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THIS STORY

A guy walks into a church...

... and makes everybody laugh; and it was good

By **DAVE TIANEN**
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"... I don't know if you've been around a 4-year-old. They ask a lot of questions . . .



Buy a link here *"We're in the doctor's office, and the lady*

across from us started nursing her baby. My son looked at her. Then he looked at me. I'm tryin' to ignore him.

"He looked at her. He looked at me. This is when I find out he doesn't even know how to whisper."

- Michael Jr.

It might be hard to believe, but that joke was told in

church on a national TV special. It was part of "Thou Shalt Laugh," a 2006 showcase of the top talents in Christian comedy hosted by "Everybody Loves Raymond" star Patricia Heaton.

Quietly, the world of Christian comedy has been building momentum. But the reason is hard to pinpoint.

Shonda Pierce, a 15-year-veteran of stand-up comedy who recently stepped down as president of the Christian Comedy Association, says a kinder, gentler comedy started to catch on in the aftermath of Sept. 11 as people began looking for something more wholesome and substantive. She believes two comics in particular - frequent "Tonight Show" guest Michael Jr. and actress-comedian Sherri Shepherd - have the potential to become major mainstream stars.

Whatever the reason, Christian comedy is attracting producers who see the potential for crossover success. Case in point: "Thou Shalt Laugh," now on DVD, was produced by the same people who did the massively successful - and decidedly unholy - Blue Collar Comedy Tour with Jeff Foxworthy, Bill Engvall and Larry the Cable Guy.

Christian Comedy



Illustration/
Kristin Pelisek

Multimedia



Here are two samples of improv comedy by the Christian comedy troupe, Fishsticks.

- Video 1
- Video 2

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When the Christian Comedy Association formed six years ago in Nashville, there were 50 members. The second year, turnout more than tripled, and last year's meeting drew almost 300 comics.

Likewise, bookings have grown for Outreach Comedy, a California agency that handles Christian comics for the church market. When Outreach began four years ago, it was handling 150 events a year. Now the count is 500 a year and growing.

"Initially there was quite a bit of resistance from the churches because they didn't see (comedy) as a great outreach opportunity," says Outreach Comedy general manager Paul Pickard.

"The churches said, 'Comedy in my church? I'm not sure it will work. What if the guy slips up?' They were thinking it was going to be somebody from a comedy club who wasn't a Christian."

Christian comedy is not only growing, it's lucrative, says Corey Ford of the Clean Comedy agency in Los Angeles. The reason: Many of the gigs come from churches and corporate clients, and they both draw bigger crowds and pay better than most comedy clubs.

Local laughs

The idea of using comedy to attract new faces and entertain the existing church family is starting to catch hold here:

- On Feb. 17, the West Coast husband-and-wife team of Ron McGehee and Kerri Pomarolli will perform at Elmbrook Church in Brookfield.
- Three veterans of the Milwaukee ComedySportz troupe are launching their own improv comedy group, Fish Sticks. The group has yet to perform, yet it has sold out its first show.
- Ordained minister Steve Rivera in Kenosha has been doing stand-up comedy for five years and is looking for funding to start a Christian comedy club.

Whit Shiller, of Fish Sticks, says that many Christians might not even consider attending a regular comedy club. He points out that one Milwaukee club is in the basement of a topless club.

His expectation is that Fish Sticks will offer "squeaky clean" but professional comedy in a safe environment like a church or school. He also hopes that Fish Sticks will be a useful fund-raising option for worthy institutions in the community.



If Christian comedy is growing in popularity, it isn't necessarily easily defined. Pomarolli says there are comics who are Christians, but she questions whether there is anything that can be defined as Christian comedy.

"It's so funny that people use the word 'Christian' comedy. We're comics and we're Christian. Is Jerry Seinfeld a Jewish comic? People like to really label us because it's so unique," Pomarolli says.

Shiller sees Christian comedy as a blend of content and motivation.

"I think the difference, really, between Christian comedy and clean comedy is: What is the spirit and the purpose behind it? A Christian is going to come at things with the idea that this is a service to the Lord and to your fellow man.


"We want to do this in a way that is going to be uplifting; it's going to be positive, that's going to make an impact, even if it's something as silly as having a few laughs on a Saturday night."

