



# Interview with the Playwright, Kevin M Reese

[updated: 11/17, 2010]

**Q: How did the show come about?**

A: Our church had always done a Maundy Thursday drama of some sort. I was speaking with the person in charge of the event, and she mentioned she was running out of ideas. I told her I would be happy to write a new Last Supper drama for her. Well, I really didn't expect her to remember that conversation-- let alone hold me to it! Well, bless her heart-- she did. Now, my problem was to come up with a script. I knew I couldn't write yet another Last Supper play with 13 guys sitting around the table quoting the Bible. (not that there's anything wrong with that-- but by now most Christians have all that memorized...) So I started brainstorming. In that process (or should I say "chaos?") I kept coming back to memories of my childhood where my Mom, my sister, all my Aunts and any other female that was in the house, were all gathered in the Kitchen preparing whatever meal we were gathered for that day.

I wanted to tell the story in a way that would make the audience sit and really listen-- because I believed (as was my case) that it has probably been a long time since they've had to do that with this story. As I said, most Christians have it all memorized by now-- but by "mixing it up" a little, changing the faces, the location, the perspective, I could perhaps help bring some new life, some renewed pertinence back to the story for them.

**Q: Where did you get the idea for your version of the story?**

A: I'm an adaptor. Most of the children's shows I've written are adaptations of traditional children's literature (Fairy Tales). When I write an adaptation of a fairy tale, I have to find a "hook" -- a reason why I am going to add yet another version of the story to the countless number of other variations of the story. When I wrote Little Red Riding Hood, the hook was that the Wolf was silly and bumbling, and he was more interested in the goodies Little Red was carrying than he was in Little Red. Likewise, when I agreed to write this show for my home church, the last thing I wanted to write was yet another version of 13 guys sitting around eating bread and wine. It's been done. Many times. A few times too many. I'm not taking away anything from Jesus' story-- my salvation is based upon it-- it's just that ... been there, done that. During the research phase of my writing routine, I was at a family get-together. I come from a rather large family. My mom had 17 brothers and sisters and my dad had 7-- so I always had a lot of aunts around. I remember all the various family reunions, Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas parties, etc., with all my aunts in the kitchen doling out advice and observations about cooking, men, kids, life. I thought it would be interesting to explore Jesus' Last Supper story from the perspective of the women.

I've long wondered why it was that men were declared the guardians of the Law, the spiritual leaders of the family, the heads of the household-- and we were told this in the Bible, which was 95% written by men. I'm not casting dispersions on the authority of the Bible. It's what we have of God's Word and my Faith is based upon what's written inside it. I'm just saying that it seems strange to me that God would deny mankind 50% of it's humanity (the woman's perspective) by having so much of the Bible being "inspired" to men. Men and Women look at things so differently-- the Bible would have been a much different thing had more women been "in the loop."

**Q: What is your religious background?**

A: I was born and raised in the United Methodist Church and have continued my membership to this day. My Mom and Dad were charter members of Hillcrest United Methodist Church in Northern Indiana- which means they helped (literally) build the church. With that came a pride and a sense of belonging with that congregation. I imagine that also contributed to my memories of "family" during my formative years.

As a young teen, I was active in our Youth Group and like many young teens, heard "The Calling" into the ministry. I went through high school and my first year of college fully expecting to eventually enter a seminary after I got my degree. The summer after my first year of college, I returned to Hillcrest UMC and spent the summer as an intern/summer replacement for our pastor, Rev. Joe Wagner, as he spent a month doing mission work in Haiti. During the month of August, I led the Sunday services, did some visitation, helped around the church.... I absolutely hated it. I realized I could not follow that path. I hated how people looked at me "differently" as a (pseudo) pastor than they did as just a regular person. I felt I was up on the pulpit "performing" instead of preaching the Word of God (of course, I have since realized that some of the best actors I've ever met were Pastors).

So there I was, a Sophomore in college and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I had taken speech and drama classes in college to help with my public speaking skills-- and enjoyed that, so I decided to change to a Speech/Drama degree. I took a year off from college, stayed with Mom and Dad while I got my head together (working as a waiter, then as an office errand boy). I got active in the local community theatre and through the director there, got into The School of the Ozarks, where I got my Bachelor's degree in Theatre. That led to my going to Oklahoma City University to work on a Master's of Performing Arts in Musical Theatre Vocal Performance.

While at OCU, I stopped attending church regularly. So of O had a very strict church attendance policy, so I imagine I took the opportunity to "sow my wild oats" at the more liberal grad school atmosphere. I attended church about once a month and occasionally filled in as a choir soloist for various friends who had church choir gigs (nice work if you can get it). After I finished my grad work (I didn't get the degree. I completed all the course work and met all my proficiency levels but didn't finish the thesis-- don't get me started), I spent the next 5 years or so as a typical gypsy actor, traveling around the Midwest moving from show to show. I ended up in Wichita, Kansas, where I met my wife, Janelle.

