

Traveling ministry uses modern approach in illustrating sermons

By Richard A. Kiley

Combine Christ's use of parables and proverbs in His preaching with the medieval church's application of story telling to communicate with those who could not read, and you'll get an idea of the contemporary approach of the Covenant Players.

The Covenant Players, an international Christian touring company, recently performed their "sermons through drama" for the people of St. Michael's Church in Newark, enabling parishioners to take a closer look at themselves and their faith practices in today's world. The group that entertained the parish was named "The Excelsior," a team assigned to cover the western New York region.

"It was very beautiful, very well done, and certainly made the message come to life," said Father Edward Steinkirchner, pastor of St. Michael's. "The experience was a happy one, and we would love to have them back."

Father Steinkirchner's feelings concerning the California-based repertory group are echoed by thousands of clergy and lay people who have been lucky enough to witness the vibrant group.

"It was beautiful; I'm 91 years old, and I've never seen anything like it," Mary Vanbemortel said. "I'm a Hollander and I've never had any schooling over here, but I understood almost everything. It was something really worth watching."

The group's unique way of presenting material also appealed to Emily DeWind, 75. "It was different. They (the Players) presented it so you felt like you were right there experiencing it with them," DeWind said. "It was easy to follow, also."

But the "ministry of faith" has had to work hard to get the backing of the Church hierarchy, which did not always look upon the group as it does today, according to Marcia Tindall, administrative assistant for the Los Angeles-based corporation.

Back in the early 1960s, when Charles M. Tanner envisioned a traveling ministry in drama, many onlookers doubted whether he would be able to convince Church officials of the program's viability or persuade them to pay for such a service.

According to Tindall, more than 550,000 performances later, Covenant Players continue to thrill and teach people with more than 110 touring units. The group has now performed in 50 countries on six continents and communicated its message in 10 languages. More than 900 plays and "mini-skits" make up its vast repertoire, which covers a wide range of issues and subjects from all kinds of perspectives.

Major themes covered by all of the touring units range from family communication, values, and drug and alcohol abuse to morality, ethics and Christian education. Secondary subjects, which may be employed according to the specific unit's repertoire, include materialism, spiritual freedom and the purpose of the Church.

Because the Players approach each parish and community differently, they not only incorporate numerous themes when they perform but also vary the length of their



Per Jakobsen (left), who portrays Cleo, lifts David Bissill, who is playing the part of the hero, Stanley Bladget, in the Covenant Players' first performance, "The Dalton Street Gang," at St. Michael's Church, Newark.



Kimberly Nolan-Bissill portrays a victim of the 1973 earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua, in "Depend on It," a short play which encourages perseverance in the face of seemingly hopeless conditions.

skits. In doing this, the Players are able to keep their audiences attentive with a smattering of longer one-act plays combined with appropriate one- or two-minute skits (sometimes containing humor) to relieve tension or weariness. This approach also facilitates the transition from one topic to another.

More recently, according to Tindall, in keeping up with today's media-dependent society, the ministry has introduced the use of radio, television, movies and cassettes to spread its message. This change has put an added strain on the already stringent financial situation of the non-profit company, which depends upon performing engagements and donations as its only source of income.

The money raised through the group's work pays for such necessities as traveling expenses, office space, insurance, and the entire income of all the touring actors.

"Company members' salaries begin at \$25 a week," Tindall said. "And members are only paid when the money is available." To aid small churches and community organizations that cannot afford a lot of money to hire the group, the Players do everything possible to keep expenses down.

As one might expect, the life of a Covenant Player is not an indulgent one. Members must live out of suitcases for months at a time while traveling. Using the cheapest means of travel under any weather conditions can sometimes seem unbearable, but the group trudges on regardless.

The traveling ministry has broadened its horizons internationally, with teams in Ireland, Lebanon and Egypt. Tindall said two members have been invited to China for two weeks, and the company hopes to set up a full mission there this fall.

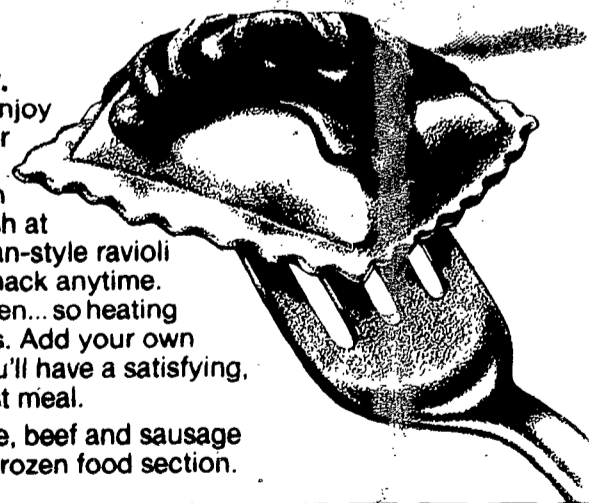
Parishes interested in the Covenant Players can receive more information from the group's world headquarters: 6311 DeSoto, Suite H, P.O. Box 4001, Woodland Hills, Cal., 91365. Information can also be obtained by calling (818)716-4191.



Per Jakobsen playing the part of Judas' sister, talks with David Bissill (Judas) during "Candle Against the Sun," which depicts the last week of Christ's life.

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