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Quick & Easy Christmas Programs



Manger King

Laura and Robert Keeley

A Christmas Play for Children

Manger King

Laura and Robert Keeley



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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We wish to thank Laura and Robert Keeley for writing this play. The Keeleys are co-directors of children's ministries at Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. They have written and directed many plays for children, including *Not Forgotten*, *Promises, Promises*, and *I've Got Mail*, also published by Faith Alive Christian Resources.

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Preface

Everyone loves the Sunday school Christmas program. It's always fun to see how the young children will behave in front of the whole church. Who will sing the loudest this year? Who will turn his back to the audience? Who will wave to her parents? It's more than that, of course.

Our hearts swell when we hear the children sing with the kind of enthusiasm and abandon that we adults left behind long ago. We treasure seeing and hearing these young children sing and speak about the stories that mean so much to us.

For the people in charge of the program, though, producing this wonderful program can be a big headache. As directors of children's programs at our church, every year we look for new songs and a fresh way to approach the Christmas story. The challenge, of course, is that the theme is always the same—Christmas! So we began to make some basic decisions about what we thought the program should and should not be.

What's the Purpose?

We started by thinking about the purpose of the Christmas program. We saw some things happening in churches that didn't fit with our idea of what the program ought to be. Sometimes, for example, children would be required to rehearse long in advance, taking weeks away from their church school instruction on Sunday or requiring parents to bring their children to church for after-school or evening rehearsals. The purpose, it seemed, was to present a program that was "just right" and came off without a hitch.

Eventually we decided that Christmas programs should have multiple purposes. In our church, the program was part of a worship service, so it had to have theological integrity and present something meaningful to the congregation. We also came to see the program as an opportunity for the church to demonstrate that it values children by giving them a chance to lead a worship service. And we concluded that a program put on by children should reflect their developmental level and should project a sense of fun and wonder. Since the Lord gave us children, we should be happy when they act like children! The program should not be so formal that the children are afraid to be themselves.

On the practical side, as parents we didn't want to drag our children to extra rehearsals. And as directors, we didn't have the time for numerous rehearsals. The Christmas season is busy enough! We needed a simple program that we could present with just one rehearsal—and that didn't take away from ongoing church school classes.

Things to Keep in Mind

Keeping these ideas in mind, we developed the following principles for directing our church's Christmas programs:

- The program doesn't need to be perfect. Of course, it's important to give our best to the Lord, but even with multiple rehearsals, children will still forget lines and get nervous. Frankly, that's often part of a program's charm. Parents and other adults love seeing kids act like kids, waving to their parents and siblings. That's OK!

- It's usually best for children to read their lines, not memorize them. When kids aren't required to memorize their lines, they generally feel more comfortable participating in the program (and are more willing to be involved in next year's program). We usually print our words in large (16- or 18-point) type and place them on a music stand. We ask the kids to read with as much expression as they can, clearly and slowly.
- Include as many children as possible. If you have more actors than the play has characters, you can easily add a few lines and characters. In *Manger King*, for example, you could write a few simple lines and add one or more characters to each scene, or you could divide the existing lines between the characters listed and one or two extras. Bible readings can be broken into a number of parts as well. (We often ask second graders to read Scripture.) And kids without a part in the play can be part of the choir or choirs. Note too, that in scene 5, two children change the throne into a manger, and children in preschool through second grade add strips of cloth to the manger.
- If your church is small, invite teens and adults to play some of the roles. For example, in *Manger King*, teens or adults could play the roles of the Hebrew women in scene 1B; the roles of Betsy and Joseph in scene 3B; or the role of Elyse in scene 4B. Teens or adults can serve as readers too. Their participation will add an intergenerational aspect to your celebration.
- Invite—don't pressure—kids to participate. They need to be comfortable doing so. We call the children's parents at home and ask them if their child would like to participate. This way, there's less peer pressure and parents have some input. Because the children know they are not asked to memorize anything and that participating is “no big deal,” we've never had a child who didn't want to be included.
- Make a point with your program—and have fun doing it. Children and adults should enjoy the program and learn something from it. *Manger King* uses humor, but it also attempts to make a point. Even though the point may be more apparent to adults, children hear it and will recall parts of it during the Christmas season. Don't underestimate what children pick up.

Using *Manger King*

It's important to adjust this play (and all others!) to the needs and skills of your children and to your congregation. Here are some easy ways to do that:

- As we suggested above, you can expand the characters and lines in the play if you have more children than roles in the play. Also keep in mind that many children—especially younger ones—will enjoy participating as part of the group that sings the songs that accompany this play.
- While there are no “star” roles in this play, you will probably want to use older children (grades 5 and up) for most of the characters. We've used a fairly even balance of boys and girls, but feel free to make gender adjustments.
- If you have a good group of singers, you may want to add more songs. If you have soloists, feature them in the songs. To cut down the time needed to learn a song, ask two or three children to sing the stanzas, with the choir (or congregation) singing the chorus (or vice versa).
- As you assign the parts, keep in mind the personalities of your group of kids and attempt to choose parts that fit them. Feel free to adjust some roles or lines to fit the child who reads them; for example, a shy child may prefer to have just one short line at a time. Perhaps lines for a child with special needs can be simplified and still carry the same meaning.

