

ONE OF US

Production Notes

by Deborah Craig-Claar

GENERAL APPROACH

One of Us does not simply retell the Christmas story, it invites each of us to become a part of it. The musical celebrates the Incarnation not only by examining the miracle and mystery of God's decision to become "one of us" in the person of Jesus Christ, but by showing us a road that leads directly to the manger, so that we might become "one of His." This concept of inclusion runs through every aspect of this moving musical, and should serve as your guiding principle in making production decisions.

First of all, I'd encourage you to **remove as many barriers as possible between the congregation area and the platform area**. These might include prayer rails, modular walls, or other architectural features. Providing a warm, open space between the production participants and the congregation will set the thematic tone for the evening from the very beginning.

Next, plan on **freely using the aisles of your sanctuary** during the production. This will lessen the "performing" nature of the presentation and will involve the audience on a more intimate level. *One of Us* is not a participatory worship musical, per se, as it is clearly focused on communicating spiritual Christmas truths to seekers and the unchurched. Therefore, it is important to create a relaxed and genuine bond with your audience from the start.

Finally, I would suggest that your **platform and sanctuary decor reflect your congregation's most traditional and sentimental memories of this sacred season**. As we introduce them to the true meaning of Christmas, we need to begin from our common point of reference: traditional Christmas celebrations. This will probably include fir trees, wreaths, holly, candles, and whatever seems to be particularly special in your community. You don't need to create any "set" or "stage scenery" for *One of Us*, just recreate the visual Christmas that is already in your congregation's memories. Gently touch their hearts, and then they will open.

SONG-BY-SONG STAGING IDEAS

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence *with One of Us*"

The ethereal beginning of the musical might best be performed in a darkened sanctuary, lit only by candles. You can use "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" to accompany a candle lighting or a candle procession. Not only is this in keeping with the nostalgic feel of the season, but it creates an initial mood or reflection. The soloist for "One of Us" can then walk quietly into a pool of natural (candle) or soft electric (follow spot with a heavy amber gel) light. Light the two narrators the same way. Keep the mood meditative and warm as the initial themes of the musical are shared.

“Child of Light”

With the driving downbeat of this celebrative number, bring up the full sanctuary lights and fill the aisles with color, activity, and movement. This would be a great opportunity to use the youth or children’s choirs. They can carry in icons of the season (bells, holly, etc.) or use banners. The children might actually pass out small candy canes. “Child of Light” would also provide a prime opportunity for members of your music ministry to greet the congregation. (If you’d like to actually make a verbal announcement concerning a greeting, have one of the narrators speak during ms. 37-39.)

“The Heart of the Holiday”

This nostalgic song, creatively wrapped around several beloved carols, makes the perfect frame for a re-enactment of traditional family yuletide activities: trimming the tree, hanging the holly, and caroling. Recruit a half dozen folks who aren’t in the choir, bundle them up in colorful sweaters, mufflers and hats, and set them to work on completing the decorations on the platform. The two carols (“O Come, All Ye Faithful” and “Joy to the World!”) might be accompanied by quartet(s) of carolers strolling in the aisles. If your church sings carols as a traditional part of your Christmas program, you could easily slip in a simple carol-sing following “The Heart of the Holiday,” or invite the congregation to join you on “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and “Joy to the World!”

“One of Us”

The mood must return to the more contemplative atmosphere established in the opening song. The lyrics of “One of Us” present the heart of the musical, and you should consider how they might be best conveyed visually to your audience. If your church has a media ministry, you might create a media presentation to accompany this powerful song. If you have a dance ministry, a single dancer or a small ensemble might interpret Claire’s beautiful poetry. The presentation might even be as simple as an individual, standing next to a lit candle, slowly signing the lyrics in the eloquent sign language of the deaf.

“Jesus Is His Name”

The atmosphere should now be set to begin the wondrous story of Christ’s birth. As the narrators relate the story, consider having them read out of large Bibles. (Although they will probably know the verses, this visually reinforces the source of the story.) “Jesus Is His Name” will provide you with ample time for Mary and Joseph to make their journey to the “stable.” As you have probably established the aisles as open performance space, continue to use them during the Biblical sequence. Given the full “traditional Christmas” decor of the program, you are probably best served by a simple, minimalist stable area, possibly consisting of a manger and, if feasible, some hay. Also remember that if casting a full nativity with adults proves too difficult, congregations love to see children act out the Christmas story.

A special word about using live babies in nativity scenes: I believe they often provide some of the most meaningful and authentic moments in any nativity sequence. Don’t concern yourself that the baby may cry during the music, as that will only add tremendous emotion and authenticity to the scene. (Because Mary and Joseph do not sing or speak in this production, it might be charming to use a young couple from your church who are new parents, and let them

hold their own child.)

“Fear Not! Good News!”

You can either stage the announcement of Christ’s birth by the angels to the shepherds, or simply have the shepherds arrive at the manger. Use the aisles to accomplish either or both events. The shepherds should appear rustic and earthy, both in the clothing and manner. Each should have a distinctive gift (also rustic) to present to the Christ child. Consider having shepherds of a wide age span, from young boys to elderly men. (Again, casting members of an extended family will add a lovely dimension to your program.) The shepherds should arrive from every corner of the sanctuary.

“What Child?”

This creative treatment of the beautiful carol “What Child Is This?” should accompany a scene of worship at the manger. Once the shepherds are in place, other shepherd children can join them. A single angel can appear above the scene. Let the scene remain realistic and spontaneous.

“We Bow Down”

This popular worship song serves as a wonderful procession for the magi. If you plan to bring the kings to the manger, you can have them arrive individually, with their offerings. To provide the maximum visual contrast with the rustic shepherds (“princes and paupers”), allow the magi to be as regal and opulent as your budget will allow. Remember that the scale of their physical appearance must be appropriate for the room. The visual mixing of the shepherds’ and magis’ gifts before the manger can provide a strong final image for the sequence.

Another creative (and bolder) idea is to have contemporary people approach the manger during this number. That will visually create a timeless scene of worship that will set-up the subsequent song of invitation.

“Peace”

As this powerful ballad begins, you should slowly “remove” most figures from the manger. You can accomplish this by having the various individuals stand at staggered points during the first section of the song and slowly walk (in a measured step) down the aisles. The holy family should remain. It would be very effective to dim the lights fully and return to candlelight at this time. All focus should be on the Child in the manger. The soloist can sing from the dark or from additional candlelight. If you plan to extend an invitation, it should be offered directly following “Peace.” The narrator can follow this time of dedication or rededication or healing with the scripted prayer. (During the prayer, you can unobtrusively exit Mary, Joseph and the Baby.)

“Again and Again”

This energetic new worship song creates a high-energy response of corporate praise and thanksgiving, following the intense intimacy of “Peace.” Full lights should again flood the platform as the soloist, perhaps joined by a small ensemble, fronts the choir. If you used a dance team or youth earlier, this would be the perfect number to use them again. The song should segue directly into the Finale, with no break of momentum.

“Finale *includes* One of Us and Child of Light”

A finale which includes a reprise of previous musical numbers should also include a reprise of their corresponding visual elements. Bring back the participants who helped bring “One of Us” and “Child of Light” to life before for this rousing final number. Once again, the aisles should be filled with color and movement and the sanctuary filled with light.