



# Improv Evangelism: An invitation

A Project Submitted for  
Dr. Douglass R. Clark  
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**BY**

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## **Intro to Improv**

It's 9:20 on a Friday night. A line of students has gathered on the sidewalk outside of a brick building on Main Street. Some of them have been waiting in the cold for half an hour to get inside. As the minutes pass, the line begins to stretch around the corner. At 9:30, the doors open, and the students begin to stream into the Center for Sharing. The

crowd enjoys free hot drinks and Italian sodas while a band onstage plays Christian music. Soon, the venue has reached its maximum capacity of 400, and latecomers have to be turned away. By the time the emcee approaches the microphone, energy and excitement fill the air. What are people so excited about? What is this event that students—Christian and non-Christian—flock to on Friday nights? It's church: Improv Church.

For five years we have been involved in the ministry of the Improv Church—an interactive ministry geared toward reaching college students and other Generation Xers who don't often attend traditional church services. Improv Church is different from traditional church in that it is driven by a form of improvisational drama, in which actors spontaneously create skits and stories based on suggestions from the audience. The goal of each evening is to explore—through Improv—truths in life that connect us with the Gospel. Over the years, we've witnessed the power of Improv as a communication tool, and as an effective and successful means of communicating the Gospel and connecting people with church. So far Improv has been successful, and we see even more potential for the future of Improv in the sphere of evangelism. In general, this paper is an invitation for the support of improvisational drama for evangelistic purposes, and, more specifically, for the support of a church plant driven by an Improv “seed” service. The proposal is for a ministry geared toward (but not limited to) members of “Generation X” (people age 18-33).

We would like to note that although this paper focuses on the power Improv has in the realm of reaching out to Generation X and communicating the Gospel, we do not suggest that Improv, by itself, is inherently spiritual. Like music, Improv is simply a powerful, interactive communication tool that, when infused with God's word and employed by ministers of the Gospel, can be used to build and uplift the community of Christ. We would also like to note that we do not postulate Improv to be the only way of connecting Generation X to the church. We simply seek to show that it is a viable option for reaching those who steer clear of the traditional church and who need to connect with God through other means. Improv is one type of service through which the message of Christ can be presented in a non-threatening way, and through which the unchurched may enter into a community of believers.

### **Why Bother?**

In discussing creative (non-traditional) evangelism, a few questions arise: Is there really a need? Why not use traditional evangelism, which brings many people into the church? What, exactly, are we winning souls to if we use methods drawn from secular society? These questions are important, and will be addressed. In order to address them, however, one must take a look at some patterns regarding the target generation.

## The Busters

Members of “Generation X”, or the “Buster”<sup>1</sup> generation, tend to follow different religious patterns than those of their parents’ generation, the “Boomers.” Recent surveys have shown that Busters are comparatively less likely to be involved in religious activities than their parents:

- Only 36%, of Buster vs. 44% of Boomers are likely to attend a church service on a typical weekend.
- 12% of Busters vs. 25% of Boomers are likely to volunteer time to their church.
- In a typical week, only 29% of Busters vs. 39% of Boomers read the Bible
- 76% of Busters vs. 84% of Boomers pray to God.
- 33% of Busters vs. 49% of Boomers are born again.
- 56% of Busters vs. 70% of boomers say that their faith is very important in their lives.

There are even greater percentage gaps between Busters and older generations. Interestingly, Busters are *more* likely than other generations to be searching for meaning in life.<sup>2</sup> As a whole, however, more Busters are leaving the religious arena than joining. The upcoming generation is not searching for meaning at church. The question at hand is, why not?

It is easy to look at Busters’ avoidance of church and conclude that it is simply a symptom of a delinquent generation. The trend among older generations seems to be that of viewing the Buster generation in terms of its deficiencies. The “MTV generation” is often characterized by laziness and rebellion—and these opinions are not without cause. Many Busters appear disrespectful of authority and tradition. These characteristics, however, are more than just a popular attitude young adults have seen on television and decided to adopt; they are a visible aspect of a generational mindset that is fundamentally different than that of older generations. According to George Barna, author of *Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation*, Busters are “the most ignored, misunderstood, and disheartened generation our country has seen in a long time.”<sup>3</sup>

***A Different Experience.*** The experiences of the Buster generation have caused them to become disillusioned about the values of older generations. 50% of Busters are children of divorced parents, and many whose parents were not

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Group Page, (<http://www.barna.org>), Feb 18, 2004

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.barna.org>

<sup>3</sup> Barna, quoted in Andres Tapia, “Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation,” *Christianity Today* 38 (1994): 19.

divorced grew up in homes in which both parents worked and were often not around.<sup>4</sup> According to Tapla, “having grown up amidst headlines about fallen televangelists and crooked politicians, Xer trust in authority figures is low, and cynicism of anything organized, like the church and political parties, is high.”<sup>5</sup> Generally, the Buster attitude of disrespect for authority stems from a deeper distrust, and belief in the fallibility of people in authority.

