

## *Starting an Improvisational Theater Ministry at Your Local Church*

Thinking of starting an improvisational theater ministry at your church? This short guide will give you a basic foundation to this kind of ministry, show you some common pitfalls to avoid, and help you on your way to establishing a thriving ministry. Along the way, we'll share some of our own experiences in starting our own ministry at Oasis Christian Center in Vancouver, Wash.

### **What is Improvisational Theater?**

Improvisational theater is a dramatic art form in which the actors, or “improvisers,” act out a scene without any script or predetermined plot line, based on suggestions from the audience. You know that TV show, “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” That’s improvisational theater. And in a church environment, it’s comedy with purpose, art with a twist, and fun for the whole family.

### **Benefits**

An improvisational theater ministry has several benefits to a local church:

1. It gives youth and young adults a purposeful outlet in the area of creative arts.
2. By its very nature, this type of dramatic art form melds around the hearts and beliefs of its participants, offering on-the-spot flexibility to speak on a variety of topics without searching for the “perfect” drama script.
3. Performances are a community-building experience that church members can rally around.
4. Performances attract people who might not otherwise go to a church event. By being intentional about how the performance is structured, the audience will leave with seeds of God’s Word planted that can lead to life-changing decisions. It’s a seed-planting ministry with proven success in drawing people into a faith-community.

### **Preparation**

Before you try to start any kind of new ministry in your local church, it’s important to lay the groundwork for success. This is especially true for improvisational theater, which some church members will immediately mistake for “worldly entertainment.” We know it’s purposeful ministry, and with some groundwork, you’ll increase your chances of success. Here are some things to do:

*Pray.* Nothing of significance in the Kingdom of God was ever started without prayer. If you want this ministry to have Kingdom impact, then start praying. Pray for direction and guidance. Pray for God’s blessing. Pray for unity in your church. Pray for your pastor. Pray for your community. Ask God, is this kind of ministry the right fit for my church?

Then wait for an answer. Pray that God will bring together a team. Pray that you and your team will live a Spirit-filled life, with actions that are “above reproach.” Pray that God will make your path straight, and remove barriers to an effective ministry. Make no mistake—you are engaged in spiritual warfare, and the enemy will actively work to block success in this ministry. But God is stronger, and if you let Him work through you, in His time you will see success.

Let’s be clear. If God wants an improvisational theater ministry at your church, and wants you to lead it, He is just waiting for you to ask Him for help. You will see prayers answered, in surprising ways. But if you’re doing this on your own, well, you’ll be wasting a lot of people’s time, including your own.

*Talk to your pastor(s).* Let your pastor(s) know that you feel led to start an improvisational theater ministry at your church. Help them understand what it is, and why. Share this document with them. Ask for their spiritual support, and perhaps even their mentorship through the process. Most pastors are just waiting to see someone take leadership on a project like this.

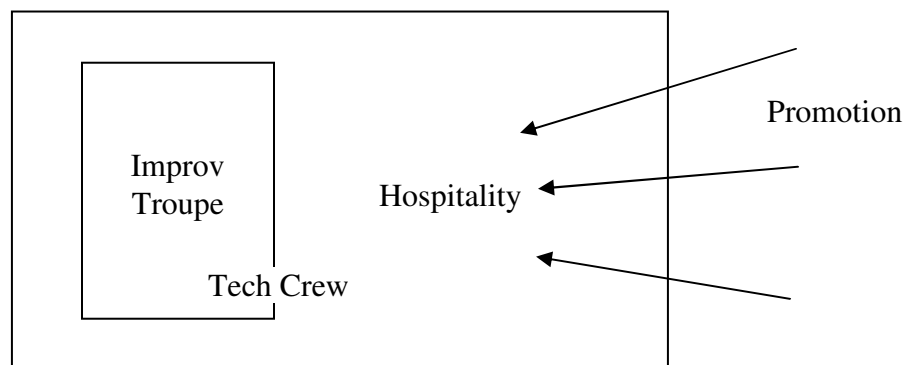
*Gather a team.* Before you go public with your idea, quietly share it with a few key people who might be interested in helping. Get their commitment for help, and perhaps even meet together a couple of times to pray about it.

