

Arts and Entertainment



The City of Memphis is known worldwide for its diverse cultural assets, perhaps best for the history and continuing force of its music. A significant concentration of cultural and artistic attractions for the Mid-South are located in and around Memphis to serve the greater region. These resources include centers for the performing and visual arts, history and science museums, and the national award-winning Memphis Zoo and Aquarium.

Still, the need for effective access and educational opportunities related to the arts remains pressing. And, to underline the importance of viewing the arts as essential rather than esoteric, a study conducted by Americans for the Arts revealed the following:

Arts in the schools increase test scores and lower dropout rates. The Arts Education Partnership's publication, *Critical Links*, contains 62 academic research studies that, taken together, demonstrate that arts education helps close the achievement gap, improves academic skills essential for reading and language development, and advances students' motivation to learn. (Source: Arts Education Partnership)

More opportunities for exposure to the arts must be made known to children in vulnerable and distressed neighborhoods.

Locally, organizations like ArtsMemphis, Watoto de Africa, and Hattiloo Theater provide avenues for arts education and artistic expression, but all remain grossly underutilized. Each provides rich and rewarding services; what is needed are community advocates who specifically promote arts education and seek ways to use the arts in nontraditional settings to instigate change. More opportunities for exposure to the arts must be made known to children in vulnerable and distressed neighborhoods. The neighborhood church provides the perfect resource of people and facilities to raise the level of awareness of the arts in these communities.

Memphis Cultural and Arts Assets:

According to the Memphis Region Sourcebook (2001), the area's arts and cultural resources are located in three main clusters:¹

- The Downtown and Midtown areas that includes Beale Street, Mud Island, Hattiloo Theater, the Blues Foundation, the Rock 'n' Soul Museum, the National Civil Rights Museum and various visual and performing arts venues, including the state-of-the-art Cannon Center (Downtown), and the new Playhouse on the Square (Midtown).
- The Overton Park area that includes the Brooks Museum of Art, the Memphis Zoo and Aquarium, and the Memphis College of Art.
- The third cluster includes the University of Memphis visual and performing arts facilities, The Pink Palace Museum, and Audubon Park, which features the Dixon Gallery and Gardens and the adjacent Theatre Memphis.

In addition, Germantown Parkway boasts Ballet Memphis and the Germantown Performing Arts Center. Also important to note are the many other events that draw upon a regional audience such as the International Barbecue Championship, part of the widely known Memphis in May International Festival, which has a significant impact on the Memphis metropolitan area.

ArtsMemphis, whose mission is “raising funds to ensure excellence in the arts and build a vibrant cultural community for everyone” in the City of Memphis, has reported the economic impact of the arts on the city and region:²

- Raises over \$100 million annually
- Accounts for 3,616 full-time jobs
- Generates \$9 million in local and state government revenue
- Influences an estimated 69,862 households (out of a potential 471,887) in the area
- Currently impacts zip codes 38103 (Downtown) followed by 38120 (the part of East Memphis nearest to Germantown) at the most significant levels. (Source: Artsmemphis.org)

Given this information, current circumstances beg church involvement for the promotion of arts in our broader community. Before discussing those opportunities, the Arts and Entertainment Committee identified current assets related to specific challenges that face the Memphis community.

Some efforts currently underway that seek to promote awareness of the arts and cultural assets in the city and region are:

ArtsMemphis ACT program

70% of the 11,000 students involved in the ArtsMemphis ACT program (arts education—not the standardized test) are economically disadvantaged and on the free or reduced lunch program. The ACT program is only available in 38 of 160 Memphis City Schools.

Student Ticket Subsidy

The Student Ticket Subsidy program, funded by the Tennessee General Assembly and administered in cooperation with the Tennessee Arts Commission (TAC), provides funds to public school students to attend arts and cultural events for free or at a greatly reduced rate.

Arts Access

Arts Access is an annual outreach program sponsored by ArtsMemphis that ensures the arts are available to those who cannot always afford the price of admission, in the belief that art exists to be explored, experienced, and appreciated by everyone.

Varied programs provided independently by arts organizations in the city

An example of this type of effort would be the After School Acting Program at Playhouse on the Square (ASAP). After School Acting Program sites exist throughout Memphis and the surrounding area at local churches, synagogues, schools, and community centers.

Local media coverage

While a formal program or campaign does not exist, it is important to note that recent strides have been made by local media to raise awareness of grassroots organizations and artists of the city.

