



## Drag Performance as Worship and Praise

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When I was pastoring a small-membership, open and affirming UCC church in Worcester, MA, I approached the congregation with the idea of having a drag performance in our sanctuary during Pride week as a form of outreach, as a fundraiser, and as a safe space for the local LGBTQAI+ communities, especially for the youth. The reaction was mixed, as some of the members had never heard of “drag” (crossdressing with exaggerated gender features for the purpose of entertainment). Nevertheless, the congregation felt moved to approve and sponsor the event.

The days leading up to the drag event were tense, as the local media took note of it and reported on it. Fortunately, the church only received a few phone calls condemning the show and it went on without incident. The impact, however, on both the entertainers and the audience proved to be emotionally powerful.

As pastor, I was called on to perform an opening and closing prayer. What I didn’t expect was that many of the drag performers chose faith-based songs and hymns to perform that evening. Some offered heartfelt testimony and gratitude of being seen fully and never dreamt that they would be welcomed, much less allowed to perform in a church setting. The reverence these performers had for our church sanctuary and the congregation moved us to tears. I felt the holy presence of the Divine that evening. I believed we all did.

Drag shows have been a beloved tradition of the LGBTQAI+ communities since the beginning at every Pride event worldwide. Recently, there have been attempts to frame drag queens/kings and drag performances as obscene “adult” entertainment, with some state and municipal legislatures passing laws to keep minors from attending such events. Some Pride event planners had to cancel drag shows in order to obtain a

permit to use public space. Judges in both Tennessee and Florida have found these laws may be unconstitutional and have temporarily blocked them.

Determining age-appropriate entertainment and activities is an important factor when considering a movie, comedy, or physical event for our youth. However, just because a man decides to wear a dress or a woman to wear a tux as part of their entertainment is no reason to consider it indecent. The content is what matters.

Recently, I attended a drag queen book story time reading hour for children at one of our rural/small town churches not far from Cleveland, Ohio. This church was threatened and firebombed for it. Yet the congregation persevered with the event, and the children were treated to books that offered positive affirmation of the love of God and neighbor. The drag queens looked marvelous, and the children loved them.

The church should be a place of sanctuary for all and enable all to express their loving relationship with the Divine and humanity through storytelling that is most authentic to the storyteller. Worship uses all forms to communicate the scripture via pageants, puppets, poetry slams, songs, and updated retelling of Bible stories. Why can't drag performers do the same in our churches?

In the United Church of Christ, we aspire to extravagant welcoming, to expand our inclusivity for a just world for all. Having the courage to stand up and invite our drag performers into our churches, to share their holy stories with us, would truly have the power to change the world, and we, especially our youth, could only benefit from it.

<sup>1</sup> **“Judge Finds Tennessee Law Aimed at Restricting Drag Shows Unconstitutional,”** *New York Times*, June 3, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> **“Judge Rules Against Florida Law Restricting Drag Shows,”** *New York Times*, June 23, 2023.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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