These experiences have shaped the way Busters formulate values. Tapia notes that, “unlike their workaholic Boomer predecessors, Busters put a high value on community and relationships.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, busters may not be able to find community within the church or even the family unit. In fact, according to Dieter Zander, “to Busters, family is more frequently defined as those who will love them, not those who produced them.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, a Buster’s decision to attend church is often based primarily not on doctrinal issues, but on the amount of love and acceptance found within the church community. As a result, Zander notes, whereas in years past “becoming a Christian preceded becoming a church attender, that sequence is no longer valid with Busters.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the patterns of previous generations, Buster conversion does not happen in a day, but is “more of an ongoing process where people get socialized into the faith.”<sup>9</sup>

The longer process of Buster conversion may also have to do with a generally postmodern Buster mindset. Zander observes that Busters are “the first generation to reflect the postmodern ideas circulating in French and American universities since the 1970s.”<sup>10</sup> Busters tend to believe that the human intellect is not the only vehicle to truth. One’s emotions and intuition are equally valid ways of knowing. Thus, “truth is defined by each individual and the community of which he or she is a part.”<sup>11</sup> In the process of defining truth, “experience trumps dogma.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is why only 30% of Busters vs. 38% of Boomers feel a responsibility to share their religious beliefs. Busters tend to process truth relationally as opposed to propositionally, and Zander notes that “story telling is the most effective way to reach this generation, because busters won’t argue with a person’s story.” “They’re more drawn to someone’s honest failure than trumped-up success.”<sup>13</sup>

**The Arts.** One of the most striking features of the Buster generation is the importance placed on the arts—most clearly observed in the centrality of the film industry, and especially of popular music. This, too, may be a result of the importance placed on experience. Rudy Carrasco, 26, managing editor at the Hispanic Bilingual-Bicultural Ministries

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<sup>4</sup> Andres Tapia, “Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation,” *Christianity Today* 38 (1994): 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>7</sup> D. Zander, “The Gospel for Generation X,” *Leadership* 16 (1995): 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Tapia, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Zander, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Tapia, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 21.

Association says he'd rather be at a U2 concert than at church singing hymns." Paula Esealuka, 29, associate director of InterVarsity's Urbana Missions Convention says "one of the things the church is afraid of is that we're too in touch with the culture. Yes, we watch a lot of TV, yes we listen to a lot of music. But I'm not afraid of it. It's our culture."<sup>14</sup>

Although some may believe that they should, Busters—even Christian Busters—do not generally see popular culture as a threat to their values. According to Tapia,

for many Christian Xers, the issue is not the evils of pop culture but how stagnant the arts seem to be within the evangelical church. To the buster crowd, Christian music often feel old-fashioned or, if contemporary, not up to the highest standards. There also seems to be a yearning for art that it not didactic, like Carrasco's spiritual connection with U2.<sup>15</sup>

Generation X's experiential focus leads to emphasis on the arts as a means of experiencing spirituality.

Given the difference in mindset between Generation X and older generations, it is no wonder that Busters do not feel their needs being met in a traditional, didactic church service. It's also no wonder that busters are rarely compelled by the traditional evangelistic meetings that focus on persuading the audience of the truth of a church's doctrines, and then calling for an immediate decision. While some may be tempted to lament these generational differences, one must realize that these differences are not necessarily intentional, and that despite their rough exterior, Busters are, according to Zander, "a spiritual generation...they believe that something is wrong with the world, and that there must be something beyond what they can see, feel, touch, taste and smell."<sup>16</sup> Busters are open to spirituality; they simply don't experience spirituality in the same way many older people do. Tapia notes that being able to reach Xers with the Gospel is going to mean "Coming to terms with a major cultural shift that, for better or for worse, is going to change the landscape for many generations to come,"<sup>17</sup> "We cannot turn back the clock, but we can claim the postmodern context for Christ."<sup>18</sup>

***A different Culture.*** Any minister looking to evangelize the Buster Generation must understand that Busters represent a shift in culture. Methods of outreach tailored to the Boomer and older generations don't often fit the Buster generation. Oosterwal notes the pluralism of American culture, and observes that:

The Church's captivity to one of these American cultures, its language and life-style and logic, is one of the main reasons for its present lack of growth in North America. For, thereby the church has greatly limited the target

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Zander, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Tapia, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 20.

group of its evangelistic endeavors and missionary out reach. As a result, barely 10% of the American population can hear the Adventist message today<sup>19</sup>

The cultural differences of Generation X must be adapted to in order to allow them to hear the gospel message clearly. In a sense, reaching the Busters must be seen as a missionary endeavor. A successful missionary does not enter a new culture and reject it, lamenting the fact that it is different from his own and dwelling on its flaws; a successful missionary learns to understand the culture and work within it. In order for the church to effectively reach the Buster generation, it will have to adopt a more pluralistic outlook, and adapt to a new culture. This attitude is displayed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9, when he states, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” This attitude is not one of relativism—Paul’s sole purpose is to win people to Christ—rather, it is a willingness to adapt to the target audience in order to share the gospel in a relevant way.

There is a clear need for doing creative evangelism in order to reach the Buster generation. There is nothing wrong with traditional evangelism—it can be quite effective. However, it is only effective for a certain group of people. An entire generation of people have difficulty responding to traditional evangelism.

**Communication.** At this point, we must make note of important questions: what methods might one use in evangelizing Generation X? In adapting to a secular culture, which tools are safe to use, and which are dangerous? To what, exactly, are we winning souls if we use methods drawn from (employed by) secular society? These are questions not only of methods, but of the ideology those methods represent.

