

# The Perfect Christmas Pageant -

Perfect...Just Perfect

by A. James DeHayes  
Phillip H. Dutter - Editor

I was privileged to be in the congregation of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York when Dr. Thomas Tewell, Senior Pastor, delivered a sermon on *The Perfect Christmas Pageant*. The sermon struck me as containing a message for everyone, especially for executives of companies facing the challenge of accelerating change. Here is a condensed version of Dr. Tewell's story for your enjoyment.

Doris began directing the Christmas pageants at a large church in the Midwest in 1949. She was a fixture at the church, having directed every Christmas pageant from 1949 until 1995. During those 47 years, Doris outlasted seven Senior Pastors, nineteen Directors of Christian Education, and twenty-six Chairpeople of Christian Education Committees. Parishioners often stated that Presidents of the United States could come and go, wars could begin and stop but one thing was certain; when Christmas time came, Doris would be directing the pageant.

Doris' goal each year was to create the perfect Christmas pageant. She required perfect lighting, perfect sound systems, perfect blocking, perfect enunciation, and perfect timing. Her quest for perfection is why only nine children were selected for the pageant each year: one Mary, one Joseph, two shepherds, three wise men, one angel, and one narrator. Each year, parents tried to persuade Doris



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to allow more children in the pageant. One parent even quoted the Bible saying, "It says right here.....there is a heavenly host." Doris replied, "I would rather work with one angel than a heavenly host."

Other parents said, "Doris, you could work in a few children as shepherds and sheep," to which Doris replied, "If you allow too many kids in the

pageant, you will lose the one thing that is absolutely indispensable for a Christmas pageant – total control."

In the fall of 1996, the church elected a new Chairperson of the Christian Education Committee. The committee members included three mothers of rejected Marys,

Josephs, shepherds, and wisemen. Although their children had tried out for many years, there had only been nine participants allowed in each pageant, now and forever, amen.

The new Chairperson realized she had a problem on her hands so she did what any good elder would do to solve the problem. She appointed a committee. The new committee came up with a resolution that was passed unanimously by the church. The resolution stated: *Be it resolved that all children who wish to be in the Christmas pageant will do so. A part will be found for every single child.*

Doris resigned the next morning, simply stating, "If these young mothers think they can do it better then let them do it themselves."

In 1996, the Christmas pageant in that large church in the Midwest was less than perfect. Perfection is difficult when you have twelve shepherds, twenty-seven angels, and three dozen sheep grazing during the pageant. In fact, there were many less

than perfect moments that year. During the rehearsal, Mary and Joseph were not surprised when the narrator read from *The King James Version*, "...and Joseph also went to the city of Nazareth to Judea to the city of David to Bethlehem to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife being with child." But, when the mothers thought about it, they realized the children really did not understand what *The King James Version* meant. So, unknown to anyone other than the narrator, they decided to use the *Good News Version* of the Bible for the real pageant.

On the night of the pageant, as Mary and Joseph made their way into the church, the narrator read, "...and Joseph went to register with Mary, promised to him in marriage, and she was pregnant." As they entered, the word "pregnant" echoed across the PA system. In a moment of terror, Joseph looked at Mary and said, "Pregnant? What do you mean pregnant?" Suddenly, the meaning of Christmas came home to the congregation in a fresh, new way.

There were other "perfect" moments that year:

The three dozen sheep got tired during the pageant so they made their way into the last two pews of the church. They found Doris in the back row. She had done this for forty-seven years and did not want to miss her children performing. It was a holy moment when several of the sheep fell asleep in her lap.

The lights went out at the worst time during the performance. However, as the congregation looked out the windows, they could see that snow was falling. As everyone saw the beauty of the scene, they did a collective "aaahhh".

Then, it was the innkeeper's turn. A junior high student, he had been rejected as Joseph, a shepherd, and a wise man. He was the type of junior high student for which awkward is the only word to describe him. He looked awkward, felt awkward, and was definitely awkward in the pageant setting. Mary and Joseph approached him and asked if there was room at the inn. He dutifully said his line, stuttering just a bit, "There is no, no room at the inn." With that, Mary and Joseph turned to go to the manger where the baby Jesus was born. Then,

the barely teenaged innkeeper, in a moment of grace, had compassion in his eyes for Mary and Joseph. He forgot he only had one line in the show. As Mary and Joseph turned to go out to the stable, he called out, "Wait a minute, you can have my room!"

The congregation laughed for a moment and then listened as 91-year-old Minnie McCanaugh said in a loud whisper to her husband, "This pageant tonight was perfect, just perfect!"

No, it was not perfect in the way Doris strove for perfection. It *was* perfect in the way God gives perfection: that He can take our fumbling, feeble attempts at fairness and love, at making everyone feel a part of Christmas, anointing it with His grace, and change peoples' lives. The reason Minnie was quite right was that just as the innkeeper experienced a moment of grace when he widened his heart and would have given up his own room, everyone in the congregation realized that making room for strangers, the broken, the grieving, the lost, and even a consultant or two, is what Christmas is all about.

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In recent years, many of our clients have been going through changes in management style and corporate culture similar to the dramatic changes described in this story. They have moved from a rigid, hierarchical, authoritarian, change-averse style of management and corporate culture to one that is looser, more participative, less bound by precedent and more responsive to change. In some cases the transition has been the result of a deliberate, organized effort. In others, it has been through a combination of circumstances. The main forces driving this change have been: 1) the rapidly changing competitive environment, 2) the impact of technology on virtually every business activity, and 3) the increased expectations of employees at all levels to have more to say about what they do and more freedom of action in carrying out their responsibilities.

While most companies seem to have benefited from these changes, some have been more successful than others. One problem recently encountered is

the one illustrated by Doris in the Christmas Pageant story – unwavering resistance to any change in management style by key managers. A second problem is that the desire to loosen controls and allow more freedom can go too far too fast and cause breakdowns in communication and coordination. In the Christmas Pageant story the result of the abrupt and dramatic change in approach could have been chaos had it not been for a little bit of luck coupled with a sympathetic congregation feeling the spirit of Christmas. This risk can be minimized by emphasizing key corporate values, by getting people to understand the direction of the company, and to apply it to all the decisions they make. It is important for company leaders to remember that controls should not be loosened in areas such as ethical issues.

The key message of the story in my mind, however, is that the idea of a "perfect" pageant should not be whether it fits an orderly, detailed model but whether it strikes a responsive chord with the congregation. Similarly, the most meaningful measure of organizational effectiveness is not whether a company runs like a well-oiled machine but whether the company is achieving its objectives for growth and profitability. This is more likely to happen in today's world when management is willing to take reasonable risks to increase the company's ability to adapt to change. ■

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*\*Excerpted from a tape of: "The Perfect Christmas Pageant!" Matthew 1:18-25. Dr. Thomas K. Tewell. The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, 7 West 55 Street, New York, NY 10019-4995. December 14, 1997.*

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