Manger King can be used alone or as part of a worship service. Depending on how many songs you sing, the play will take about 25-30 minutes. The sample bulletin on pages 28-29 shows how we used this play as part of a worship service.

Sit back and enjoy what the children in your church can do. They amaze us every year! It's a joy and a privilege to be able to work with them.

—Laura and Bob Keeley

Plot Summary

Kristen, Andrew, and Lynnae are living in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth. They wonder how they will recognize the Messiah. Kristen is sure that they can expect a leader like King David. He will be a Messiah who

- is chosen by God.
- cares for his people.
- protects them from their enemies.
- obeys God.

After each discussion between these three Hebrew children, other children portray scenes from David's life, showing David as the

- anointed one.
- shepherd.
- warrior.
- king who obeys God.

In the final scene, Kristen is challenged to reevaluate her expectation of what the Messiah will be like when Alyssa comes and tells of Jesus' birth in a manger.

Bible readings and songs telling of Jesus' birth follow each of the four stories about David.

Characters

Scene 1A: Looking for the Chosen Messiah

- Kristen, a Hebrew child
- Lynnae, a Hebrew child
- Andrew, a Hebrew child

Scene 1B: David the Anointed

- Rachel, a Hebrew woman
- Hannah, a Hebrew woman
- Lydia, Hannah's sister
- Reader 1

Scene 2A: Looking for the Caring Messiah

- Kristen
- Lynnae
- Andrew

Scene 2B: David the Shepherd

- Sally, a Hebrew shepherd girl
- Matthew, Sally's brother
- Alex, a Hebrew shepherd boy
- Nicole, Alex's sister
- Reader 2

Scene 3A: Looking for the Protector Messiah

- Kristen
- Lynnae
- Andrew

Scene 3B: David the Warrior

- Betsy, a Hebrew teenager
- Joseph, Betsy's older brother
- Reader 3

Scene 4A: Looking for the Obedient Messiah

- Kristen
- Lynnae
- Andrew

Scene 4B: David the Obedient King

- Elyse, a Hebrew mother
- Julie, Elyse's daughter
- Sarah, Elyse's daughter
- Reader 4

Scene 5: The Messiah Comes!

- Kristen
- Lynnae
- Andrew
- Alyssa, a Hebrew shepherd
- Reader 5

Costumes

All the characters in this play should be dressed in Israelite clothing. Israelite costumes are easy to make with patterns found in fabric stores. Ask senior members of your church family or others who enjoy sewing to assist with this project—it's a great way to involve others in your program.

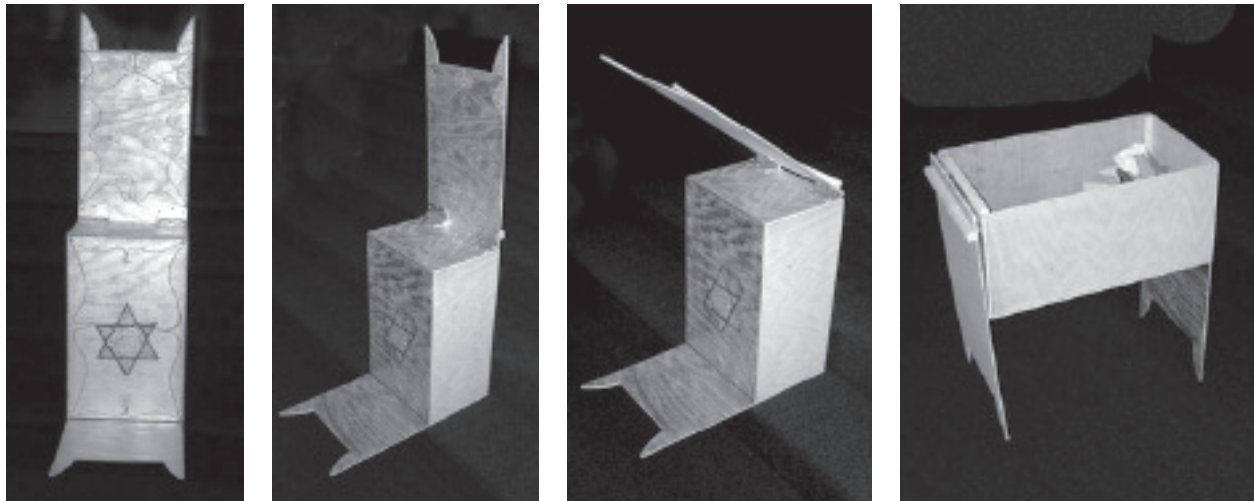
Choose earth tones and solid-colored fabric in cotton or cotton/polyester blend. (All-cotton fabric will wrinkle but may be more authentic looking. Textured fabrics can also add to the authentic

look of the costume.) If the fabric is lightweight, children can wear the costume over their regular clothing.

Note: You'll need additional fabric to make a strip (4" x 14" or 10cm x 35cm) for each child in preschool through second grade. Children will place these strips in the manger during the final scene. (If your group is small, all the children can participate in this activity.)