Janelle works for a corporation, that led us to being transferred about every 4-5 years. We moved from Wichita to Oklahoma, back to Kansas, to Iowa and now we're back in the Wichita area. It's during this time that I "retired" from acting and directing and began writing plays. This enabled me to be a stay-at-home Dad to our four kids. Our family continued attending Methodist churches and our memberships followed our travels. My wife and I were on numerous church committees from Lay Leader to Worship Committee to Finance Committee— between the two of us, I think we've been on just about every committee there is.

I've enjoyed rather unique relationships with my various Pastors over the years. Because of my background, I have an understanding of the "pastoral" process that most congregants don't have. I have become a confidant to many of my Pastors. Though I revere them as my spiritual guide, I also understand that they possess the same human traits as any other person. I have come to be a supporter, a champion of Ministry. They have a calling that I could never fulfill— and it's my calling to help them fulfill theirs. I think this is the impetus of my rather unique "take" on Christianity, on spirituality.

Some might call me a cynic, others might consider me a Heretic, a Gnostic or possibly even Agnostic — I consider myself a Christian. I think when we die, we'll get to Heaven (or whatever the After-Life really is) and realize that we didn't have a clue as to what everything is all about. God is a loving God who wants us all to get along the best we can. The Bible is a wonderful guide— but I think I also get inspiration from sunsets, trees, my kids' laughter and my wife's smile. I imagine I'm not any more "unusual" in my spiritual journey than most people— I just have the audacity to write it down on paper.

My viewpoint of Religion is that each of us needs something to believe in, something that helps us get through the day, something that helps us justify "why we're here." Religion was invented by Man— not by God (I don't mean to infer that Man invented God— religion is "the study of God"). We find ourselves drawn to others with similar beliefs, attitudes, and values. I think the doctrines of Buddhism, Hindu, Muslim, Christianity, Judaism, etc., all are man's attempt to relate to God and explain that relationship to others. There are more similarities between the various world religions than there are differences (and those are mostly cultural). I see no point in debating our religious beliefs. We believe what we believe, what's right for me is not what's right for you. What seems the most "right" for me is the United Methodist doctrine of the Christian Faith.

Again, I think that when we die, we'll realize that God is even more wonderful, Heaven is more wondrous, and His Kingdom is more wandering than we ever could imagine. There is a reason for the old adage: "Never debate politics or religion." Few things are held more passionately and felt more personally. I think my work with children's theatre and the influence children's imaginations have had on me is a big influence on my spiritual journey.

**Q: How does your personal Spiritual Journey affect the play?**

A: Very little— and a whole lot. It's still the tale of the birth of Christianity, it's just told from a different viewpoint than we normally hear. Mostly, my seemingly unorthodox viewpoint of Christianity has lead me to asking "why?" and "why not?" in regards to the story of Christ's

Passion. The process is not any different than how I approach writing my children's plays. My not-really-so-unusual opinion of Judas (see my notes in the Director's Script) adds some flavor to the story— but doesn't change it so much that it polarizes your audience. I think it all adds to the mix of seeing the story from a different perspective.

**Q: What's your favorite thing about the play?**

A: My favorite thing? I love watching the audience's faces as they watch the show. They enter the auditorium not having a clue as to what they are about to see. I can almost see the synopsis taking place in their brains! HA. I also think it's very cool that there has become a sort of community of productions of Beneath the Upper Room. Each year the number of productions all over the country doubles. Someone sees a production at one church and the next year they want to do it at THEIR church. I think knowing that other Christians are witnessing the same show, the same experience at the same time all over the country brings a neat sense of community to each production.

**Q: Why do you require Communion be done a certain way in the show?**

A: I only care about WHO participates— HOW the sacrament is celebrated is completely up to the church that is presenting the show. I don't understand how or why a church gets to the point where they can say to one person "you may join us as we partake of Christ's Body, Christ's Blood" and to another say, "you may not partake." It was Christ's gift to Believers— we have no say in the matter. I understand the Catholic Church's justification in restricting Communion— I don't agree with it, but I understand it. That's why this show probably won't be presented in many Catholic Churches. But that doesn't have to be the case. If their doctrine restricts Communion, they can still present the show— they just can't have communion within the confines of my script. They can celebrate it privately before or after— just not during. Forgive my child-like analogy: I think it's very rude to invite kids to a party (the play) and then make some of them sit aside while others get to play a party game (Communion).

But this is the very thing that I find exciting about Religion! For some reason, all these millions of people are drawn to the Catholic Church with all its rules and restrictions and hierarchy. Those millions of people are hearing about Jesus and His Gospel. They are filling their Soul. Likewise, others are attending Synagogue, or Mosque or any of the other places used by other Religions to worship and learn about God. It's all good that they are learning of a higher purpose, a higher calling to love others and do what is good and right. I gladly call a good Hindi my brother just as soon I would a good member of my home church (the operative word is "good").