets and setting up audio needs) this person would serve well in this position.

The technical acts as a foreman over the lighting, set and audio designers, keeping them on schedule and regularly letting the stage manager know the progress. In the secular theater they must be able to "do it all" and be willing to work around the clock to get it done. In the church, in some ways it is the same.

It has been my experience that the paid "audio guy" often fills this role in church. If the "audio guy" is also the technical director it can lead to disaster in your audio mix, due to the fact that they can't concentrate on their "craft" of mixing and knowing the show for the mix. I have also seen the lighting designer take on the role of technical director, sometimes it works, but most of the time it is tough. I just feel it is tough for them because it spreads them very thin and does not allow them to do what they love...light a show.

### Lighting Designer

The lighting designer, works closely with the director to determine his/her vision for the lighting needs and then makes suggestions and recommendations for lighting. Lighting is supposed to enhance and compliment a program not take away from the intent of the story. Too many times I have seen lighting directors offer their services to churches so they can try out all the new lighting tech toys. I have no problem using the new toys as long as they don't "upstage" (take away from) the message of the story. It is something that should be determined early on. How much light do we want to use, what kind and color should be in each scene and do we desire our production to be a light show or scene and story enhancer. Given the correct light at the correct moment it can really help people embrace the message. What I am trying to say is ask yourself, "Do I want this to be a story about the great lighting effects we can create or a story about the story?"

The lighting designer answers to the tech director. After the lights have been hung, he/she meets with the stage manager and the director to "set" the different scenes. This process is not a short one. A good lighting director in many ways is a creative electrician. Who gets a charge (no pun intended) with using light to make moods.

In church, the lighting designer may also be the "audio guy." In smaller communities it is difficult to find someone who has an understanding for this process. Again I think

you should go to the community theater, university or high school. You never know who is out there aching to get their hands on a project for the experience.

I recently visited a church where the audio guy claimed he could light a show. He had assisted the lighting load in one time and well; he had no idea what he was doing. He made himself and all of us miserable over it. We had

*continued on page 77*