Staging

You'll want a king's throne in a prominent place. In our church, this was on the top step, center stage. The throne pictured below was designed by a member of our congregation so that it could be easily converted into a manger (see scene 5, p. 26).



The four scenes with Kristen, Lynnae, and Andrew and scene 5 can take place on the floor of the sanctuary. Or, if your space allows, stage these scenes so that the congregation can see the characters.

The scenes about David take place center stage. (Note that the king's throne is not part of these scenes and can be set back to allow room for the characters.)

You'll also need a place for the Bible reader(s) and the choir. We had two choirs, one with younger children (preschool through second grade) and one with older children (third through sixth grade). In our church, the choirs sat on the steps leading to the platform and then stood when it was time for them to sing.

During the singing of "Manger King" in scene 5, have two children quickly change the throne into a manger. (We asked two third graders to do this.) During the song "Welcome to Our World," have children in preschool through second grade place strips of cloth in the manger. To make the manger look warm and welcoming, show the children how to place the strips half in and half out of the manger.

Songs

We've suggested the following songs to use with this play:

- “Tiny Baby” by Karyn Henley (from the CD *Before I Dream in Jesus' Arms: Bible Stories and Songs for Bedtime*, Chatterville Music, 2000. Distributed by Tyndale House Publishing).
- “Oh, Shepherds, Wake Up” by Robert and Laura Keeley (see p. 30).
- “Jesus, Name Above All Names” by Naida Hearn (*Sing! A New Creation*, available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, www.faithaliveresources.org; 1-800-333-8300).
- “Child of God” by Grant Cunningham and Matt Huesmann (from the CD *One Silent Night*, Myrrh Records, 2000).
- “That Boy Child of Mary” by Tom Colvin (*Songs for LiFE*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, www.faithaliveresources.org; 1-800-333-8300).
- “Holy Emmanuel” by Terry Scott Taylor and Steve Hindalong (from the CD *City on a Hill: It's Christmas Time*, Essential Records, 2002).
- “Manger King” by Julie Miller (from the CD *City on a Hill: It's Christmas Time*, Essential Records, 2002).
- “Welcome to Our World” by Chris Rice (from his CD *Deep Enough to Dream*, Rocketown Records, 1997; or from Amy Grant's CD *A Christmas to Remember*, Myrrh Records, 1999; or from Michael W. Smith's CD *Christmastime*, Reunion Records, 1998).
- “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (*Psalter Hymnal*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, www.faithaliveresources.org; 1-800-333-8300).

Scene 1A:

Looking for the Chosen Messiah

[Lynnae, Kristen, and Andrew stand stage right.]

- Lynnae:** Wow! Look at this room! I thought my room was messy but . . . wow, this is impressive!
- Kristen:** You're better at this than I am.
- Andrew:** Thanks. I try to keep a certain level of messiness here at all times.
- Kristen:** I can see that.
- Andrew:** My parents think I'm just a slob, but I prefer to think of it as a protest against the Roman occupation.
- Kristen:** A protest? Against the *Romans*?
- Andrew:** Sure.
- Lynnae:** Oh, I get it! The unkempt nature of your belongings actually represents the way that the Roman Empire has made a mess out of our land, ruined our economy, and threatened to destroy all that we hold dear.
- Andrew:** I just thought that if I kept my room messy, it would be annoying.
- Lynnae:** You think that your messy room annoys the *Romans*?
- Andrew:** Actually, it annoys my parents more than the Romans.
- Kristen:** You know, you could clean up this mess.
- Lynnae:** But then he would no longer be making a statement about the Roman Empire.
- Kristen:** Well, my father would sure like to make a statement about the Roman Empire. He's sick of paying taxes to the Romans!
- Lynnae:** My father talks about that all the time—at home, that is. He's careful about what he says on the street.
- Andrew:** Have you heard about the new census tax?
- Lynnae:** Yes. My father thinks the Romans stay up late at night trying to think of new ways to tax us.

Kristen: It's a good thing they don't have a "messy room" tax!

Andrew: My room isn't that bad. At least not bad enough for the government to come after me!

Lynnae: My mother says we could use a whole new government—a Hebrew government.

Kristen: And a new ruler—one like King David! You know, a ruler like the one promised to us.

Andrew: Oh, you mean the Messiah.

Kristen: That's exactly who I mean!

Lynnae: How is the Messiah going to be like David?

Kristen: Lots of ways! Don't you pay attention in class?

Lynnae: Lots of ways, huh? Name one!

Kristen: Well, first of all, he's going to be anointed, just like David was.

Andrew: Annoying? You mean like my room?

Kristen: Not *annoying* but *anointed*.

[Kristen, Andrew, and Lynnae exit.]

Scene 1B: David the Anointed

[Rachel, Hannah, and Lydia take center stage near the king's throne.]

Rachel: Hi, Hannah! Hi, Lydia. Where are you two headed?

Hannah: We're going to Bethlehem to visit relatives.

Lydia: Did you know that our family is getting so big we can barely fit into one house?

Hannah: And when everyone talks all at once—ooh, my ears start ringing just thinking about it.

Lydia: They say that's a sign of aging.

Hannah: What is?