Before one can answer these questions, one must note the distinction between the communication tool, (or *method* of expression), and the ideology (the thing being expressed). In some cases, the method of cultural expression is inherently harmful because it, in itself, communicates a destructive ideology. Some forms of heavy metal music, for instance, came about for the soul purpose of expressing rebellion and violence. A missionary may enter into a culture that worships through occult rituals, but should the missionary attempt to share the gospel through the use of the occult in worship, it would, in most cases, be harmful to the advancement of the gospel. There are certainly methods of cultural expression that should not be adopted by the church.

In other cases, however, the method of expression is relatively neutral—it can be successfully used either constructively or destructively. As we have already pointed out, music is one of these methods. Some forms of music are inherently destructive, while other forms are used to promote healing. Stories are another communication tool that can be

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<sup>19</sup> Gottfried Oosterwal, “The SDA Church and American Culture,” Unpublished Paper. From *RELT 457History of Adventism Syllabus Appendix*, 5. Pedrito, Maynard-Reid, instructor: 2001.

used both to harm and to help. Even television, as destructive as much of it is, retains the capacity to offer educational and uplifting programming. Poetry, the visual arts, and language itself all have the capacity to destroy or to build up. Interestingly, the most powerful and universal communication tools tend to be neither inherently helpful nor inherently harmful.

In the case of inherently neutral communication tools, content<sup>20</sup> is what determines whether the tool is being used destructively or constructively. Unfortunately, neutral yet powerful communication tools sometimes acquire the stigma of negative ideologies. Some methods of cultural expression are assumed to be harmful simply because they were first employed by the secular culture. In the eyes of the church, especially, certain methods, such as media and performing arts, tend to lose their distinction from the frequently worldly message they portray. This is most tragic when powerful communication tools get exiled to the realm of secular society, and the church misses out on opportunities to speak its message in a compelling way. Thus, because the language of secular society is avoided, secular society does not receive a great enough opportunity to accept the gospel message. Once again we look at the missionary model: if the missionary refused to learn the tribal language simply because it was the “heathen” communication tool, the gospel would not be preached.

Secular culture is the prevailing culture of Busters. In order to reach Busters, one does not have to become secular, but one *must* find communication tools that speak the language of Generation X. Music and the arts, and especially the power of story must not be underestimated in their power to communicate the gospel to Busters. Above all, one must be open to the possibility of experimenting with different methods of evangelism than one is used to. Barna says, “We have a generation coming up that doesn’t speak the same language, that doesn’t go to the same places, doesn’t have the same needs, and isn’t looking to Christianity to answer their spiritual concerns. We either change or we lose them.”<sup>21</sup>

One important way, in which the church can change to welcome Busters, is a greater incorporation of the arts. Besides music, drama and humor are powerful to the Buster generation. These powerful tools, however, have been left unutilized. The church, unfortunately, has a history of frowning upon drama and humor.

### **The Shadow over Theater**

The origin of anti-theatrical prejudice began with Socrates who saw drama as having a powerful effect on the audiences’ psyche and emotions. To Socrates, theatre was an “imitation,” which was “the bringing into being of an

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<sup>20</sup> And sometimes circumstance.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Tapia, 18.

inferior world.”<sup>22</sup> In his book *Republic*, Plato basically rejected all theatre and drama unless it was used in support of the politics of the state.<sup>23</sup> Since Plato believed in an ideal, heavenly world (“the kingdom of the forms, simple, abstract and eternal in its changelessness”<sup>24</sup>) which was much superior to this earth, he saw theater as inferior to this already inferior world. Then again Plato criticized most feelings (other than the courage of a warrior for the state), so his prejudice was really more against “the products of the mind” (which theatre stimulated) than against theatre itself.<sup>25</sup>

The roots of Christian and Puritan anti-theatrical prejudice stems from the Roman Empire’s use of theatre. The Romans believed that Christians were a menace to society and began to ostracize, embarrass and persecute them. They would prepare theatre productions to which Christians were invited/forced to come and be entertained. These dramas would center around their own pagan gods (such as *ludi Florales*, a goddess who was a prostitute) and poke fun at the Christian beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Eventually it was the Christians acting (re-enacting) in arenas along with other actors (gladiators or animals) for Roman entertainment.<sup>27</sup>

In an attempt to separate themselves from their culture, Christians would force new converts to foreswear against theatres before they could be baptized.<sup>28</sup> Theologians, such as Tertullian and Augustine furthered this battle against theatre:<sup>29</sup> since theatre is fiction, a false reality; thus an illusion and a work of the devil.<sup>30</sup> We must keep in mind that most of the theatre up to this point reflected devils masquerading as gods, pagan gods, demons, obscenity, etc., which were just reflections of the beliefs of the Roman and Greek cultures.

During the Medieval Age (11<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> century), the church officials had difficulty promoting their beliefs in society, since few people could read or write in Latin (and Mass was always conducted in Latin) and religion was becoming more crafted by superstition than doctrine.<sup>31</sup> So, ironically, the church began to use drama to act out the Easter, Christmas and Creation accounts for the benefit of the common person’s faith. Soon, secular plays began to spring up, such as *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham*, reflecting the culture at that particular time. Then the churches

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<sup>22</sup>Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>25</sup>Bruch, Debra, “The Prejudice Against Theatre” *Paper Presented for the Association of Theatre in Higher Education at Michigan Technological University*, 1991: 35.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 7.

complained that one “could fill a theatre within one minute after the signal that a play was about to begin—but you could ring the church bell for one hour and still the church would be empty.”<sup>32</sup>

