

Good News

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Theatre presents a unique view

By RENEE WALSER

Church theatre is not an unusual thing, but for a church to have its own theatre where they produce from four to five plays each year - that's unique in this area.

First United Methodist Church of Gastonia bought an old Winn Dixie building five or six years ago and converted it into a theatre that seats about 200. The church organized a theatre group in the early 70s and produced their plays in the chapel until the new theatre, complete with dressing rooms and a shop for set-making, was established.

The goals set down by the group's steering committee include: to present God's concern for man through drama; to give the participants a time of fellowship; to stimulate the use and acceptance of drama in the church; and to do something new and different in worshipping God.

"The philosophy is it is a ministry," said minister of education Jim Westmoreland. "Participation is a primary importance, not perfection. Involvement - be the best you can be, but allow people to become involved."

Not only can the 2,200 members of the church become involved in the theatre, but people of the community of all faiths have participated.

Participation in all areas is completely voluntary, Westmoreland said. People become involved because of their love for theatre.

Plays are not always religious in subject. For instance, the group is planning to produce "Meet Me in St. Louis" for next February.

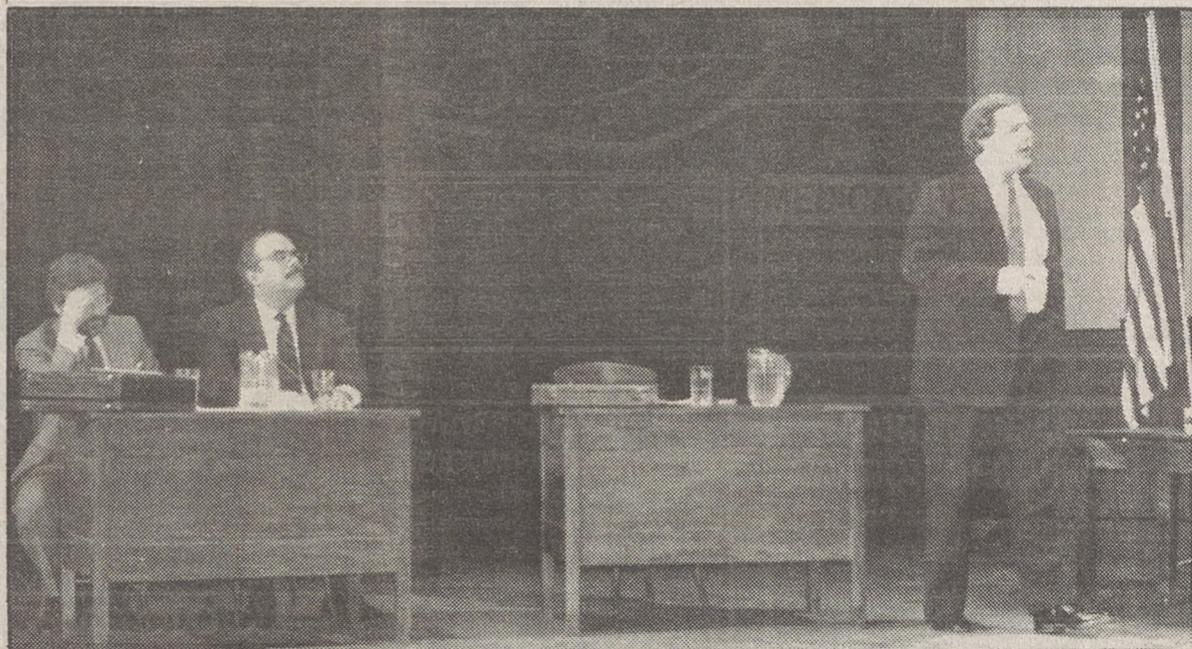
One play each year is a children's play, in which every child who auditions receives a part.

It takes six to eight weeks of rehearsal, Westmoreland said, for each play. And then the actual performances run for about four nights. Admission is free.

The latest play the group produced was "The Case of Humanity vs. Pontius Pilate." The stage was set up as a court room with judge's bench, prosecutor and defender's tables and jury box. Audience members were asked to fill the six jury seats on stage and render a verdict at the end of the drama.

The play featured real-life lawyers playing the parts of prosecutor and defense attorney, Gastonia's Richard Abernethy and Jesse B. Caldwell III.

Performed in one act, the drama requires the audience and jury members to decide Pontius Pilate's guilt or innocence in the crucifixion of Christ. Westmoreland said that the



Joseph of Arimathea, played by Charles Barkley, takes the oath from the bailiff, Jason Thomas, as the judge, James Westmoreland, looks on. Below, defense attorney, Jesse B. Caldwell III, and Pontius Pilate, played by Richard Schultz, hear the prosecutor, played by Richard Abernethy, begin his case in "The Case of Humanity vs. Pontius Pilate."