



18 Fresh and Innovative Drama Ideas

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1. **Contemporary Retelling** - With this technique, retell the Bible story in your own words and look for ways to connect it to the lives of your listeners. Try to find parallels in the Bible story to the world of your students today. Set the story in a contemporary setting and rewrite it with the names, places and terms popular with your students. Paraphrase it in your own words. This technique can really bring the message home and help your students understand the application, and relevance, of the Gospel to their lives.
2. **Monologues** - Telling a story from the point-of-view of one of the characters within the story is called a "Monologue." You can tell the story from the point-of-view of a person, an object, an animal, or a spiritual entity (such as an angel or demon). Sometimes, the character could really appear in the story (such as a monologue from Peter about the day he walked on the water with Jesus), at other times the Bible may only hint at what the character may have experienced or felt.
3. **Tandem Storytelling** - Tandem storytelling simply means that two people tell the same story by alternating speaking parts. They may either narrate the entire story, or take turns exchanging sections of dialogue with each other. Sometimes, the tellers even say their lines together. As you prepare tandem stories, read through the scripts carefully and work on your timing so that these sections don't sound mumbled or rushed.
4. **Tandem Monologues** - Two actors alternate telling their stories. As the stories progress, the audience begins to realize the parallels between the stories, or the true identities of the actors. This can be a very powerful dramatic presentation. Sometimes, both storytellers may be portraying the same person at different points in her life. For example, one storyteller may be telling Ruth's story from her perspective when she is a grandmother while the other storyteller may be portraying Ruth as a young woman. Tandem monologues can also be told from different peoples' perspective. For example, one storyteller may tell the story of "Jesus healing the Demoniac" from the perspective of one of the shocked disciples, while the other storyteller tells the story from the perspective of the man who was healed of demon-possession. Typically, when delivering tandem monologues, the storytellers do not look at each other during the story.
5. **Monologue with a Scripture Reading** - By alternating a monologue with a section of scripture, the audience realizes the application or relevance of the verses to life in today's society. This technique is similar to tandem monologues, except that one person's part is a scripture reading.
6. **Narralogue** - Typically, when you tell a story you include both narration and dialogue. In other words, you might say, "Once upon a time there was a man named Elijah." That's *narration*. Then, you might say, "Elijah said to the widow of Zarephath, 'Please get me some food and water. I'm very hungry.' But she said, 'I have nothing to give you!'" The places where you portray the voice, posture, and mannerisms of the characters while delivering your lines are sections of *dialogue*. When one person delivers a monologue and the other narrates the story, you have what I call a "narralogue."





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7. **Interview** - One person portrays a detective or reporter on the scene of an important biblical event. He interviews one of the characters from the story. For this type of story, it's fun to dress the part and wear crazy costumes.
8. **Dialogues** - Two people "perform" a discussion. For example, two actors could play the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), or the two spies in Jericho (Joshua 2). They carry on their conversation in a dialogue that the audience gets to witness! As two people discuss an issue, the tension grows from their unique situation or perspective. Dialogues are easier to learn than other types of creative dramatic presentations because they mirror natural conversation. Dialogues are the most common type of scripts and dramatic sketches currently available.
9. **Reader's Theater** - Invite a small group of people forward to dramatically read a story. Give each person a script with her part highlighted. The advantages of this type of creative dramatics activity is that no one has to memorize anything, it's relatively easy for you as a teacher to include in your lesson, and the participants really enjoy it.
10. **Skits and Sketches** - Some people refer to short dramatic pieces as "skits" and people in the theater arts refer to them as "sketches. Dramatic sketches can be humorous or serious, thought-provoking or entertaining. Using them well is more important than what you call them!
11. **Improvisation** - When improvising, actors create their own dialogue, action, or characters. These may be based on situations or scenes related to a Bible story, or they may be spontaneously created stories.
12. **Role-Playing** - When you've finished telling a story, you can use role-playing to extend the learning and to apply the lessons of the Bible story.
13. **Narrative Pantomime** - While one person reads or tells a story, a small group of children act out the story. This can be done improvisationally (where children make up their movements "on the spot") or it can be rehearsed and then reenacted for another group of people.
14. **Spontaneous Melodrama** - This is similar to "Narrative Pantomime," except Spontaneous Melodramas tend to include more characters, be more silly and surprising, and involve more physical comedy. This technique works best with a large group where there's an audience to watch the show!
15. **Human Video** - Choreograph the movement of actors to correspond to a favorite song or instrumental piece. As the music plays, the actors act out ways of visually representing a story that relates to the song. They don't necessarily act out every word of the song, but show instead how the song moves them and makes them feel. You can either use instrumental music, or music with words.