-  **Comics:** The humor? Simply divine
-  **Stine:** Comic delivers with an edge


Where Art Thou Yuks?

If you're interested in checking out the growing phenomenon of Christian comedy, here are some places to start:


Concerts:


 **Kerri Pomarolli and Ron McGehee.** 7 p. m. Feb. 17, Elmbrook Church, 777 S. Barker Road, Brookfield. \$10 at the church's Garden of Readin' bookstore.

 **Fish Sticks Comedy.** 7 and 9:30 p. m. Feb. 10, lower campus of Heritage Christian School, 1275 S. Elm Grove Road, Brookfield. \$5; for reservations, call (414) 915-4600, visit www.fishsticks.comedy.com or e-mail tickets@fishsticks.comedy.com

 Fish Sticks also performs at 7 p.m. Feb. 17, Eastbrook Church, 5353 N. Green Bay Road. \$5

DVDs:

 **"Thou Shalt Laugh."** Recent TV special hosted by Patricia Heaton ("Everybody Loves Raymond"). Features seven of the top names in Christian comedy including Thor Ramsey, Michael Jr. and Taylor Mason.

 **"Tolerate This."** Newest DVD from Christian rant comic Brad Stine.

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Different styles

Religion

Christian comics may all play clean, and they may even view their work as a ministry, but stylistically they cross almost every comedic school.

Cars

Travel

Brad Stine, one of the country's hottest Christian comics, is often described as a clean Denis Leary. Stine does rant comedy that satirizes liberals, humanists, political correctness and judgmental Christians.

Visitors' Guide

Taylor Mason is a ventriloquist who seems like an update of Waylon Flowers and Madame. Kathy Westfield is a former flight attendant who finds her material in everyday fodder, such as drug ads: " 'Feeling a little moody? Ask your doctor for Paxel.' Then they tell those side effects: 'May cause bloating, blotchy skin, hormonal changes and hair loss.' I'm thinking to myself, I start out a moody black woman and I end up a bald, overweight white guy."

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One of the dividing points in Christian comedy is over whether it's permissible to poke fun at the Christian culture. Pickard, of L.A.'s Outreach Comedy agency, says most of his performers don't have any material about church life. In fact, he won't handle a performer who pokes a lot of fun at the church. Other taboos include profanity, gender bashing and racial material.

Newspaper

"Sometimes we get a little bit of flak," Pickard says. "The mainline, conservative churches, they don't like the cutting-edge stuff. They just want nice, funny material that's family friendly all the way around. So we find ourselves walking this fine line between conservative, Christian values and churches that want to push the envelope and reach a culture that's being connected in many different ways through the media."

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About the

On the other hand, Pomarolli likes to have fun with the Christian culture.

Journal Sentinel

Internships

"Are you kidding?" Pomarolli asks. "It gives me great joy. . . . It's like my mom says, 'We Christians don't have therapy. We have a small group, and it's not gossip if your head is bowed.' That rings true to pretty much anyone. It's not gossip if you say I'm praying for you."

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Pomarolli admits she likes to push the envelope a little bit.

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"I talk about sex in my act," she says. "I think it's funny. I have a joke in my act, and I say, 'All you single people think that when you get married it's just sex, sex, sex. I have news for you. When you're married, sometimes 'Lost' is on and we've got to make a choice.'"

FAQ

Questions about

accessing stories? See

Part of what Christian comedy is about is breaking down stereotypes.

our Frequently Asked

Questions page.

"I think a lot of times when people look at Christians they see the 'Frozen Chosen,' " Shiller says, "real staid personalities, and that's not who we are. Christians have a sense of humor, and God is a God of joy. And we want to be about that."

PARTNER SITES

MKEonline.com

On the other hand, Pierce says Christian comedy carries some hazards other comics don't have to think about.

MetroParent

"The hardest part of being a Christian comedian," she says, "is we can go out and make the world scream and laugh, but our audience, the Christian market, they can decide you're not funny, . . . but they can also decide you're going to hell. . . ."

TODAY'S TMJ4

620 WTMJ

"I'd almost rather be heckled by some pastor than to have him question my spirituality or my salvation. We get that a lot."

94.5 WKTJ

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