

A LITURGY OF LAUGHS

Congregations rediscover the ancient practice of humor

BY MARY BOLAND



When it comes to humor, church is not often at the fore of the comedic train of thought. Church, in the eyes of many, Christian or otherwise, takes an air of deep solemnity. That, along with a slew of personal beliefs (or lack thereof), is the reason why many people do not attend church on a regular basis.

To reverse this decline, the Holy Humor or Bright Sunday movement has taken off. This observance embraces levity over gravity and has congregations worshiping joyfully. The idea of celebration revelry during church, while seemingly unconventional, actually has deep historical roots. It stands on the idea that the Easter season, holding in its depths the single greatest event in history—the resurrection of Jesus—is a time for unabated celebration.

The idea of “holy humor” began with the early Greek Christians, who celebrated with

pranks, parties and festivities galore. They saw the resurrection of Jesus as an event worth an ecstatic celebration, rather than solemn service. Later in fifteenth-century Bavaria, congregations began a tradition of truly joyful, and maybe a little raucous, celebrations in honor of Bright Sunday or “Rischus Paschalis,” meaning “the Easter laugh.” Their wild festivities were a way of honoring the supreme “joke” that God played on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. After about 200 years of churches simply having too much fun, Pope Clement X banned

the services in the seventeenth century due to what he considered unacceptable behavior.

Yet the tradition survived, and its rebirth has been spearheaded by the Fellowship of Merry Christians. Beginning in 1988 under the guidance of Cal Samra, this movement strives toward a simple goal of recapturing the spirit of joy, humor, unity, and healing power of the early Christians. Since the inception of the Fellowship of Merry Christians, all sorts of churches have begun to implement Holy Humor Sunday into their liturgical year. One such church is Niantic Baptist Church, where Jill Harvey works each year to create an engaging theme for Holy Humor Sunday around which she bases her homily. Themes have included everything from Hawai’i, where colorful shirts, lays, and even a tiki bar were all a part of the service, to a more metaphysical topic, such as moving both in the literal and spiritual sense. One year was spent specifically on the topic of hats

HOLY HUMOR HOW-TOS:

TAKE IT SLOW

Ease humor into the service, gauging the congregation’s response, and build off positivity.

GO WITH A THEME

Put your own spin on popular biblical stories, and tie the themes to everyday life (i.e., tax day, mixed with not being greedy)

BE SERIOUS ABOUT FUNNY

Keep theological value at the core of everything. Holy Humor Sunday is still a service where people seek religious reflection, and the theme should carry at its core a deep religious reflection.

GET ALL INVOLVED

Enable input from the congregation and remember all the groups that could participate in the fun!

and head coverings all surrounding Paul's letter to the Corinthians 11:2–16 and leading up to the symbolic idea of "hats off to Jesus."

In Winter Haven, Florida, Rev. Alan Harvey has brought joy and laughter to the congregation of First Presbyterian Church for 16 years. As a member of the Fellowship of Merry Christians, Harvey finds a true calling to incorporate the joy of humor into his Bright Sunday service every year. Harvey's Bright Sunday tradition at First Presbyterian began with caution, as he tested the waters gently, sending subtle ripples of laughter through the congregation, and building on the level of humor every year.

One of the first themes was an easy one to embrace—A Merry Heart is Good Medicine—and included small prescription vials filled with jokes and cartoons and etched with the liberal directions to "use as needed." Following years' themes have included an array of Bible-inspired productions that have only grown larger each year. Harvey has played a vital role in every production, creating a colorful set of characters to portray, from a clown covered in butterflies to Jesus himself. With theme titles such as, "The Unauthorized Musical Comedy Version of the Prodigal Son" and "Fabulously Faithless and Faithful Financial Follies," each theme embraces a religious or secular topic. As the years progressed, the congregation at First Presbyterian has only grown, with more and more members embracing the humor and even getting involved themselves, whether in behind-the-scenes preparation or acting roles in sketches.

Despite all the fun and laughter, Harvey is quick to point out the theological significance that makes its way into every Bright Sunday spectacle. "Our Easter service here is very traditional. It is joyful, but there is a certain solemnity about it. Bright Sunday is a time when we encourage joy and laughter, so it is a different way of celebrating the resurrection. Each time I do it there is theological content to the service. I'm very careful about that. I always try to make certain it's understood that there is a message to get across."

This deeper message is most present during the congregation's symbolic butterfly release that began about ten years ago. As a popular Christian symbol of the resurrection, butterflies, from kid-colored construction paper decorating the sanctuary to living creatures themselves, never fail to appear. Members of the congregation who have lost a loved one can opt to release a butterfly in the loved one's honor. "It has been very meaningful to people to release the butterflies in memory of their loved ones," Harvey reflects. The Painted Lady butterflies are paid for through a designated fund and those who have lost a parent, child, spouse or sibling can freely participate in the ceremony. Anyone else can purchase their own butterfly to be released as well.

Bright Sunday services at First Presbyterian are a truly joyous, festive occasion that requires significant planning and preparation. Harvey believes any congregation can do it but emphasizes some

amount of caution, "My counsel to anyone beginning it would be to take it slow. You don't bring your most outrageous humor at the first, but you build acceptance for it and get people to see that truly this is another way of worshiping." With support from the congregation, people can get directly involved in the planning and the production, which helps to foster a collaborative spirit and makes things easier on everyone.

The service, Harvey believes, is more than just a colorful worship service; it's a positive experience on everyone's health, too. "Faith is the most vital, but laughter is the best medicine in the sense that we need to take life seriously, but we also need to laugh. Laughter can bring healing; it can bring wholeness when there's been a lot of brokenness." Laughter mixed with faith really is the best medicine.

Mary Boland is a contributing editor to Church Health Reader.



First Presbyterian Church in Winter Haven, Florida, incorporates butterflies into their Bright Sunday service to remember loved

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