

by Esta Felder*

Parting the Seas:

Using the Arts to Reach the Middle East

“Faith takes a vision, turns a dream into a mission.”
– James Ward

I became a Christian when I was 12 years old. I grew up on a farm in Montana with my parents and four siblings. My father was a cowboy and made a living doing various jobs. My mother worked as a full-time secretary. I grew up attending church but accepted the Lord at a camp in the mountains. Of course it was a profound change in my life. It was the start of a journey that has taught me that one

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thing is necessary, only one. I'm eternally grateful to rely on God, every moment, one day at a time.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do early on in life—move to New York City and become an actor. But I also felt called to full-time Christian work. How would God bring these things together? I had no idea, but I was sure it would happen.

When it came time to apply to colleges I applied to a slew of them, all out of state. That included a small Mennonite college in Kansas, even though I had never heard of Mennonites. (My mother thought it was a cult.) Someone from the recruiting office at Tabor College called my parents at home one evening and convinced them that I could go to school there without putting them in a financial bind. Since I was determined to leave the state, they agreed. Kansas wasn't New York, but it wasn't Montana either.

During my two years at school I volunteered to be part of a prison ministry. We visited McPherson jail once a week and Hutchinson Reformatory once a month. At the end of the second year, I learned about MVS (Mennonite Voluntary Service). After listing my interests on a form I was offered a place with an organization that lobbied for alternatives to imprisonment for non-violent offenders in Washington D.C.

After my two-year MVS commitment was finished, I boarded a bus headed for New York City. I had enough money to pay for two weeks residence in a Quaker boarding house, which left me with about \$100 dollars in my pocket. I was twenty-two.

It was sink or swim. I didn't know anyone in the city, and I had to find a job, quick. It took two weeks to find a job and four weeks to get paid. In the meantime, I borrowed \$100 from someone who barely knew me so I could buy food and transportation. My parents sent me a check for \$100, but I couldn't cash it because I didn't have the necessary ID to open a bank account.

During all this, a relative there of someone I had known in D.C. contacted me and let me know about an apartment available in the Lower East Side. The building was known as the “white” building on the block in an otherwise predominately Puerto Rican neighborhood. It turned out that the residents of the building were mostly from Mennonite backgrounds who had moved in, got organized and bought the building from the city. The price was the total sum of the ex-landlord's back taxes. The owner of one of the flats was looking for a sublettor. The rent, or in this case, maintenance fee (a whopping \$85) was affordable to me. I lived without furniture for a long time but God had provided a place to live. A bank account came



Esta's block in
New York City, NY



Middle Eastern Leaders Praise the Drama Ministry

with the job so I was able to cash my parent's check. It was a slow start but eventually I was able to go to acting classes and start auditioning. God had parted the Red Sea!

I was in New York a total of twenty years. While I was there the Lord made it possible for me to attend acting school and work in professional theater. Most of my work came from being part of an improvisational group and also a member of a repertory theater company. This included touring college towns in the States as well as going on tour in the Soviet Union, as I was called at the time.

Towards the end of my time in New York I was longing to do full-time Christian work. I wrote a full-length play in 1997 that was produced at the Ohio Theater in Soho. That was the first time God put it on my heart that I could write. He also put it in my mind that presenting the gospel in the form of theater could be an exciting and powerful way to spread the word of God.

I took this vision to my home church in New York (Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian), but they didn't have anything like a theater ministry at the time. I'd hear the same thing from all the other organizations I applied to over the next year. In the meantime, I moved back to Montana to help my sisters care for my mother who had multiple dementia.

Rosedale Mennonite Missions was among the many organizations I applied to. After a series of interviews they asked if I had ever thought of going to the Middle East. I had always assumed that I would return to Russia. I loved it there, and they love theater.

I went home to pray and fast about this offer from RMM. Amazingly, thanks to the generosity and faithfulness of the people at my home church, I was able to raise the funds I needed to be an RMM intern. Within three weeks I had moved to Columbus, Ohio, and joined a group of very young people doing a REACH discipleship training school. When the three months of training ended, I headed to a Middle Eastern country where RMM had workers. God parted the Red Sea again!

I was sent to join two RMM couples who were living in a remote Middle Eastern city. I poured countless glasses of tea and wrote the first version of a play—*Homeless*. Our small group of believers in that town performed my first Middle Eastern play in our dining room.



Homeless—Esta's first play in the Middle East

■ “Our culture is a culture of passion, emotion and spectacle. This ministry is perfectly suited in supporting the efforts of the church to reach out to those around them. We have found the plays to be useful and effective. We feel they have become an essential part of the local ministry.”

■ “Esta has shown the ability to produce culturally relevant and effective theater pieces. We consider them to be very valuable. During her time here, she has conducted herself well in cooperation with the local churches and ministries.”

■ “From the standpoint of the actors, drama gives them an invaluable opportunity to express the truths they believe in a way that avoids confrontation and threats. The two things that keep them from opening up about their faith.”

■ “When we started meeting together two years ago, we felt the Spirit calling us to a wider ministry and vision for the youth of our country. We were being called to provide opportunities for our people to use their talents and gifts in serving the Lord and to help bring his Kingdom. When we met Esta we knew that the Lord heard our prayers and answered us.”