During the Italian Renaissance (15<sup>th</sup> through 16th century), some people argued that drama was inherently evil, others that it was essentially moral, and still others saw it as a form of logic and philosophy—basically an instrument or tool.<sup>33</sup> When John Calvin, who established Puritanism, came onto the scene he continued the prejudice against art, literature, and drama.<sup>34</sup> Puritans blamed the theatre for the hardship of life and the evils in the world, accusing it of crimes such as: “emptying the churches, perpetuating pagan custom, distorting truth, showing forth profane, seditious, and bawdy stories, teaching knavery and lechery, causing God to visit the plague on London, leading youths into idleness, and extravagance, affording meeting places for harlots and customers, aiding the Pope, and corrupting maidens and chaste wives.”<sup>35</sup> Their frustration was further inflamed when Queen Elizabeth I began to use theatre as a political weapon to sway the people to support England and her church. Puritans, such as St. Ambrose, who saw theatres as houses of Satan, argued that since “theatre” is never mentioned in scripture, “theatre has no place in God’s kingdom.”<sup>36</sup>

Ellen G. White did not speak well of theatre (except for a short quip about a dramatized Christmas program), but then again the theatre and drama of her time reflected that culture at large. During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Melodrama, which emphasizes sensationalism, became “one of the largest and most significant” types of theatre.<sup>37</sup> The majority of the melodramas, which catered more to the lower class in the larger cities, featured the supernatural and were highly exotic and unusual.<sup>38</sup> From around 1870-1930, there was a surge in American theatre called Burlesque, which involved scantily clad women singing and dancing with strong sexual overtones—from which the “striptease” evolved.<sup>39</sup> There were “peep shows” in which men could pay money and then through a small glass hole watch a woman naked/half-naked do some type of act or performance. If this was theatre during Ellen White’s time, of course as a Christian she didn’t have anything good to say about it.

Drama is a tool which reflects the culture that employs it. Historically it has been employed by different cultures for politics, for pleasure, or for religion or against it. It is, however, no more evil or good, than a wrench is evil or good. Thus, if we are a Christian community using drama, our drama will reflect our Christian culture. Since drama has the

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<sup>32</sup> Loveless “In the Real World.” *Article not yet published in Westwind*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Bruch 9.

<sup>34</sup> Bruch 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bruch 10.

<sup>36</sup> Bruch 12.

<sup>37</sup> A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Origins of Early Film*. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1949, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre (9th edition)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003, 320

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 350.

power to influence people's emotions and thoughts, Christian drama can have a positive effect on God's Kingdom, especially in a culture that is already compelled by the arts.

## Humor

In the pre-scientific medical world known to Hippocrates, a physician circa 400 BC, humo(u)r was understood as a fluid that effected human emotions and personality.<sup>40</sup> Ancient people "laughed at the quirks and foibles of humans and at the excess of human personality as caused by humours."<sup>41</sup> Plato and Aristotle theorized "humor is a pleasant experience of oneself as superior."<sup>42</sup> Freud saw humor as "a way of discharging sexual and aggressive instincts which society forces us to repress."<sup>43</sup> But today, the meaning of humor sadly has been restricted to "the ludicrous and the ridiculous, and a source of amusement."<sup>44</sup>

Humor at its essence is the "perception of the incongruous."<sup>45</sup> To see incongruity we must have our own sense of what is normal or standard. When we see an incongruity between what we think is normal and what actually happens, we deem it humorous if the experience is pleasant. For instance, one might find it humorous to see a Jack Russell Terrier wearing a sweater that matches that of its owner. The observer might find it humorous if he thinks: "Dogs don't need sweaters." On the other hand, the woman wearing the matching sweater might not see the incongruity because she is thinking: "Hey, this is cool!" So before we can see the incongruity we must have our own sense of what the norm or standard. It can be funny to one person, who is "able to distance himself by viewing the whole business from a superior vantage point,"<sup>46</sup> but not funny to the other. Laughter is the "judgment of order upon disorder."<sup>47</sup>

Laughing is a natural part of being human. One of the first things a baby instinctively knows how to do is to smile and then to laugh.<sup>48</sup> Thus humor can be described as "a breath of childhood,"<sup>49</sup> taking "sheer delight in life,"<sup>50</sup> and "born out of playfulness."<sup>51</sup> Because humor and laughter are essential to human experience, to encounter somebody who

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<sup>40</sup> Arun Kumar Wesley, "Laughter the best medicine an analysis of humor for a theological enterprise." *Bangalore Theological Forum* 33 no.1 (June 2001) : 198-217, 206.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard's View of Humor: Must Christians Always be Solemn?" *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1987) : 176-186, 177.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, 178.

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Gérard Bessière, *Theology of Joy*, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies. trans. and ed.

Johann Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua, New York: Herder and Herder, 1974, 88.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Leunig, "Laughter and life: seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary." *St. Mark's*

*Review* no. 160 (Summer 1995) : 3-1, 6.

