

# STORYTELLING

September 2024

## Connection Street Theater

*"For the kids that come to be in a show or do the camp, this is their church. We need to get past the idea that only a worship service or a bible study are legitimate connections."*

*–Pastor Doug Peterson, Faith Lutheran Church, Shelton.*

Connection Street Theater began to serve the Shelton community in 2011. It was the brainchild of the pastors there at the time, Steve Olson and Brian Weinberger, and their wives Jill and Bekkah. Between all of them, they had skills in theater, music, and tech and thought that a community theater out of the church would be a great way to serve a small town that didn't have many performing arts opportunities and allow people to make connections with the congregation.

When those pastors' ministry had concluded, the Faith community decided that the theater ministry should continue. Michelle Whittaker got on board as a general director with Laury Thorson active as an actor and music director.

"Not only is it a great benefit to have arts in a community," says Michelle, "but it is a way to bring younger people and energy to an aging congregation."

Connection Street is a way for people to experience Christ's love without being "churchy," and has been successful in bringing people rejected by other churches back into a faith community. Not only to the theater projects, but even to worship and other events, and often these are people who had never imagined, in their words, setting foot into a church again.

Every Christmas there is a show that encourages whole families to participate together. When they did "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever," the story in the play about unruly and unchurched neighborhood kids taking over the show and learning the real meaning of Christmas happened in real time and in real life alongside the play. Now those kids are the backbone of Faith's youth group.

Participants in Connection Street productions experience love and acceptance and are grateful for the family they've found. It is real evangelism, with the love of Christ demonstrated and lived instead of talked about. Kids who participate grow in confidence that follows them into other aspects of their lives, and adults come to try something new or regain something they loved. There are wonderful interactions between seniors and younger people that are becoming increasingly difficult to find in other places, and these intergenerational ties benefit all.

According to Pastor Doug, an unforeseen and exciting benefit is that people in the theater have brought their connections to community organizations and through them Faith has developed ministry partnerships with nonprofit organizations. Not only has Connection Street brought beauty and joy to Shelton through the arts, now there is a web of interconnected organizations that work together on housing, food insecurity, literacy – it is a surprising and rich aspect and outgrowth of this work.

Anyone is welcome to contact Faith Shelton to learn more or for advice about creating their own connective ministries, and Pastor Doug has this piece of encouragement: "Do it because it's beautiful and good," he says. "Not a means to another end but the thing itself. Release the idea of results and recognize that these ministries are spiritual encounters in and of themselves."

*~ by Synod Storyteller Chavaleh Forgey*