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16. **Tableau (or Scripture Snapshots)** - Create frozen scenes from pivotal parts of Bible stories with small groups of actors. Practice the poses and then present the snapshots as part of a special program. Here is a list of some scenes I've used for a Good Friday Service:

Snapshot #1 - Jesus Reveals The Betrayer (Mark 14:17-21)

Snapshot #2 - Jesus Institutes The Lord's Supper (Mark 14:22-26)

Snapshot #3 - Disciples Sleep While Jesus Prays (Mark 14:32-34, 40b; Luke 45a)

Snapshot #4 - Judas Betrays Jesus (Mark 14:43-45)

Snapshot #5 - Guards Beat Jesus (Mark 15:16a, 17-19, 20b)

Snapshot #6 - Peter Denies Jesus (John 18:18, Luke 22:56-58, Matthew 27:73-75)

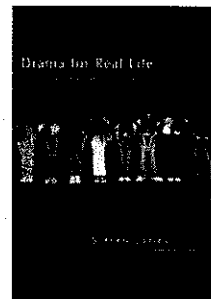
Snapshot #7 - Guards Crucify Jesus (Mark 15:25)

Begin with a blackout. As the reader begins speaking, slowly bring up the lights so that as he finishes each reading, the light allows the audience to see the Scripture Snapshot. Then, blackout again as the actors quickly and quietly move to create the next Scripture Snapshot. Then, begin slowly raising the lights as the reader begins the next scene. Allow only 3-4 seconds of darkness between each scene.

17. **Mime** - Actors use their bodies to visually portray a story. You may choose to have a narrated story in the background.

- **Human Sculpture** - As you read the story, one student moves a partner in ways to reflect what is happening in the story. This can be a very funny activity to do with older students!
- **Human Clay** - As you tell the story, have the children pretend to be the different characters or animals in the story. Encourage the children to become different story characters by reshaping their bodies. For example, say, *"Let's all act like the lions in Daniel's den... Great! Now, let's pretend we're Daniel praying to God. Good! Now turn yourselves into the angel that shut the mouths of the lions!..."* This technique works well when you have different animals or distinctively different people in a story.
- **Silent Story** - Children simply act out a Bible story with no musical accompaniment or narrator.

18. **Interpretive Readings** - These thought-provoking pieces are intended to give people a new perspective by providing image-rich, reflective presentations of scripture and doctrine.



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Checklist for Strong Dramas

It's easy to find sketches to perform in church settings. There are hundreds (probably thousands) of free scripts online. All you have to do is download them and print them out. So, why another book of dramas?

Well, there's a reason those sketches are free: most of them aren't very good. Most of them are sermons in disguise where one person has a problem and goes to The Wise Answer Giver who shows his misguided friend the Error In His Ways and then leads him in a Sinner's Prayer so they can all live Happily Ever After. While I don't know of a foolproof formula for writing good dramas, that's certainly a foolproof formula for writing a bad one.