<sup>51</sup> Conrad Hyers, "Christian humor: uses and abuses of laughter." *Dialog*, (Sum 1983) :

198-203, 199.

had no capacity for humor would be alarming and would appear unusual, anything but human.<sup>52</sup> Humor helps us to have a “healthy ‘objectivity’ about ourselves.”<sup>53</sup> Some people even attribute humor as a “sign of the presence of God in mankind.”<sup>54</sup>

### **The Shadow over Humor**

In our day and age, there are few people who have *never* laughed in church—yet humor is still a touchy subject, especially when relating to organized religion.<sup>55</sup> Laughter many times is seen as the opposite of reverence and respect, which in turn implies that religion and God are not taken seriously.<sup>56</sup> The early church struggled with laughter and viewed it as an indication of the Greek and Roman pagan and hedonistic ways of life. St. John Chrysostom proclaimed that “this world is not a theatre in which we can laugh, and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins.”<sup>57</sup> Robert Barclay, the infamous 17<sup>th</sup> century Quaker, said “laughing, sporting, playing games, jesting, idle talking, etc. are not Christian liberty or harmless mirth.”<sup>58</sup>

In 1888 William Pope Harrison (a contemporary of Ellen G. White) wrote an article in the “Methodist Quarterly Review” regarding humor in the pulpit. He said that humor, “tricks of speech and clownish antics,” were used by some pastors as a cheap “substitute for knowledge”<sup>59</sup> He continued his attack saying (among other things):

“The incongruity of humor, wit, and worship needs no argument to point out.”<sup>60</sup>

“Novelty captivates weak minds, and the multitude will throng the church to listen to a poor joke, which would barely have prompted a smile if uttered on the street.”<sup>61</sup> “To serious worshipers, wit and humor in the pulpit are not only distasteful, but they are pernicious.”<sup>62</sup> “We have sinned by mixing humor in the pulpit.”<sup>63</sup> “Let our young preachers beware of catching this infection. The house of God is not the place for laughter.”<sup>64</sup>

Because Adventism sprouted out of Methodism, these viewpoints are still held by many people today. We should first take note, however, that there are different types and levels of humor; some are unacceptable, such as the humor that comes at the expense of others. When we put other people down because we think they are dumber, poorer, or uglier than

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<sup>52</sup> Evans, 179.

<sup>53</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “Sense of humor as a Christian virtue.” *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (Apr 1990) : 177-192. 177.

<sup>54</sup> Bessière, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Kirby, “The Serious Side of Humor.” *Sunstone*, (December 1997) : 10-11, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Hyers, 198.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> William Pope Harrison, “Humor in the Pulpit.” *Methodist Quarterly Review*, (March 1888) : 112-117, 114.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

we are; we use this “humor” to come away “enjoying our superiority.”<sup>65</sup> Often a person’s religion and/or God becomes the brunt of many a jest. We find this type of humor in the book of I Kings 18:27 when Elijah taunts the prophets of Ba’al on Mount Carmel. But, luckily, we can also find positive and useful humor in the Bible.

### **Humor in the Bible**

Take the book of Judges chapter three for example: Left-handed Ehud who wields a short sword (or a long knife) is going to go meet with fat King Eglon of Moab (whose name literally means “the fatted calf”). The Hebrew mind will immediately catch the humor in the situation: 1) Because Ehud was left-handed, he is able to slip past the guards with his short sword on the “wrong thigh” (where the King’s guards would not have thought to check). 2) Ehud says that he has a “message” from God, but is actually there to kill King Eglon, the fatted calf. 3) Killing a fatted calf is a cause for celebration. 4) The “message” from God is really a judgment on the King and a signal of triumph for Israel. From the very beginning of the story, the Hebrew mind both understands the incongruencies of the situation and is able to laugh with glee at the cleverness of Ehud. Even though some of the humor in the Bible is lost in its’ translation, there is still much humor that can be appreciated.

Jesus used absurd humor and irony in his parables as well as in his daily conversation with others. The function of his humor was to “challenge/shatter” his audiences’ perception and understanding of the world.<sup>66</sup> He spoke of the Beam in the Eye,<sup>67</sup> The Camel through the eye of the Needle,<sup>68</sup> giving Stones instead of Bread,<sup>69</sup> and the three bogus excuses in response to the invitation to the Great Supper.<sup>70</sup> Much like today, Jesus’ audience knew well what it was like to offer excuses. They could relate to the frustrations of trying to grow/encourage that one stubborn fig tree.<sup>71</sup> He used these relatable “humorous absurdities of the imagined situations to drive home his points.”<sup>72</sup>

### **The Value of Humor**

One of the most difficult and greatest tasks in life is the negotiation “between the world of enjoyment and play and the world of duty and discipline.”<sup>73</sup> Heroes such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther, and Martin Luther King Jr. all

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<sup>65</sup> Hyers, 200.

<sup>66</sup> Wayne D. Sandifer, “The humor of the absurd in the parables of Jesus.” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, no. 30 (1991) : 287-297. 288.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 7:3-4.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 19:24.

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 7:9.

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 22:1-14.

<sup>71</sup> Luke 13:6-9.

<sup>72</sup> Sandifer, 287.

<sup>73</sup> Leunig, 4.

used humor to prepare the way for reform.<sup>74</sup> Religious humor finds its place when we see the incongruencies between and in ourselves; more specifically the “human behavior as it relates to the gospel principles.”<sup>75</sup> “The heart of religious life is this very perception of the permanent discrepancy between ideal and actuality.”<sup>76</sup> Religion realizes it, and humor accepts it so we can move beyond our current state of being. Humor is inherently an aspect of Christian Hope.<sup>77</sup> We are striving more and more for something that we already have—eternal life!<sup>78</sup>