The following challenges impede greater success of the aforementioned programs, and others:

Funding

Few institutions exist that are dedicated solely to providing funding to support arts programs. Exposing entire under-resourced communities to the arts thus becomes difficult.

Transportation

Communities with limited resources do not have direct, fluid access to programs outside their immediate neighborhoods. This creates the basic inability to experience or participate in these programs.

Arts exposure for certain zip codes

As previously noted, the greatest concentration of households touched by the arts is found in zip codes 38103 (Downtown) and 38120 (far East Memphis). These two areas represent upward trending communities of affluence and neighborhoods where people who have the means choose to live.

“Grassroots” organizations and individual artists receive relatively small amounts of financial support.

Three specific dynamics affect arts development at this basic level:

- The group or artist must be a nonprofit organization to receive funding. Unless individual and collective artists align themselves with nonprofits, they cannot get support as easily.
- These groups and artists have shorter “artistic life” because of lack of funding.
- Where a clear arts influence is least present in the city, there is a sporadic presence of grassroots art as well.



Recommendations:

The Shalom Arts and Entertainment Committee has identified opportunities for churches to raise an awareness and appreciation for the arts in Memphis. As previously stated, Memphis has a wide variety of the arts and cultural assets. The fact that the majority of Memphis households touched by the arts are highly concentrated in an upward trending neighborhood (Downtown) and a neighborhood of choice (East Memphis) is troubling. As we seek ways to support and establish healthy churches to develop healthy communities, connecting local, neighborhood churches to the arts provides a means to that end. The Arts and Entertainment Committee recommends the following:

Churches must develop or rekindle a value and an appreciation for the arts.

In the contemporary church, an unspoken and unwritten line has been drawn between artists and the church. A paradigm shift must take place to allow the church to embrace the artists in its midst and in the broader community. The displayed gifts and talents of these individuals and groups are the expression of the inherent God-given desire within all of us to reflect beauty. The church needs to be reminded of this dynamic and to explore increasing its understanding and knowledge of varied artistic genres and how best to support local artists within the church setting.

Churches should provide avenues for artistic expression.

As with any skill, repetition and opportunities to express or apply that skill enable the practitioner to perfect it. Many neighborhood churches have facilities perfectly suited for artistic expression. An approach of opening the church doors to artistic expression creates an environment where relationships between church leaders and artists may be forged. These relationships could possibly lead to the discovery and cultivation of young artistic talents within the urban core.

Churches should provide support for youth in arts programs.

Churches should seek ways to support the funding and participation in youth programs such as the aforementioned programs of Watoto de Africa, Hattiloo Theater, and ArtsMemphis. Of course, this review is not an exhaustive one; yet it adequately highlights the clear imperative for neighborhood church involvement to raise awareness and fill our cultural “pipeline” with emerging artistic talent that might otherwise be stifled.

Conclusions:

Memphis has played a significant role in our nation’s rich heritage of music and the broader performing arts. Names such as Isaac Hayes, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Carl Perkins still hang in the air. Memphis continues to produce talented young artists, as evidenced by the number of young American Idol contestants from the Memphis area who make it as far as Hollywood for the final competition. Worth noting anecdotally is that many of these Memphis-area finalists often have one thing in common: a church. A church where young kids are exposed, week after week, to church music by singing in the choir or singing solos and performing before entire congregations. This environment allows young people to discover and nurture their love of music and the performing arts. Thus the churches in Memphis, both large and small, have served to be a proving ground for talents worth sharing with the community and the nation.

An approach of opening the church doors to artistic expression creates an environment where relationships between church leaders and artists may be forged.

Shalom should explore church-sponsored programs for arts education. Existing parachurch ministries and nonprofit organizations with a focus on promoting awareness of the arts should be engaged to discuss how site-based work in neighborhood churches might be best developed and enhanced. A pilot project should be developed to match the resources of outside volunteers with neighborhood churches that have a passion for youth and the arts, as well as matching volunteers to any experienced parachurch or nonprofit organizations focused on neighborhoods with a high concentration of at-risk children and youth.

Neighborhood churches are already well positioned to be hubs for broader community engagement. We should explore partnerships with the arts community, beneficial for all, with the specific goal of stimulating creativity and providing environments of meaningful artistic involvement in neighborhoods starved for such vital expression.

¹ Memphis Region Sourcebook (2001)

² www.ArtsMemphis.org