

## George Kazakos: Movie Theater Churches Report Their Successes

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*The Alhambra Renaissance movie theater has been the Sunday-morning destination for many Unificationist churchgoers in Los Angeles, California.*

By nearly all accounts, an accomplishment of the Unification Church (UC) USA in 2012 is the establishment of successful theater churches in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Chicago. The pastors of these churches recently shared their lessons learned and the inspiration behind the building of these theater-based ministries.

The Unificationist community in Los Angeles, one of four larger communities in California, is uniquely characterized by the fact that it holds Sunday Service in a movie theater, the Alhambra Renaissance, for approximately 400 church-goers every Sunday morning. This theater ministry, the first of its kind in the Unification Church nationwide, was launched in October 2011 under the leadership of Pastors Mark Tengan and George Kazakos, after Pastor Kazakos' inspiration to follow the lead of other Christian organizations.

"I've been searching for how we can improve our Sunday Service," said Pastor Kazakos. "One day, I came across an advertisement about a conference on using a theater for worship. At first I thought it was odd, but I went to see the buzz. To my surprise, other Christian organizations were flocking to this solution.

"The 'millennial generation' is now ushering in a new way of worship, combining entertainment and worship. I like to call this 'theo-tainment.' Hundreds of years ago, as people worked on farms, coming to the big city to an epic-sized cathedral with stained glass was a simulating sight to see and assisted people in mind and heart to focus on the divine. In our modern world, people go to movie theaters to get inspiration and to be taken to new places in their minds. Well, why not use this great technology for God?"

According to Pastor Kazakos, the benefits of a theater ministry are numerous. "It's in the middle of the market place with tones of parking, it's a public place that is easily accessible to guests, and it's a multi-million dollar facility that we can use for a fraction of the price. Also, we can grow as big or as small as we need by adding or subtracting rooms," he said.

The format of the church service includes songs, scripture readings, a sermon, a prayer from a local family, a tithing announcement, as well as time for fellowship with refreshments before and after the service.



"I finally am happy in having a location that we can feel confident in to bring new people," said Pastor

Kazakos. "I would like to open another theater in the same facility where we can have different music so that people can choose their style of service. At that point I would like to open another location and expand. Also, it's important to have a strong small-group ministry – otherwise the theater solution is not as strong."

Since the start of the theater ministry in Los Angeles, eight members have joined the Unificationist community. "New and existing members are joining small groups, and recently, many members are sharing True Parents' vision," he said, adding that, on average, the ministry brings seven new people per week, in unity with True Mother's direction. "If we come together, attending God and True Parents, as members of a large community, each congregant's identity as part of the Realm of the Royal Family comes alive!" Rev. Kazakos said.

### **The Las Vegas Theater Church**



*Pastor Demian Dunkley helped launch a theater ministry in Las Vegas, Nevada at the RAVE Theater in April 2012.*

"There is something about movie theaters that makes Americans feel excited and at home at the same time," said Pastor Dunkley. "Also, Sunday's are days that a lot of families go together to see a film. All these factors create an atmosphere that is both welcoming and exciting, which makes it easy to invite people to."

Inspired by the potential of a theater ministry, the Unificationist community in Las Vegas was quick to follow in the footsteps of the Los Angeles pastors. Las Vegas Pastor Demian Dunkley and his team began planning the move of their worship service to the RAVE Theater as early as December of 2011 and officially launched their theater ministry in April of 2012.

"Shortly after being asked to pastor the church in Las Vegas, I, together with Mike Smith, and members of our core ministry team, attended a one-day theater church presentation that Pastor Kazakos had put together in December," said Pastor Dunkley. "More than anything, I was amazed at some of the statistics of successful church growth in theaters. Upon returning to Las Vegas, Mike and I made a presentation to the community and started the planning process."

"After locating the RAVE Theater at the five-star Town Square Mall, we were able to start making substantial steps. The vision of how the theater church should look was clear to me, but I knew it would be ambitious. Mike put together a complete list of the audio visual equipment we would need, communicating regularly with his friends in LA who had been involved in setting up there. Mike's dad, Gregg Smith, assisted with audio and lighting. I dealt with the Theater to set up the contract."

Pastor Dunkley and the Smiths' signed a contract with RAVE in March of 2012, and began preparing their Las Vegas congregation for the move.

"I would make regular announcements at church about progress and encourage everyone to start shifting our mindset to becoming a ministry that witnesses to people by invitation," said Pastor Dunkley. "We were going to be in a public place that everyone can find, so there is every reason to invite everyone you know. It is also such a novel idea, you can use the fact that you go to church in a theater as a conversation warmer. After three weekends of dry run-throughs and constant technical challenges, we successfully started our theater church ministry in April."

Prior to the move into the RAVE Theater, the Las Vegas congregation consisted of approximately 80 members, including children. According to Pastor Dunkley, 13 individuals joined the church from the beginning of 2012 to August, and another two joined during the two weeks after Rev. Sun Myung Moon's passing in September.

"The only limitation to bringing new members is oneself," said Pastor Dunkley.