■ “We share the plays with our brothers and sisters in other major cities. Our aim is to show that this ministry can change people's lives and draw people to God.”

■ “With the most certain mind and heart I can say that the theater ministry is having and will have big spiritual benefits for our national churches and the future of our young people.”

After a year studying language and living in this remote location, I suggested that if the theater ministry were to have any chance of succeeding I needed to be in a more urban setting. So I moved to the country's largest city where I have lived and worked ever since.

Within a few months of moving to this sprawling city of more than 10 million, we performed our first play. It was at an international church that had 33 different countries represented in the congregation. The play reflected this. There were two Americans and eight other actors from eight different countries—

"Speaking God's word repeatedly gives the Holy Spirit a real opportunity to work!"

Turkey, the Philippines, Iran, Germany, Russia and three different African countries.

The response from the congregation each time we performed the play was incredibly moving. I felt confirmation of this vision for the first time. Two of the actors in the play accepted the Lord as a result of playing their parts. Speaking God's word repeatedly gives the Holy Spirit a real opportunity to work!

I tried finding plays online, but they didn't fit culturally. It was during this time that, of necessity, I became a playwright and really learned to write.

In 2005 Eleanor,* another RMM worker joined me. She painted murals, created props, and provided much needed moral support. We continued to do plays at the international church and at the same time tried to make the local churches aware of the drama ministry.

Early on we took a play called *Waiting With a Promise* on "tour" to several different churches. This meant transporting all the costumes, props, music, camera, and five actors around the sprawling metropolis without our own vehicle.

The local pastors were quick to say yes to a play being performed in their churches. None of them, amazingly, even asked to read the play ahead of time. They really loved and wanted drama. The feedback and support from the local congregations was nothing but encouraging.

Foreign co-workers, on the other hand, were quick to share all the reasons why a ministry like this

Eleanor's* Perspective

on the Early Days of the Drama Ministry

The beginning was tough. More than once we wondered why we even bothered. Esta* would work so hard on each piece, but then the obstacles to putting together a drama in a foreign country were almost insurmountable.

The first step was always getting the play properly translated. Then space and props were an issue. One day we were searching for some specific items for stage props. We figured out which buses to take to which stores. After we found what we needed, bought it all, and carried it back to the right bus to Esta's apartment, I'll never forget how pleased we were by all we'd accomplished.

One of us said, "Wow, that only took us four hours! We thought we were going to be gone all day!" Of course we both knew that the same task in the U.S. would have taken only 45 minutes—but we were ecstatic about four hours!

Even more difficult than translation, space, and props was finding dependable, willing actors. There were many times we'd sit in an empty church building, or even outside, waiting for actors to show up or for someone to unlock the building.

During all these "birth pangs" I remember Esta repeating over and over again, "This is God's vision, not mine." And that's what kept her going.

But then we began to hear of amazing results. After a performance of *The Woman at the Well*, a woman approached Esta and said simply, "I am that woman." Others would see that the dramas portrayed Christian ethics, and say that they had never thought about life in that way before.

I have never seen such a sure faith and persistence in a vision as I saw in Esta in those early years. Despite the struggles and the constant battle with language and culture, Esta gave every piece, every performance, every success, and failure to God. She refused to give up and kept turning to God for his strength and vision.



would never work. They were right about the obstacles. It was extremely difficult!

One of the most memorable occurrences was when we did three evening performances of the *Homeless* play. The house was full, and the play was about to start, but we were still missing four performers.

As it happened, one of them had gone to the hospital with a nosebleed. Of course, the other three rushed to the hospital as well. Right up to the starting time I didn't know whether to cancel the show or not.

At the last second, the actress with the nosebleed arrived, carried in by one of her friends. Since it seemed she couldn't even walk, I suggested we cancel the show. But she said, "The show must go on!" And so it did. I was ready to check myself into a hospital by the end of that run!

We struggled on for a few more years. Then seven years ago I was approached by a young man who is one of the founders of "Revival Youth for Christ." RYFC is a monthly meeting of young people from all the churches in the city where I am living. (This movement has since spread to five other cities.)

Typically the young people meet, worship, hear a sermon and pray together. Somehow they learned of our fledgling theater ministry, and asked if I could write a play to perform at each meeting.

Ever since then we've been doing a play once a month, for nine months of the year. During this season I've found young people who have a genuine interest in theater and a solid work ethic. They show up for rehearsals and do the work. With all the training and experience, they have become quite good!



It's now been 13 years since this theater ministry began. Churches all over the country have access to a website that contains over sixty plays and dramatic readings in the local language. All of the plays have been performed at least once in various venues and cities—at Revival Youth for Christ gatherings, churches, special events, summer camps, and conferences.

Recently, the country's only full-time Christian television station has started recording the plays to televise. This 24/7, seven-day-a-week station reaches not just people from our country, but spans to Germany, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Bulgaria. It has the potential to reach 30 million local-language speakers.

The station gets over 100 calls and messages a day from people wanting information about Christianity. We've taped four plays so far and plan to do a lot more. I've shared several ideas for programs using theater and other dramatic tools that they have said they're interested in taping. I think the Lord is parting the Red Sea again!

**Names changed for security*

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