*Meet with the church board.* To be successful, this ministry will need the support of your entire church, especially those who are leaders. Approach one or two of them one-on-one and share your vision. Ask for their support and guidance. Then take it to the church board and ask for approval to begin an improvisational theater ministry. If they approve, you’re well on your way success.

### **Ministry Components**

There are four major areas of activity in a successful improv ministry:

1. The improv troupe. These are the folks who perform.
2. Technical crew. You’ll need a technical crew to help create the environment for an effective performance. They set up the staging, lighting, and any sound system.
3. Hospitality. As an outreach ministry, a key purpose is to connect visitors with church members, and having a group of people focused on this aspect will increase your success.
4. Promotion. People won’t come to a show up unless they know about it.



## Auditions

Improvisational theater is unique. It requires a certain set of skills that are unlike other types of performing arts, and we strongly encourage you to hold auditions to help discover people with these innate skills.

Here are some types of people who will probably not be successful at improv:

- *The clown.* The humor from improvisational theater comes from the unusual juxtaposition of ideas that come from two players working together on stage. A clown's attention-seeking antics may be funny, but will often derail a scene.
- *The dramatic actor.* People trained in acting are encouraged to study a script, drawing out the key emotions and acting it out with consistency. A lot of the traits that make a successful actor actual hinder the ability to improvise a scene.
- *The deliberate thinker.* Improvisers need to be fluid, quick thinkers who spontaneously jump in. People who carefully think before they speak will have a hard time moving a scene along.
- *The complainer.* Some people don't want to try anything new. Or do anything at all for that matter. For this type of person, it is easier to complain than to do something about it.
- *The prima donna.* This person may make a great improviser, but won't help set up, shows up late for practice, doesn't help clean up, or take ownership of anything. In other words, they want to have the fun without the work.

Your audition should have two components: throwing people into improv scenes to see how they naturally respond, and an interview to learn a little bit more about their background and motivation.

*Scene work.* Here you are not looking for people with all the improvisational theater skills all put together. Clean Slate, another improv ministry that helped launch True!improv, looks for the following as part of the audition process:

- Improvisers who can convey truths about life, as opposed to people who go for the joke or try to be funny.
- Team players, who accept and support fellow improvisers' ideas.
- Improvisers who work well with others, who don't depend too much on the other people in the scene and who are also willing to share the spotlight.
- Performers who naturally take on different interesting characters.
- People who can commit their time.
- People who are committed to sharing Christ.

You'll want to leave enough time for:

- Warm-up games, to ease people into it and help people feel comfortable with each other
- Games that emphasize different types of skills
- Improvisers to rotate stage partners, giving you a chance to see how everyone works with one another
- Interviews

*Interview.* At True!mprov, we ask 3 simple questions:

1. What prompted you to come to the audition?
2. Tell us about a time in the last 6 months when you felt God's power at work in your life?
3. Tell us about the last time you shared your faith with someone?

In a perfect world, you'll have 9-12 improvisers in your troupe. This will allow you lots of interaction and chemistry, and will help keep people from burning out. However, when we started we only had 7, which dropped to 5 by the end of our first year. After auditions for the new season, we were back up to 8 improvisers.

Spiritually, we suggest looking for a mix of people, between spiritually deep, active disciples of Jesus to seekers who are okay with your purpose but may not have an active spiritual life. It's nice to have 1 or 2 seekers, because this group ends having many characteristics of a small group, and the influence can be strong. But you don't want too many, because the fundamental purpose is ministry. Having stronger Christians involved provides and opportunity for some discipling to happen as part of your group.

We ask everybody to sign a document outlining our expectations of troupe members. This includes things like coming to practice every week, affirming the ministry purposes, living a drug-free lifestyle, and committing to regular prayer for the ministry. (This document is available on the training section of our website at [www.trueimprov.com](http://www.trueimprov.com).)

People who want to be involved but are not suited for being part of the performing group should be encouraged to get involved with the technical crew, the hospitality group, or to help with promotion.