Good dramas have characters and struggles we can relate to and give us questions to think about rather than answers we're supposed to believe. Here are a few guidelines for evaluating dramatic sketches:

- Does each character struggle with something? None of the characters should have all the answers. Every character should want something or have a goal or an unfulfilled desire that gives them a reason to be onstage.
- Does tension escalate until it reaches a conclusion that is both inevitable and unpredictable? A drama must move forward rather than deescalate into simply a conversation or a two-person sermon. Even a disagreement isn't a drama--it's just the seed that could give birth to a drama. The more tension, the more drama. Very often, tension can arise because of strife between two people's conflicting goals.
- Is the ending predictable, or is it surprising? When a drama begins, listeners naturally and unconsciously begin to identify with one of the characters. We tend to identify with the character who seems to be like us. So, I like to switch things around. Once the listeners are on the side of one of the characters, I like to pull the rug out from under them so that the story hits home. As soon as listeners can guess how a drama will end or how it will get to the end they begin to lose interest.
- Does the drama move the listeners? Sketches do more than just entertain or inform people. They affect us. I believe our goal in drama ministry should be to speak the truth in a way that moves people to the place where they can encounter God. If all we're doing is informing people, we've failed. Explanations don't move people, stories do. We should strive to reach not just the intellect, but also to the imagination; not just the head, but also the heart--just as Jesus did when he taught.
- Are the characters believable and three-dimensional? One-dimensional characters are either good or evil--one or the other. Believable characters are more like us--sorta good and sorta evil. Mixed up, flawed, hopeful, hopeless, concerned, distracted, and real. (Note, there's one exception: In comedic sketches the characters are usually more shallow or stereotypical because humor exaggerates traits or characteristics in order to show us by overstatement how ludicrous we sometimes act.)
- Are the characters people with whom the audience can identify? Age, background, interests, etc... affect how well the audience can identify with dramatic characters. The more we have in common with them, the easier it will be to identify with them. The more we can identify with the different characters and their struggles and discoveries, the more we'll be drawn into the story.
- Is the blocking natural rather than forced? Movement should arise not from contrived situations, but from the natural interaction of the characters with their environment. As you read the scripts



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aloud with your actors, (especially once they've learned their lines) you'll notice places where movement becomes instinctive. That's good because the more gestures and blocking appear to be rehearsed, the less effective they are. So strive to be natural and responsive rather than wooden and canned.

- Is dialogue natural-sounding? Well-written dialogue is crafted aloud rather than on paper. You can usually tell by reading it. Are the sentences long, complex, stilted, and grammatically correct? Or is the language abrupt, conversational, and informal?
- Overall, does the drama reinforce Christian cliché's, or does it replace them? Effective dramas show us our blind spots rather than make them larger.
- Does the drama offer the audience a chance to ask meaningful questions? If no questions are raised, it is probably not a very effective script.

Hints for Actors

Whenever you act out a scene, you're doing two things simultaneously--remembering and responding. You remember your lines, while at the same time you respond to the other characters, the setting, the action, and the audience.

Remembering and responding work together so that when they're done well, the audience notices neither. So rehearse to respond. Practice until everything becomes natural enough so that you can respond to what's going on without being distracted by trying to remember your lines. Your lines need to become second nature. If you have to spend your attention or mental energy remembering your lines, you won't say them naturally. You won't be totally present in the moment.

So, when you approach a script, spend less time and effort trying to "get it right" and spend more time trying to absorb the words so that you can act out the scene in a way that frees you up to respond naturally to the other people onstage.

Since you want your movement and gestures to grow naturally from your interaction with the text of the script, don't memorize with your mind. Memorize with your body. Experience the words as you rehearse them. Walk and move your way through the script. Let the setting and the interaction with the other people onstage help you develop your gestures and actions. Also, remember to:

- **Pour emotion into action.** Don't act out what you're feeling. Instead, show by what you do how those feelings make you respond.
- **Be aware.** Step into the role and notice what's going on. Be prepared to find what you're not looking for.
- **Learn your lines on time** - If the rest of the of the cast has learned their lines and you haven't, you're wasting their time. Learning your lines is a sign of respect and an integral part of this type of ministry.
- **Respond with spontaneity** - Respond to what's happening now, regardless of how things are supposed to go, or how they went in rehearsal. Learn to listen with your eyes and then respond with your body.



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For information on national and regional conferences related to using the creative arts in worship, see churchdrama@earthlink.net

For networking information and lots of links to scripts, go to www.cita.org or contact Christians in Theatre Arts at:

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