We must be careful that we do not hold our own self-importance above our religion. Perhaps the jokes that poke fun *at* doctrine, creeds, fundamental beliefs, ordinances etc., should be off limits for humor. However, we sometimes construe jesting about our humanity as mocking God.<sup>79</sup> In reality, we are just allowing the humor to enable us to rise above and see the bigger picture.<sup>80</sup> Humor can become our “‘out’ to which a person escapes when he can no longer face the fearful stress” of daily life.<sup>81</sup> With the humor, we can reach outside of life and can embrace others “in spite of failings and disappointments.”<sup>82</sup> Looking at the history of evangelism on an organized church level, fear seems to have been a much more persuasive tool than humor.<sup>83</sup> Humor, however, cannot be relegated to the realm of secular society. It is a positive part of the human experience. In the words of Hyers:

“Faith without humor ceases to be faith; it becomes fideism and dogmatism. Humor without faith ceases to be humor, it becomes superficial, empty, hopeless, sarcastic, and bitter. Religious expression at its best, therefore, functions within a delicate dialectical balance between faith and laughter.”<sup>84</sup>

Humor is a phenomenon (and in the scope of this paper: a tool); it is not Christian or Secular—it is human.

## **The History of Improv**

When Bryan was traveling in Greece, a tour guide took him to a particular amphitheater near Delphi where improvisational theatre supposedly has its origins. It is rumored that during a certain Greek festival, there was a chorus of

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<sup>74</sup> Wesley, 201.

<sup>75</sup> Kirby, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Evans, 182.

<sup>77</sup> Roberts, 189: “There would be something malicious or at any rate unacceptably frivolous in the enjoyment of people’s failures... if that were the end of the story—if, say, we believe that people are just fundamentally screwed up and then die. This would be tragedy, not comedy... It is because Christians are hopers that they can also be laughers about the most serious things in life.”

<sup>78</sup> Roberts 177: Soren Kierkegaard even goes so far as to call Christianity “the most humorous view of life in world history” (Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers, Volume 2, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 1681.

<sup>79</sup> Kirby, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Wesley, 216: “Humor is that perception of reality albeit from a light-hearted point of view which renews hope in humanity. It is that sense of reality in one, which does not take defeat at the hands of death, failure, injustice, etc. It is the liberating spirit in the human (which found expression in God’s liberative motif for the human, beginning with the Exodus and culminating in the Cross) that theology as the articulation of faith in God and freedom for the human, has to take into account.”

<sup>81</sup> Evens, 182.

<sup>82</sup> Hyers, 202.

<sup>83</sup> Kirby, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Hyers, 202.

four men wearing goat masks who were singing for an elite audience. Between one of the songs, one of the “goat-heads” spontaneously cracked a joke about story in the previous song and then another “goat-head” stepped out to make another retort—Improv had begun. Thus, actors have used the tool of improvisation for centuries.<sup>85</sup>

In 1550 in Tuscany, Italy, we find our first records of Improv officially being woven into professional acting.<sup>86</sup> The Commedia Dell’Arte worked with the famous masked comedies of ancient Rome.<sup>87</sup> Commedia Dell’Arte combined scripted dialogue, mime and improvised dialogue into their “routines.”<sup>88</sup> These actors could sing, dance, do acrobatics, and were well educated in geography, foreign languages, history, poetry and various other subjects.<sup>89</sup> This type of theatre, though relying more heavily on “intricate, costume entertainment” than on improvisation, continued until the 18<sup>th</sup> century until it evolved into other types of theatre.<sup>90</sup>

In 1945, Viola Spolin founded the Young Actors Company in Hollywood<sup>91</sup> and began by teaching her games to young children.<sup>92</sup> She claims to have come up with what we call “Improv games” out of the necessity to “unlock the individual’s capacity for self expression.”<sup>93</sup> Her son, Paul Sills, had a dream of having a cabaret theatre, a stage “where anyone could get on stage at anytime and improvise for his or her fellow man.”<sup>94</sup> Spolin eventually came to Chicago in 1955 to direct the Playwright’s Theatre Club and worked with her son to found the Compass Players<sup>95</sup>—the world’s first improvisational theatre<sup>96</sup> where five to six actors played multiple roles and did not know what was going to happen next.<sup>97</sup> On December 16, 1959, Sills opened the most influential Improv theatre ever: Second City.<sup>98</sup> Viola Spolin went on to be one of the most inspiring and insightful directors of theatre until she died in November 1994.<sup>99</sup>

Across the Atlantic Ocean in 1956, Keith Johnstone was hired on as the head of the Royal script department at the Royal Court Theatre in London.<sup>100</sup> Being the new teacher he was first given the classes consisting of eight to ten year olds.<sup>101</sup> Johnstone was well on his way to thinking outside the box. In his opinion, his former teachers used old and

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<sup>85</sup> Kozlowski, Rob. *The Art of Chicago Improv: Shortcuts to Long-Form Improvisation*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002, 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999, xlix.

<sup>92</sup> Kozlowski, 3.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Spolin, ix.

<sup>100</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro*. London: Methuen, 1987, 23.

