

A role for everyone: Casting the Christmas pageant

by [Kenneth F. Baily](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue



Outdoor Nativity scene at Pine Grove Methodist Church, [some rights reserved](#) by [Brian Leon](#).

You are about to enjoy an animated Christmas pageant in your congregation. Congratulations. If it includes live camels, plan accordingly. If it involves live babies, plan on having a backup baby in case your chosen star doesn't want to be anointed and breaks the "no crying he makes" credo. If your pageant involves scripture, you'll need to merge various texts into one mash-up script.

I grew up as a Quaker and did not participate in any Christmas pageants. But in my ministry I've come to know them well. I've dealt with tricky theological questions and treacherous sociological suggestions concerning the script, content, date, cast and music of Christmas pageants. I have seen original performances shine. I've seen traditions implode. And I've seen locally beloved practices trump, deny, invert and supersede commonsense solutions.

Yet we do this every year. Why? What do we expect from our pageants? Are these productions only a fast-moving train that's always sure to derail? Or are they, in spite of our grumblings, a cherished love offering for which we, the people of Advent, hunger and yearn?

It could be that God's revelation relies not on scripts but on casting. It could be that it's neither the features nor the finesse of the presentation that matters, but the cast

and crew. Let me explain.

I had my first pageant role in my forties when the child playing Joseph fell ill. I was given a costume, a place to stand and curt instructions from the director to “Be quiet. Stay still. Act adoring.” Years later I use these directions as a meditation device.

I was moved by my role in the play. Once I’d actually been among the other actors and actresses, I began to understand the central message of the Christmas pageant: the core of the story is that no matter the script, the set or the costumes, there is a role for everyone in the Christmas story.

The year of my debut a beloved kindergartner broadened my sense of the crèche even further. Wearing a feathery white swan costume, she stood out in sharp contrast to our gray/brown manger scene. The director expected me to discourage this outfit, so in my very best client-centered posture, I kneeled down before this fabulous five-year-old and asked if she wouldn’t consider being a donkey or a sheep or a goat. “I’m a swan,” she said. Holding fast to my exegetical authority, I explained that there were no swans at Jesus’ cradle. She furrowed her brows and looked me directly in the eye with calm conviction. “Don’t you think swans love Jesus too?”

I told the director that the swan was in.

This year my parish has a ticklish new challenge. It’s not the pageant itself—that’s been exactly the same since anyone can remember. We will build to a crèche climax as the curtain opens to reveal our eldest high school girl holding a live baby Jesus on her lap. The ticklish bit is choosing the baby: we have four new babies in the congregation, with another one due before showtime. I called on my staff for help: I sent an e-mail to my colleagues with a question in the subject line, “Who is Jesus?” Of course, what I was asking was, “How we will we choose a baby and how we will explain our choice?” Yet every time they hit “reply,” the subject line came back to me like a repeating, sounding joy: Who is Jesus?

“Who is Jesus?” is the simple yet profound question of the pageant. The answer comes as one participates in the storytelling. For children in my congregation, this means moving through every role in the story as they grow: they begin in the manger itself, proceed to the far end of the sanctuary as an animal or angel, return to the front in the speaking parts (including Herod) and then enter the aura of the holy couple by playing Mary or Joseph. Our tradition is that everyone is included;

everyone experiences the cycle.

The rest of the year we strain to tell this story. We try to be inclusive; we strive to explore incarnation, we seek to share scripture and we endeavor to name our spiritual gifts. But for a brief moment this Christmas, we'll find all of that easily in our pageant casting. We'll all meet at the manger.