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Christian comics change lives one joke at time

By Eddie Vega

When the Rev. Jay Laffoon began organizing Christian marriage conferences 10 years ago, he worried that many couples would arrive expecting cautionary tales about sin and hell and a long list of don'ts and few dos. Believing that Christian marriage is a thing of joy instituted by God, Laffoon wanted people to enjoy the gatherings.

"A joyful heart is good medicine; but a broken spirit dries up the bones," he said, quoting Proverbs 17:22. So he tried a radical approach; Laffoon hired a stand-up comedian as an opening act.

Not just any would do. The comic had to be dentures-flying-out-of-the-mouth funny. He also had to be able to profess his faith in Christ. After

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Judy McDonald, 30, is part of a growing movement of Christian comics sharing their faith as part of their acts. (Kelsey Sirgy)

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had to be able to profess his faith in Christ. After an exhaustive search, Laffoon found a comedian who joked about relationships and recounted how Jesus had changed his life. His routine got laughs. His personal story got a standing ovation.

While using comedians in evangelical work may raise some eyebrows, Laffoon insists it's not a radical departure. Many clergy use humor in their sermons, often as icebreakers in the introduction or as an anecdote that teaches important lessons about life and faith. While the strategy was unusual a decade ago, today Christian comedy has a loyal following, and the practice is growing.

Laffoon, 45, an ordained minister in the Church of God in Michigan, now has 10 comics who perform at 13 "Celebrate Your Marriage" conferences a year.

What's driving comics into churches? Many comedians have discovered that churches make great performance spaces. "Nationwide, there are more than 300,000 churches and less than 300 comedy clubs," said Lenny Sisselman, 49, a booking agent based in Nashville, Tenn., who specializes in Christian acts. And "some of these churches have better performance spaces than the clubs. They have better sound systems, lighting and more seats. [The audience members] also have longer attention spans.



Judy McDonald, 30, is part of a growing movement of Christian comics sharing their faith as part of their acts. (Tommy Plunkett)



Jeff Allen, 50, is part of a growing movement of Christian comics sharing their faith as part of their acts.



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Remember, these are people who enjoy sermons."

Some mega-churches, like televangelist Joel Olsteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, seat upward of 16,000 and have an architectural style closer to Radio City Music Hall than a traditional church. They even have giant video screens that allow for close-ups of the speakers.

And pastors are finding that entertainers can help fill those seats, Sisselman said. "Many churches have found that their numbers surge at outreach programs aimed at nonbelievers or believers who don't normally attend church," he said. "It's clean entertainment and they can bring their families."

Non-Christian comics, who perform at generic family nights, simply have to offer a clean, family-friendly act consistent with Jesus' message of hope, said Tom Sobel, a booking agent. But there are many more opportunities for practicing Christians.

"Pastors are looking for comics to profess their faith in Christ and to do it from their hearts," Sisselman said.

But most important, a comic must be funny, said Jeff Allen, Sisselman's star comedian. Allen, 50, started his performing career in the smoky comedy clubs of the 1980s. An alcoholic facing bankruptcy and divorce, he found Christ and a meaningful story to share with Christian audiences.

"In a club, if I took a break, it gave someone an opportunity to interrupt, to heckle," he said. "But in church, I could take my time to develop a story, to make a point. There's no heckling in church."

When performing at pastors' conferences, marriage retreats and outreach programs intended to draw nonchurch people to church, he tries to follow the advice a pastor gave him early in his new career: Let your faith drive your comedy but leave the preaching to



Jeff Allen, 50, is part of a growing movement of Christian comics sharing their faith as part of their acts.

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the preacher.

"If no one ever came back to church after I made them laugh, I would still be happy," Allen said, "because it is God who works on the human heart, God who decides if they come back." But, he added, "if after a lifetime that's all that happened, that my comedy had no impact on God's Kingdom, then I would be disappointed."

Catholic comedian Judy McDonald agrees. She views comedy as a religious vocation, a way of building the Kingdom of God. "I don't mock my religion. I don't tear it down," said McDonald, 30. "Christian comedy is a gift from God."

While hesitant at first, pastors have become welcoming. In the four years McDonald has been performing, her number of engagements has increased to about five a month from six a year.

Her routine includes jokes like: "You can always spot Catholics at 'Star Wars' movies. They are the ones who hear the phrase, 'May the force be with you,' and stand to respond automatically, 'And also with you.'"

At St. Meinrad's Archabbey in Indiana, a conservative Catholic college and seminary that trains men for the priesthood, humor like that is welcomed, said Jeremy King, a Benedictine monk and director of cultural events. McDonald participated in a retreat there for Catholic educators and youth ministers about how to make religious vocations more appealing to young people.

As for Christian comedy, the real question for King, 60, concerns appropriateness. What might be fine in an outreach program might not be at a High Mass. He has not caught McDonald's act but is hoping to book a Dominican nun, Nancy Murray, who uses comedy in her one-woman show about Catherine of Siena, a Catholic saint known for her good humor. Murray is no stranger to comedy; her brother is the actor Bill Murray.

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