By the way, two of our best team members auditioned after responding to an ad on Craig's List. Both are strong Christians with no background in the Adventist Church, and each has brought a great spark to the team.

### **Training**

Training is fundamental to success. Improvisational theater is unlike any other kind of performance art, and a good improviser is continuously learning.

To begin with, go watch some improv. Find a troupe in your area and go to some performances. Watch improv scenes on YouTube. Soak up the experience.

Next, get trained by professionals. Most cities have improv groups that offer training. Many of them will even send a coach to your church for several weeks to get you started. Comedy Sports and Theatre Sport are two franchises that offer this type of training, in addition to performances. True!mprov had an initial training weekend by Clean Slate, an improv ministry in Seattle that mentored us through the startup process. After the initial

training weekend, we continued training with a local improv coach who worked with us once a week for 10 weeks.

There are some excellent books on improvisational theater. Every True!improv player is required to read *Truth in Comedy*, by Charna Halpern. Other books that have influenced our improvisation can be found in the training section of our website, at [www.trueimprov.com](http://www.trueimprov.com).

As you improve, continue exploring boundaries and experimenting with new forms and games. Keep things fresh. Clean Slate really encouraged us to commit to a high standard of improv, maintaining a pure form of improv. Some things to keep in mind:

- Improv is not sketch drama. It can be frustrating to try to insert improv where you might normally put a Bible skit, because if you remain true to the improv art form there's no telling exactly where the scene will end up.
- Improv is exploratory, and needs to be spontaneous. Preplanning a scene is the best way to kill it.
- Don't be afraid of letting it go where it will.
- Don't try to control it by planning ahead.
- It's important to accept what improv is, to practice being comfortable with its unpredictable nature, and to experiment with how it can be used.

Improv draws from the deep reservoir of each improviser's history. Garbage in, garbage out, which is why it is crucial for each player to actively work to put good into their mind, especially during the few days prior to a performance. "Editing" thoughts on the fly can slow down a scene, and letting God help you maintain a pure life goes a long way toward preventing a scene from accidentally heading down a non-family-friendly path.

### **Practice**

Practice at least once a week, to keep your skills sharp and keep the connection strong between the team members. After your initial training, you can continue to work on different improv skills and experiment with new games.

### **First Show**

Before you "go live" with your ministry, schedule a private show for your church. Skills develop more quickly when the team performs, while a smaller crowd will help ease players into performing. And if anyone in your troupe is not from your church, members will probably want to get to know your group before it performs publicly.

### **Promotion**

Most people who come to one of our True!improv shows heard about it from announcements at church or by word-of-mouth from one of the church members. We've also run newspaper announcements and put up posters around town, which has also brought people.

Here is a sample newspaper announcement;

Announcing the next performance of True!mprov, a comedy group exploring the ancient truths about life experiences through improvisational theatre. You know that TV show, “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” That’s improvisational theater, a dramatic art form in which the actors, or improvisers, act out a scene without any script or predetermined plot, based on suggestions from the audience.

True!mprov is comedy with purpose, art with a twist, and fun for the whole family. Join us Saturday March 17 at 8:00 p.m., at Walnut Grove Church, 6004 NE 72nd Ave in Vancouver. Doors open at 7:00 p.m. Performance sponsored by Oasis Christian Center. Admission is FREE; suggested donation of \$3 or shampoo to benefit the Open House Ministries homeless shelter.

### **Environment**

The environment is important to a successful performance. Try going to plays or improv shows in your area. Observe the atmosphere and decide what you want to emulate. Keep your show non-threatening—no surveys asking audience members if they’ve been saved. Use good music, perhaps a live band (but not a praise band). Have greeters there who will connect with people before and after the show. Offer free refreshments.

*Technical crew.* We perform in a room that seats about 100. We built a movable stage that is 8' x 16', which we set up for each performance. We also purchased stage lights, since the room we wanted to perform in didn’t have them.

Because audience involvement is crucial to a successful show, we put the chairs very close to the stage. Nobody is more than about 40 feet from the front of the stage.

Since this ministry is focused on young adults, we play house music before and after the performance, with music by Switchfoot, Relient K, or other alternative Christian band. Door open 30 minutes before the start of a show.