He explains that one important advantage of using a movie theater for Sunday Service is that, as a facility familiar to most families, it is not religiously intimidating. “There is something about movie theaters that makes Americans feel excited and at home at the same time. We love movies, so we love going to the theater. Also, Sundays are days that a lot of families go together on to see a film. All these factors create an atmosphere that is both welcoming and exciting, which makes it easy to invite people. And if you are a growing church, you can simply rent another auditorium or extend your time-slot. You do not have to build an addition to the church.

“The most important thing is that we have a place that is not too far to get to, and we have a space to be together. We are lucky in that we have exclusive use of a lounge until 1:00 p.m., so we have our coffee bar and fellowship lounge area there. If we want to eat together, we either make our way back to our Learning Center, or we go to a restaurant. By making a deal with the local restaurants, we were able to attract more attention to our invites. We would pick a day to celebrate and make an event out of it. By printing custom tickets, we made it easy to invite people to a worship- and lunch party, whether Easter, Mother's Day or any other such opportunity to have fun together. We wanted to make it easy for people to invite friends and acquaintances to church.”

Despite the congregation’s enthusiasm for weekly worship services at the RAVE Theater, Pastor Dunkley is currently looking into renting the facility only once a month and holding regular services at Rev. and Mrs. Moon’s Las Vegas Residence, for financial reasons.

“We were able to enter into the theater because of sponsored support,” he said. “But we cannot continue to ask for or depend upon that support. We are a church of 100 people or so, and our income cannot quite justify the expense of weekly theater rental at this point. Yes, there are many positives about having a theater ministry, but more than anything, we ourselves need to *want* to bring people into our community and be revived through the Divine Principle. If we truly want that, then nothing will stop us.

“However, I will say this, I was once sitting way up in the back of the theater, next to one of our guests in church, a two-time world champion featherweight boxer, and he said to me, ‘Demian, I see this place will be filled one day, with everyone putting their white envelopes into those baskets.’ It was his way of saying that this is going to be successful. Now, how often do we hear guests say that at a Unification Church?”



*Approximately 230 people gather at the Marcus Addison Cinema in Chicago for a weekly Sunday Service.*

### **The Chicago Theater Church**

Unificationist Chicagoans followed suit in the church-theater business. According to Chicago Pastors Jario and Leena Vincenz-Gavin, such preparations for creating a “more inviting environment for new members” began in Fall of 2011 with a survey.



*The Chicago theater ministry also includes a Nursery- and a Sunday-School program for children.*

“We wanted to discover what our members wanted in a church building and how they would feel about inviting guests,” the Vincenz-Gavin’s wrote to Unificationnews.com. “At the same time, we started hosting monthly town-hall meetings and presented to our community reports on the value and structural integrity of our properties and our financial capabilities.

“We needed a change. Most members were driving about an hour to church every Sunday, and this did not work for church growth. When we realized that we didn’t have the finances to rent a desired facility in the suburbs, we looked in to the theater idea and found the Marcus Addison Cinema, located right off the highway – a closer drive for all our members! This theater is welcoming, professional, clean, and homey. After nine months of research, our theater ministry was launched on August 5, 2012. Since the move in August 2012, our Sunday Service attendance has been consistently higher and currently averages about 230 people. Many more young families are coming more consistently.

“We also have a nursery for babies and kindergarten-aged toddlers and a Sunday School for children in grades one through six, so that kids can be dropped off in the morning on your way to worship. The older kids join together in the main theater for worship in song, after which they are dismissed to their lessons.” Through games, worksheets, activities, arts and crafts and small-group discussions led by high-school- and young-adult volunteers and overseen by Pastor Leena and Mrs. Agnes Rendel, nearly 60 children have the opportunity to learn about God and the Divine Principle on a weekly basis.



*Either Pastor Jario Vincenz-Gavin, pictured above, or his wife, Pastor Leena Vincenz-Gavin, read scriptures or deliver the sermon during the service.*

“The theater has been a great plus to our community with its convenience and accessibility. We have a record amount of volunteers of all ages helping to run Sunday Service, church attendance has gone up, and young Unificationists have started bringing friends to church. When the weather warms up, we look forward to using the parks behind the theater, which is also surrounded by restaurants. We often find families or friends socializing after service in these areas. We actually recently talked to the local Panera Bread manager, and they are going to start giving discounts to our members if they show their church program! We will continue using it until we outgrow the facility or can raise the finances to create a more permanent church home in the suburbs.

“It was a lot of work to purchase all the necessary equipment and signs to build a theater church, but it was a worthwhile investment. Sunday Service takes a lot of set up every week, but it gives members a chance to contribute their talents for the community. We’ve only been in the theater for four months, but it is having a lasting effect on our community.”

Apparently, Sunday Service in the windy city wasn’t the only instance of relocation. The Vincenz-Gavin’s also oversaw the move of their church center to the second floor of a local strip mall for weekly ministry activities. “The new church center includes a main presentation space, offices, conference room, a hang-out room for kids, a copy area, storage room, kitchenette and bathrooms across the hall,” they wrote. “We invested a lot of time into making it beautiful and welcoming.

“Over this past year, our first year as Pastors, our focus was mainly on building the ministry team, moving out to the suburbs to our new church center and to the theater on Sundays. Now that the foundation is there, we will continue to invest time into building our different ministries but with more focus on outreach, witnessing and church growth. We had a few new members join the Unification Church in Chicago last year, and they are some of our most active members. We want to create a thriving and growing community, as True Mother asked us to help do.”