<sup>101</sup> Keith. New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1999, x.

outdated theories,<sup>102</sup> so he instructed “negative people to be positive, and clever people to be obvious and anxious people not to do their best.”<sup>103</sup> He looked for ways in which the actors would have to think on their feet, not know their next lines, and be more expressive.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the uneasiness of her Majesty’s Drama Inspectors, who censored and screened all drama and activity—“even comedians needed royal approval for every word and significant gesture”<sup>105</sup>—he eventually came up with a type of improvisation called “Theatre Sports”—in which two teams of Improv players “compete” for points awarded by “judges.” (Johnstone did not know about other improvisational ideas until 1966, when some member of an audience lent him a book by Viola Spolin.<sup>106</sup>) During the early days of his experimentation with his Improv philosophy, his troupe, “Theatre Machine,” would refund the money to the audience if the shows did not go well!<sup>107</sup> Eventually he taught and traveled around to several countries and ended up founding the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Alberta.<sup>108</sup>

It is interesting to note that Improv was born independently on two separate continents, yet around the same time period. It is also noteworthy to identify that both Improv theories came out of teaching children theatre techniques—as a way to help the students have uninhibited expression. Now Improv has evolved in to several different schools and methods including musicals, children’s theatre and one-man shows!<sup>109</sup> Several big name comedians such as, Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Dan Akyroyd, and John Candy came out of the Chicago and Toronto stages.<sup>110</sup> Improv inspired several hit television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (much of the players coming from Second City), *Who’s Line is it Anyway?*, and movies such as *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*. Improv’s strongest asset is its ability to engage the audience in the story.

## **Why use story?**

### *What is a Story?*

“We love stories, then, because our lives are stories and we recognize in the attempts of others to move, temporarily and painfully, our own story. We recognize in the stories of others’ experiences of coming to belief our own agonizing journey and we rejoice in the companionship of those on the way.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Johnstone, *Impro*, 27.

<sup>107</sup> Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>109</sup> Kozlowski, 89.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, 138-139.

There is nothing that can captivate a room full of individuals like a good story. Good stories travel their way from other times and cultures, across seas, over mountains and into the hearts of a fresh audience. A “story is a narrative account of an event or events—true or fictional,”<sup>112</sup> yet it is much more than just that. Jesus was arguably the most influential person ever to walk this earth. Jesus did not do much lecturing, but instead taught in parables.<sup>113</sup> He stressed the individuals in his stories<sup>114</sup> and used them as a way to weave eternal truths into his audiences’ lives.

The Bible is jam-packed with stories: epic stories, tragic stories, love stories, humorous stories etc. The Bible is a storybook in which we have the opportunity to observe and learn from other individuals who played a part in the Story of Salvation and experienced God. As Christians, the story in the Bible is not just “any story but the story pregnant with meaning.”<sup>115</sup> These stories are real to us and we can relate across the cultures with their humanity.<sup>116</sup> Besides, our “faith needs a story to sustain it—a *meaningful* story...”<sup>117</sup> and these stories can help us to simplify our world.<sup>118</sup>

### ***The Ultimate Communication Tool***

“Everyone, deep down, wants to be proud of their life and feel like they are important—this is the vein of power and influence you can access through storytelling.”<sup>119</sup>

Annette Simons, well known for her storytelling and influencing abilities, advocates that “story telling is the most valuable skill you can develop to influence others.”<sup>120</sup> A good story helps to clarify our world and make more sense of our reality.<sup>121</sup>

We can utilize the “story’s power to connect people” to Jesus—“to what is important and to help them make sense of their world.”<sup>122</sup> Thus stories can bridge others into our roots and history<sup>123</sup> and worldview.

A story seems to be truer and connect with our core of humanity, much more than just dry facts.<sup>124</sup> Jesus used earthly stories to explain heavenly truths,<sup>125</sup> and “by connecting His teaching with the scenes of life, experience, or nature,

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<sup>112</sup> Annette Simons, *The Story Factor*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2001, 31.

<sup>113</sup> TeSelle 4: “Parables are stories, of course, but of a particular kind—stories that set the familiar in an unfamiliar context, which is also what a metaphor does.”

<sup>114</sup> TeSelle 121: “The stress on the individual likewise relates story directly to parable, for in each of Jesus’ parables it is the life of an individual that is at stake.”

<sup>115</sup> TeSelle, 36.

<sup>116</sup> TeSelle 121: “One of the interesting things about the men and women in the Scriptural stories is that they appear to be caught in *characteristic* action, at that moment in their lives when they are most themselves, when they reveal themselves most precisely and definitively.”

<sup>117</sup> Simons, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, xvii.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>123</sup> Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981, 30.

<sup>124</sup> Simons, 33.

He secured their attention and impressed their hearts.”<sup>126</sup> We too can teach, show, and explain spiritual principles, such as grace and forgiveness, through a common medium. Simmons says that, “clothing truth in story is a powerful way to get people to open the doors of their minds to you and the truth you carry.”<sup>127</sup> Most secular people cannot and will not belly up to the pulpit and beg to swallow truth whole. Yet, many times if “the truth is clothed in story, they let it in.”<sup>128</sup> A story “helps figure out what the jumbled facts that they already have mean in their lives.”<sup>129</sup>

When thinking about avenues for influencing others, a “story is less direct, more gracious, and prompts less resistance.”<sup>130</sup> When we tell a story we can avoid “power struggles and fact wars;”<sup>131</sup> instead the story invites the listener to be involved and to respond.<sup>132</sup> The “story also moves peoples into a very young state of awareness that is less analytical, more receptive, and better connected to their unconscious and imagination. This allows you and your message to enter their minds.”<sup>133</sup> Basically, instead of forcing our ideas, we allow our story to pull them and their curiosity<sup>134</sup> into the story—thus dispelling fear<sup>135</sup> and disarming their first skeptical defenses.<sup>136</sup> Perhaps *story* is again a new avenue for evangelism:

“It may be the parable, while itself a story of a certain kind, is a more appropriate genre for our time, for unlike more developed narratives it does not call for the same degree of faith in cosmic or even social ordering. It is a more skeptical form with regard to such matters, insisting that the gap between the human and the transcendent is closed only through personal risk and decision. It only insists that the secular and the human is the place of God’s presence—a presence for the most part hidden under the ordinary events of everyday life. It insists, in other words, on faith, not on an ordered structure built into the nature of things upon which the individual can rely. **The parable is the form for a secular people...**”<sup>137</sup>

### *Psychology of a Story*

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<sup>125</sup> White, Ellen G. *Christ’s Object Lessons*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association. 1941, 17: “Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly...divine truths by earthly things with which the people were most familiar.”