*Hospitality.* We have a hospitality coordinator that arranges for volunteers to bring goodies, which we set up at the back of the room and make available at no charge. We have someone sitting at the door to hand out a program, which lists who the performers are, what the theme is, and some events coming up in the next few weeks at Oasis, including next week’s sermon topic. This person also collects donations for a homeless shelter that we partnered with.

## **The Performance**

The improv troupe gets together about an hour before start time, to brainstorm about the theme, pray, read some scripture, and warm up. This connecting and bonding time is crucial to the improv performance.

We typically will do 8 or 9 improv games, with 3 monologues interspersed. We announce a theme, such as hope, joy, faith, or chaos, often related to the season of the year. Like the time we performed on March 17 and used the theme of luck.

The monologues feature a single improviser sharing something personal related to the theme, sometimes in dramatic form. The last monologue comes just before the last game, and is a little longer, lasting about 5 minutes. Here something from the “ancient scrolls” (the Bible) is shared related to the theme, as well as a personal experience from the improviser. No in-house references or Christian-ese, we try to keep the language as accessible as possible.

Improv Church at Walla Walla College actually does a full sermon after the improv games. Clean Slate (formerly in Seattle and now at Andrews University) take a different approach and avoid anything that might come across as “preachy,” because their purpose is relationship building. We have chosen to take a middle ground approach, where the improv games plough the ground so that a few seeds from God’s Word can be planted.

Improv is still a new ministry tool. Every community is different, so it will be important to experiment with your improv program to find what works best in your community.

Here is a sample outline for a 1-hour show:

- Introduction
  - Explain what improv is
  - Offer a prize for the best suggestion
  - Introduce improvisers
  - Audience warmup
  - Introduce theme
- The Show (each game should be introduced and explained)
  - 2 Games
  - Monologue
  - 3 Games
  - Monologue
  - 2 Games
  - Final Monologue
  - Final Game
- Closing
  - Thanks for coming
  - Prize for best suggestion
  - Call attention to donations and where they go
  - Invite people to next show, and to sign up for email list

### **After the Show**

This is where some of the most powerful ministry happens. We do a “2-minute drill,” where within 2 minutes every team member needs to be engaged in a conversation with someone they don’t know. If the show is early enough, have a follow up activity for that night, like ping pong, darts, board games, or karaoke.

Offer opportunities for people to get involved, with community service, or further donation to charity. Invite people to join you in giving back to the community.

### **Review**

We always video tape our performances and review them at the following week’s practice. This has helped develop our skills more rapidly, by seeing things we could have done better first-hand. More importantly, it has been very encouraging, because during and immediately after a performance we tend to focus on the things that went wrong. But watching the video, we get to also see the response by the audience and watch them enjoying the show.

### **Commitment to Quality**

Because this is an outreach ministry, you need to be putting your best foot forward. Put on a professional show that is entertaining and enjoyable. Avoid that “home-made” feeling. You are improvising your scenes, not the entire show. Be warm and inviting. And establish credibility early in the show—demonstrate that you have something to offer.

As part of this professionalism, consider having a cover charge or other ticket fee. Marketers know that when people have to pay for something, they come with higher expectations and enjoy the experience more.

During our first year, True!mprov asked for \$3 at the door, or donation of a personal care item (tooth paste, deodorant, shampoo, etc.) for a local homeless shelter. We have since raised it to \$5, corresponding to our increased skills and the better shows that have resulted.

### **Our Experience**

We have seen God bless True!mprov in surprising ways. We are part of a relatively small church, yet in the first two years saw dozens of people start attending our weekly worship services after they came to an improv show. We have seen members of Oasis who were on the margins jump in and get more deeply involved in the life of the church. This has been a rallying point for our congregation, as we launched a brand-new ministry from scratch. And the troupe members themselves have seen their own spiritual lives deepened through this experience.

If you feel God leading you to start an improv ministry at your church, we can’t recommend it enough. And we would love to know about your experience and plans, so we can pray for you and support your efforts. We’ll be happy to help in any way we can.