

BASICS FOR HOSTING A MYSTERY DINNER THEATER



Vision: Get a vision of hosting a mystery dinner at your church! Who would get involved? What would the purpose be - Community outreach? Fellowship? Fundraiser? Where would everything take place? When do you want to do it?

Find a Script: Research and then preview scripts to find one that fits your target audience as well as your potential cast. A great place to look is **Stuff 4 Church** – at www.theater4church.com.

Organize: Recruit a few "team leaders". You can have one person in charge of:

- Overall
- Food / Serving
- Decorations
- Drama
- Props
- Ticket Sales / Seating
- Sound / Lighting
- Registering when arriving
- Advertising / Pictures

Brainstorm: After you have received the script, get together with your team and brainstorm fresh and fun ideas for your menu, decorations, games, props, publicity, prizes, etc!

Decorations: The look of the room should match the theme of the drama. When decorating, consider colors, backdrops, table cloths, plates/napkins, centerpieces, wall decor, signs, background music, etc. Start working well in advance of the big night! You can save money by making items, matching prices, thrift stores, or on the internet.

Handouts: Consider making a playbill to hand each guest as they arrive. For proper etiquette, always include the author's name with the title of the script. Include information such as names of those who have helped, people that are in the cast, how the evening will flow, information about your group or your church, the plan of salvation, etc. At minimum - put character descriptions on the tables for guests to read. Also, have the "Who done it?" ballots and the itinerary on the tables. Provide pencils and paper to encourage guests to take notes.

Name Tags: Everyone in the cast and all the guests should wear name tags. Tags help the guests to notice who each character is. Also, it's a great way for guests to interact with one another without being embarrassed for not knowing someone's name! Name tags can have fun, thematic decor on them by using stickers or printing them out on your computer using colorful pictures.

Publicity: It's crucial!! Publicize with your church at least 6 weeks in advance. Use announcement time, the bulletin, handouts, emails, dramas, posters in store windows, radio stations, local papers, outdoor signs, etc. Consider giving away tickets to leaders who will invite additional groups of people. Give a deadline for ticket sales.

Ticket sales: Set a ticket price by considering expenses such as: food, script, props, costumes, lighting, decorations, baby sitters, etc. Also, decide if the goal is to break even or to make money. Especially the first years, there are often unexpected costs such as pots/pans or additional stage sections or new microphones, etc.

Seating: Plan table numbers in advance with a chart mapping where each table is located. Always save 1 empty table for unexpected guests. Do not put the actors at tables because they help with serving and can eat later.

Games: To keep the evening flowing and fun, offer simple games that correspond with the theme. Have guests answer trivia questions or identify pictures/decorations around the room or guess how many fish are in a bowl, etc. Also, have everyone write their names on the back of the tickets and turn them in for a door prize.

Prizes: Choose prizes for the games, a door prize, crime solvers, and the Clueless Award. Prizes should go along with the theme of the evening. They do not need to be expensive. People simply like to win and be recognized!

Sound: If one character has a wireless mic, then all the characters need wireless mics. Be sure to involve your sound team early on so that sufficient plans can be made! It's very disappointing to work so hard on memorizing lines when the audience can't hear!! (*Consider borrowing or renting extra mics.*)

Practice: Pass out the scripts. Allow characters 1-2 weeks to get familiar with parts before rehearsals begin. You'll want at least 6 weeks of practice. Make a practice schedule of which scenes need to be memorized by which practice.

Dress Rehearsal: Don't assume everyone knows what's in your head! Tell them. Give outlines to cooks, stage crew, sound team, cast, everyone who is helping. Mistakes will occur but try to keep it moving. Have fun!!

Pictures: Don't forget to get lots of pictures of the crowd, the cast, the cooks, etc. They'll be fun to look at later, post on your website, Facebook, and use to encourage people to come to next year's program!

The Big Night!

Welcome! When your guests arrive, they enter a different world. Every actor is in costume and in character. They answer only to their stage names. Have them scattered around the room ready to interact with the guests. This get acquainted period should last about 30 minutes. During this time, guests mingle, snack on appetizers, read through character descriptions, play interactive games, etc.

Host: Find a great host who can guide the audience through the evening. The host should explain what the audience needs to do at each stage of the evening. Remember, for many of your guests, this will be their very first dinner theater experience. However, the host should do this in as few words as possible!

Basic Schedule:

Mingle / Play Games
Present Scene I
Eat Dinner / Complete Table Game
Continue Drama (*A crime will occur.*)
Eat Dessert / Discuss thoughts with others at table
Interrogation Time (*Optional.*)
Complete the Ballots and Turn them in to be reviewed to find winners
Present Final Scene which Solves the Crime
Announce the Winners
Say Thanks

Interrogation time: The audience enjoys being involved by having the opportunity to ask the suspects some questions. It's fun for the cast as well because they can just ad lib the answers. However, sometimes the cast members have concerns about how to answer these unknown questions. Here are some ways to help the cast:

First of all, the cast should be very familiar with their character descriptions. Though only the murderer can actually tell a lie, other cast members can "hem haw" or act like they're holding back vital information – "accidentally" causing themselves to be suspicious! Also, they can offer suspicious tid bits of information to cast suspicion on other cast members. Example: "Yes, I really loved him. But I'm not sure the same could be said of Rachel."

A second way to help ease the concern is to review possible questions that could be asked. If there is still too much concern, here are some other possibilities:

- 1 – Distribute pre planned questions (*placed in sealed envelopes*) to each table to ask of varying suspects. This way the audience is still involved, but the cast knows what's coming.
- 2 – Take up written questions from the audience. The host can skim through the questions and omit or reword questions that he thinks could stump anyone.
- 3 - Don't do the interrogation part. With the newer scripts the audience is already very involved.

Ballots: After questioning the suspects, each audience member individually completes his/her ballot. They are turned in before the final scene is presented. As the final solution scene is presented, the ballots are reviewed back stage. Winners are selected by identifying those who answered all 3 questions correctly.

Winners: If you have more than one winner, then announce all the winners. Select a number between 1 and 100 and allow them to pick numbers to find a grand winner who receives the prize. If there are too many winners, then simply draw the grand winner from the pile.

Clueless Award: It's fun to present this award at every dinner theater. Tell the guests ahead of time that they could win the "Clueless Award"! It goes to the person who is the furthest from guessing the correct suspect and reason for the crime. There are some characters in the audience who will enjoy having fun with this one! One example at our last dinner theater a gentleman - *whose wife had been selected as a volunteer* - wrote that his wife committed the murder. She did it with her killer eyes. The way he knew was that she had used those eyes on him before!! Our prize was a compass to help him find his way.

Thanks: Write down the names of everyone who was involved and thank them. Chances are - if you don't write the names down, you'll leave someone out.