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10 April 2006

Dear sponsor/director

As church leaders on Tyneside we would like to express to you our deep sadness and concern at the decision to stage 'Jerry Springer, the Opera' at the Theatre Royal. We understand that you are a sponsor/director of the Theatre and feel you should be aware of the strength of feeling in the Christian community regarding this production. We are asking you to reconsider your support for its showing in Newcastle.

Our concerns about the show arise not from any wish to stifle free speech or fair debate about the Christian faith. Rather it is clear that the writer, Stewart Lee, is inciting people against Christianity and Christians by making a strongly insulting, defamatory and blasphemous presentation. Mr Lee has publicly stated as much saying, "*One would like to think that comedy could incite religious hatred. That would be great.*"¹

Although there has been a lot of media coverage of this show, many people are unaware of the actual content of the production. We believe that most fair-minded people would share our concerns if they realised the extent of the material. In the production, for example, Jesus is presented as 'the hypocrite son of the fascist tyrant on high'. He uses foul language and strikes a woman. God is depicted as raping Mary.

We are astonished and dismayed that this kind of attack on people's sincerely held beliefs and faith can be supported and countenanced by the Theatre Royal and its sponsors. It does not pretend to be a serious discussion of religious issues but mocks Christian beliefs for entertainment. We are sure that if the subject of such a defamatory presentation were the founder of any other major religion, e.g. Muhammad or the Guru Nanak,

¹ Stewart Lee in the Independent on Sunday, 5 Dec 2004

Senior Pastors - Clive & Sally Harding
International Harvest Church Newcastle

this kind of production would be completely unacceptable on Tyneside. Indeed, we too would regard this particular kind of denigration of other major faiths as wrong and unwelcome. The obvious conclusion is that the Christian faith is being singled out and openly discriminated against.

Christian churches on Tyneside are a longstanding, integral and respected part of our community, providing much in the way of spiritual and practical support to many local people. We take a full and active part in the life of this area including praying for our political leaders and initiating many social action projects with some of the most needy people in the community.

Many of our church members in this area are from ethnic minorities and some are asylum seekers. They have brought with them from their country of origin their own strongly held Christian faith and commitment. They too will feel aggrieved and discriminated against by the showing of this 'Opera' - in a country where they had hoped to find freedom, acceptance and protection.

Another major concern that we have is the targeting of children with cut-price ticketing on offer to under 18's. We note that the DVD of 'Jerry Springer, the Opera', is rated at 18 because of the content of the show, which has numerous explicit sexual references and constant foul language. Yet for a theatre production children under that age are being encouraged to attend. This is clearly inconsistent and cannot be in the best interests of our children.

We are aware of the considerable financial support the Theatre Royal derives from the City Council, Arts bodies' grants and sponsorship from the commercial sector. Many of our members are local residents, tax-payers and customers of the sponsors' companies. They would not wish to see this kind of financial support given to such a production. Likewise, many of us and many of our members are patrons of the Theatre Royal. We feel disregarded and held in contempt by the decision to invite the show to Newcastle.

Representing such a wide range of Christian denominations, we have as church leaders taken the unprecedented step of writing to you in this way. We want you to be fully aware of the nature of this show and that we regard the decision to present it as a clear case of discrimination against the Christian faith and the whole Christian community on Tyneside.

We await your response to our concerns and can be contacted via the address above. It is our strong wish that the Theatre Royal could be persuaded to think again and reverse its decision to host this show.

Yours sincerely

Name	Position	Church
Clive Harding	Senior Pastor	International Harvest Church Newcastle
Rev Robert Ward	Senior Leader and Director	Clarence Trust
Rev Robert Hopper	Vicar	Hillside Church Lobley Hill
Rev Mark Sharman	Pastor	Airport Church
Phil Wilthew	Elder	City Church Newcastle
Paul Newman	Senior Pastor	Whitley Bay Baptist Church
Rev Brian Howell	Minister	Kelvin Grove Christian Fellowship
Jonathan Ward	Chair of Elders	Heworth Christian Fellowship
Christina Chan	Chairlady	Newcastle Chinese Christian Church
Ed Nichols	Pastor	Dunston Family Church
John Paul	Minister	West Denton Church
Drew Davis	Pastor	Calvary Chapel Newcastle
David Murray	Elder	Regent Chapel Gosforth
Rev Malcolm Jones	Vicar	St Matthews Dinnington
Rev Dan Peters	Minister	Newcastle Reformed Evangelical
David Forster	Pastor	Acorn Durham
Rev Trevor Davidson	Vicar	Christ Church Felling
Paul Fenwick	Pastor	Byker City Fellowship
Rev Rick Simpson	Priest in Charge	Holy Trinity and St Barnabas & St Jude
Rev Alan Munden	Assistant Minister	Jesmond Parish Church
David Allister	Minister	Whickham Community Church
Roger Mills	Minister	St Johns Kingston Park
Keith Robson	Leader	Frontline Church Cramlington
Ian Fairfax	Pastor	Oasis Christian Fellowship
Rev Ken Moulder	Minister	St Oswalds Church
Mike Johnson	Elder	Newcastle Reformed Evangelical Church
Pastor Adrian Mancini	Minister	Elim Pentecostal Church Heaton
David Holloway	Vicar	Jesmond Parish Church
David Lovelock	Pastor	Welbeck Road Evangelical Church
Jonathan Pryke	Executive Minister	Jesmond Parish Church
Rev Richard Bateman	Team Vicar	St Andrews Church Cramlington
Banjo Oluwatula	Pastor	The Kings Castle Church Gosforth
Rev John Ameobi	Pastor	The Apostolic Church Spital Tongues
Elaine Lindridge	Minister	Wrekenton Methodist Church
Rev George Curry	Vicar	St Stephen & St Paul
Phil Lightbody	Associate Minister	Heaton Baptist Church
Alan Dickinson	Pastor	Whitley Bay Christian Fellowship
Rev Paul Merton	Pastor	Westgate Baptist Church
Rev Rob Hawkins	Minister	Jesmond Methodist Church
Father Michael Hickey	Parish Priest	St Roberts RC Church
Rev David Hunt	Minister	Durham Road Baptist Church
Rev David Falcus	Minister	Ashington Family Church
Phil Glover	Minister	Acorn Christian Fellowship