

# Gallery of Living Art Passion Play 2010

in its Sixteenth Year:

Story of the Life of Christ in Music, Art and Scripture

**Location:** First Lutheran Church

1515 North Cascade Ave.,

Colorado Springs, CO

**2010 Dates: Friday, March 12 at 7:30 pm - Saturday, March 13 at 2:00 & 5:00 pm -**

**Sunday, March 14 at 3:00 pm**

**Free of charge – no tickets – first come first served! Doors open one hour prior to performance.**

In the weeks following Christmas, many of the men of First Lutheran Church in Colorado Springs are seen sporting beards. Others may be observed peering at these bearded men and remarking: “You do have that Jesus look about you.” Is it some strange local Lutheran affectation brought on by the recent holiday? Is it a comment on the Colorado winter weather? Is it because many Lutherans hail from a Scandinavian/Viking background? No. It is the lead-up to the Gallery of Living Art Passion Play.

Many of us are familiar with the famous *Passion Play* that is performed regularly in Oberammergau, Germany and mirrored by a similar production in Spearfish, South Dakota. Pageant and drama have long been associated with the church. The 15th century church in England has been described as the birthplace of English drama, with records of plays as a part of Easter celebrations along with religious processions and village feasts. For example, the Chelmsford Parish in Essex County was known to have possessed an extensive collection of costumes and props which were kept in a wardrobe and property box and loaned to neighboring parishes. (Representative items were a coat of leather for Christ, a Temple and a Hell and a black plate which served as a halo for Judas!)

But we modern day church goers are more accustomed to only the children’s Christmas pageant and generally seek our theatre and art in other venues. It is notable, therefore, that right here in Colorado Springs a unique form of artistic pageant has been produced and perfected for the past fourteen years. This year will mark the fifteenth anniversary of the *Gallery of Living Art Passion Play* at the First Lutheran Church.

Inspired by a summertime California event entitled “Pageant of the Masters,” a big budget secular drama staged in Laguna Beach, the idea was brought to Colorado Springs by Joan Kuehn, First Lutheran’s Director of Music, in 1994. Kuehn and Judy Wach, Director of Special Events at First Lutheran, were looking for a way to make a unique contribution to the community. In Kuehn’s words, they “talked to some guys” about building a stage to make it work. The concept is quite simple: the life of Christ is portrayed in still-life vignettes of sacred art. The realization is more complex: well-known works of religious art are recreated using costumed actors set against reproduced backdrops and accompanied by Scriptural text appropriate to the work, all performed in a musical setting featuring singers and instrumentalists. Among the best known works portrayed are Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” and Michelangelo’s white marble statue “The Pieta.” Now how does all this come to pass in a simple church congregation?

## “Expert” Volunteers

It is made possible by people from the church. First Lutheran is blessed with a multitude of talent. “In house” artist Cindy Bauer recently recruited for the casting for the 2008 Gallery. Bauer has been responsible for painting the authentic backdrops for each scene since the second year of the Gallery (the first backgrounds were done by Carlin Kielcheski). This year, 78 people ranging in age from 4 to 80 were cast for the production. Bauer and her husband, Mike, explained that their entire family has, in fact, taken part in Gallery over the years. As Bauer put it: “It was an opportunity for our family to *grow* within the church.”

Church member and artist Sharon Cartwright is also a contributor to the event. Her oil painting “Beautiful Savior” was portrayed by cast members during the 2007-8 Gallery. In addition to her artistic ability, Cartwright lends her vocal talent to the choir.

The music is provided by the 80 members of the First Lutheran Choir, directed by Joan Kuehn with Evan Becker, organist. Several instrumentalists also come from the congregation. Costumes and make-up are all provided on a volunteer basis, and after fourteen years the skills of the volunteers are finely honed. In fact, the church relies on its volunteers to fill the roles of artists, costumers, actors, musicians and tech support, and to provide the strong arms and backs that haul the sets around. Volunteers also serve as art researchers; whereas copyright is not an issue with the older and classical works of art, it can be with more recent paintings. The only hired professional used by the church is a lighting engineer.

As Kuehn says, Gallery “uses the gifts and talents of our congregation.” She points to the roles filled by children and says furthermore that “some of these kids have grown up with the tradition.”

Indeed, many of the Gallery vignettes were conceived in an effort to find roles for the children of the parish. The first event, in 1994, featured five scenes, one of which was the “Triumphal Entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem as painted by Berhard Plockhorst. This scene has been repeated every year since then and has been joined by “Christ and the Little Children” painted in 1917 by Endre Komaromi-Kacz of Hungary. These two vignettes help to accommodate the growing number of the church’s children who seek roles each year in the production. And as mentioned, it is not uncommon to have entire families taking part in one way or another.

### The Children’s Story

I spoke to Diana Wacker, a 2007 graduate of Palmer High School who was cast at a tender age in the “Triumphal Entry.” She remembers that she and both her brother and sister participated in the Gallery in its first year. Her only other memories of that earliest experience are of “practicing holding still” and of leaning against her mother, who was also a cast member.

There are admittedly several roles that are highly sought after by the young people. In addition to her debut role, Wacker remembers best being cast as an angel for “The Resurrection” (by Karl-Heinrich Bloch, 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish painter). And she proudly remarks: “I was Mary last year in the Nativity. It was a brand new scene in 2007 (Cartwright’s “Beautiful Savior”).

Wacker was impressed, even at a young age, at all the work that goes into the production of the event. She described the general process. The planned works are cast dependent on the number of children in each piece. The children usually have several rehearsals on Sunday afternoons prior to the scheduled performances. Then, says Wacker, “The week before is just crazy!” with quite a few late nights.

Wacker took part in the Gallery for perhaps nine or ten years; she is not quite sure. She explains that there is always rivalry between older girls for the roles of Mary or an Angel, but that once the parts are cast, the fun is just “to hang out with everybody.” The directors endeavor to spread out the main parts so that one person is not playing a main part every year. The senior high school students are usually awarded bigger parts as they are soon to be moving on. Boys (young men) are usually in short supply, however, and Wacker says that the boys will be egged on by the girls to try out. Once they join in, they enjoy it as much as everyone else.

I asked Wacker if she is taking part in this year’s production. She said she was out of town during the audition weekend, but has said that she will fill in if needed, and would certainly be keen to do it again in a few years.

There have been a couple of changes to the vignettes this year, so regular attendees will find something new to enjoy. No tickets are issued, so First Lutheran recommends coming early to be sure of a seat. If you have never had the opportunity to join us for Gallery of Living Art Passion Play in the past, this is a great year to experience this unique retelling of one of the world’s oldest stories. We look forward to seeing you there!