

**GENERAL CONVENTION OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH 2009
ARCHIVES' RESEARCH REPORT**

RESOLUTION NO.: 2009-D083
TITLE: Celebrating Godspell's 40th Anniversary, Honoring John Michael Tebelak
PROPOSER: The Rev. Kempton Baldrige
COMMITTEE: Prayer Book, Liturgy and Church Music

Directly Related: (attached)

None

Indirectly Related:

None

In preparing this report, the Archives researched the resolutions of General Convention for the period 1976 through 2006, selecting "direct" resolutions that have a substantive bearing on the proposed legislation. Committee members who are interested in obtaining copies of "indirectly related" resolutions, legislative history before 1976, or who require other research assistance should contact the Archives at 800-525-9329 before Convention or at Convention in the General Convention Secretariat.

TOPIC/TITLE: Church Music: Celebrating Godspell's 40th Anniversary, Honoring John Michael Tebelak

PROPOSER: The Rev. Kempton Baldrige

C&C PAGE:

BB PAGE:

1 Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That the 76th General Convention celebrate
2 the 40th anniversary of the creation of Godspell, a musical version of the Gospel
3 According to St. Matthew written by Episcopal layman John Michael Tebelak (1949-
4 1985), by encouraging congregations, dioceses and other Episcopal institutions to offer
5 support to productions of Godspell in their local communities; and be it further
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7 Resolved, That the 76th General Convention, authorize the trial use of Godspell tunes as
8 settings for hymns sung by congregations, dioceses and seminaries of this Church, and
9 directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to facilitate such use by the
10 broader church and to report its findings to the 77th General Convention; and be it further
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12 Resolved, That the 76th General Convention directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy
13 and Music to include Godspell hymn settings, such as "Day by Day," "All Good Gifts,"
14 "We Beseech Thee," "By My Side," "On the Willows," "Save the People," "O Bless the
15 Lord, My Soul" (appropriately adapted for congregational use) to the Enriching Our
16 Worship series for the 2010-2012 triennium, under the direction of the diocesan bishop or
17 ecclesiastical authority (see Canon II.5); and be if further
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19 Resolved, That the 76th General Convention of The Episcopal Church direct the Standing
20 Commission on Liturgy and Music to develop a plan to commemorate the life and
21 ministry of John Michael Tebelak within the church year, as author of Godspell,
22 dramaturge at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and as a possible
23 exemplar for Episcopal Campus Ministry students and chaplains, and that congregations
24 and individuals be encouraged to learn his true to life Christian witness.
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Endorser(s): The Very Rev. Christopher D. Hofer, The Rev. Tobias S. Haller BSG

EXPLANATION:

In 1970, John-Michael Tebelak, a former Episcopal chorister from Cleveland, Ohio, was a graduate student at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA. He had a love of theatre but also harbored sincere ambitions to become an Episcopal priest. He read his Bible and loved what he learned about Jesus there. In a most unlikely turn of events, he came away from the most dreadful Episcopal Easter service imaginable inspired to create virtually his only legacy: *Godspell*. His joy-filled musical version of St. Matthew's Gospel, "*Godspell*", changed literally millions of lives in the past forty years. *Godspell* played continuously off-Broadway for more than 2000 performances, and has been in constant production around the world since. *Godspell*, in many ways, is one of The Episcopal Church's gifts to Christianity over the last two generations. Many of us regard attending *Godspell* as being our true 'confirmation' event. John-Michael Tebelak was 22 years old when *Godspell* hit New York. It was his first brush with the New York theatre, but by no means his first venture into theatrics. His theatrical career started when he "walked into a theatre at the age of nine and stayed there." According to the Rev. James Parks Morton, "whether it was a sermon series or a two-day conference on the environment, he turned it into theater." Interviewed in 1975, (five years before his untimely death), John-Michael recalls how he came to write *Godspell*: "...Finally, I turned toward the Gospels and sat one afternoon and read the whole thing through. Afterwards, I became terribly excited because I found what I wanted to portray on stage: Joy! I found a great joy, a simplicity-some rather comforting words in the Gospel itself-in these four books. I began immediately to adapt it. I decided to go to Easter sunrise service to experience, again, the story that I had gotten from the Gospel. As I went, it began to snow which is rather strange for Easter. When I went into the cathedral, everyone there was sitting, grumbling about the snow, and the fact that they had already changed their tires. They weren't going to be able to take pictures that afternoon. Snow was upsetting their plans. As the service began, I thought it might be a little different. Instead, an old priest came out and mumbled into a microphone, and people mumbled things back, and then everyone got up and left. Instead of 'healing' the burden, or resurrecting the Christ, it seems those people had pushed Him back into the tomb. They had refused to let Him come out that day. As I was leaving the church, a policeman who had been sitting two pews ahead of me during the service, stopped me and wanted to know if he could search me. Apparently he had thought I was ducking into the church to escape the snowstorm. At that moment-I think because of the absurd situation-it angered me so much that I went home and realized what I wanted to do with the Gospels: I wanted to make it the simple, joyful message that I felt the first time I read them and recreate the sense of community, which I did not share when I went to that service. I went to my teachers at Carnegie and asked if I could work at my own special project for my masters' degree, and they agreed. That following fall, in October, we began rehearsals at Carnegie." (1) His co-creator, Stephen Schwartz writes about John-Michael's work: "*GODSPELL* began at Carnegie-Mellon University as a directing project for John-Michael Tebelak, who was in the theatre department there. John-Michael, who had thoughts of becoming an Episcopal minister before he decided to become a theatre director, had recently attended an Easter service in Pittsburgh and was struck by the lack of joy and celebration in the service as well as by the personal hostility he felt from some of his fellow churchgoers because of his youth and long hair (it was during the height of the Vietnam War and its accompanying "Generation Gap"). The show was presented at Carnegie, where it included interpolated pop songs and Episcopal hymns set to music written by cast members, as well as the song "By My Side", written by CMU students Jay Hamburger and Peggy Gordon (a member of the cast). Being very well-received, it was presented the following year in New York City at an off-off-Broadway theatre called the Cafe la Mama. This was in February and March of 1971. There it was seen by producers Edgar Lansbury and Joseph Beruh (brought there by former CMU student Charles Haid, who became the associate producer of the show). They became interested in giving the show a commercial production at an off-Broadway theatre. At that time, I was contacted by the producers, who had heard me audition my score for *PIPPIN*, and I signed on to write music and new lyrics. We retained the song "By My Side" and the rest of the score was written in time for the start of rehearsals on April 11, 1971, except for the song "Learn Your Lessons Well" which was added during rehearsals. The show opened May 17, 1971." As has been pointed out, aside from seminarian Jonathan Daniels, no laity of The Episcopal Church are commemorated on our calendar. John-Michael Tebelak is a most fitting inclusion. (1) Interview with J.M. Tebelak, *Dramatics Magazine*, January 1975.

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