<sup>126</sup> White, 21.

<sup>127</sup> Simmons, 28.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>132</sup> William J. Baush, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985, 118.

<sup>133</sup> Simmons, 126.

<sup>134</sup> Bausch, 30.

<sup>135</sup> Simmons 25.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> TeSelle, 141.

“Lead their conscious and subconscious minds on a tour of a different point of view. Awaken their senses and emotions. Intrigue and activate their imagination. Use sounds, music, pictures, imagery, humor, dialogue, tactile elements, whatever makes it real for them, to engage them in co-creating a story that touches both their conscious and subconscious minds.”<sup>138</sup>

The big difference between simply feeding them facts and telling a story is the addition of emotional content and other added sensory details.<sup>139</sup> So whenever we tell a story, it “engages the heart and indeed the whole person.”<sup>140</sup> We can tell people about our story, but until they actually feel the frustrations, anxiety etc. in the story, we will never connect with them on the emotional level. There have been several studies on how our brains work, which demonstrate that emotions guide<sup>141</sup> and direct our thoughts and our interpretation of rational facts.<sup>142</sup> “People irrationally believe they are rational.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, to influence others we need to be emotional and influence their emotions.<sup>144</sup>

Our psychological goal in telling stories is to connect our goals to our listeners’ self-interest in some manner.<sup>145</sup> Our stories can stir up both slight and blatant responses from the audience. They allow us to touch “that place that is mysteriously good and bad—our common humanity”<sup>146</sup>—and—“regardless of our differences—money, status, race, gender, experience, culture—as human beings these common understandings flow beneath our superficial differences.”<sup>147</sup> No matter where people are at emotionally, mentally, or spiritually they can respond and connect to a story. A story meets not just one person, but all the listeners (who in turn become participants) where they are at. Through story, we can connect on a deep understanding that “we are more alike than different.”<sup>148</sup> Thus we share that we are at once both diverse and the same. Jesus must have understood that people were diverse yet the same—the parables are too universal to indicate otherwise.

Thus we connect on the deepest level and they can take “faith in a story that has become real for them personally.”<sup>149</sup> At the Improv Church we want them to have a new story that is all their own.

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<sup>138</sup> Simmons, 150.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>140</sup> Bausch, 27.

<sup>141</sup> Simmons 152: “Humans are emotional beings and all decisions are affected by those emotions.”

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> One lady, who had dropped off the church’s radar screen for fifteen years, decided to attend the Improv Church. She enjoyed her experience so much. She exclaimed that the Improv Church was a “church of joy.” Who wouldn’t want to go to a church characterized by such a rare emotion such as Joy!

<sup>145</sup> Simmons, 107.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 3.

“A man’s sense of his own identity seems largely determined by the kind of story which he understands himself to have been enacting through the events of his career, the story of his life.”<sup>150</sup>

### *How we Tell Great Stories via Improvisation*

One of the greatest advantages of Improv storytelling is that the language is easy for everybody to understand. When doing evangelism, it is very important for our Christian rhetoric to be “ordinary, contemporary, and imagistic.”<sup>151</sup> The New Testament was written in *Koine* Greek, the common, street language of the people, so that everybody might understand. Because this is the way of the New Testament parables and stories,<sup>152</sup> we strive for this at the Improv Church. We aim to tell stories that are seeker sensitive (we steer clear of words like deacon, congregation, atonement, reconciliation etc.) by using the language of the culture; narrative language.

At the Improv Church we use a familiar context from which our stories begin. Since we frequently ask the audience for suggestions to help us start our scenes, we are always using things that are familiar to *them*. Jesus would use things, people, and places around him as “object lessons”—which are basically just stories which incorporate various objects and make a point. This captivated his audience because they already had an inside tract of what the object was—but were hanging on his every word to find out what would happen to it or how it would be used in the story. TeSelle points out that

“It is not the intellectual belief or momentary experience that is revealed in these stories, but ... *real* individuals, fraught with all the ambiguity, complexity, and richness of those who possess real histories.”<sup>153</sup> Similar to Jesus’ stories, we endeavor to make the familiar humanity in the individual real and relevant.

If “influencing is a real-time activity,”<sup>154</sup> then Improv is as real as it gets. We request help from the audience for starting the scene, tapping into their momentum<sup>155</sup>—we feed of their energy and they feed off ours. Annette Simmons says “People will participate in your stories if you let them, and they participate even more when you let them have the good parts.”<sup>156</sup> The audience is sucked into the scene because it is a little part of them. It is in this context that they have

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<sup>150</sup> TeSelle, 139; Stephen Crites, “Myth, Story, History,” *Parable, Myth and Language*, ed. Tony Stoneburner (Cambridge: Church Society for College Work, 1968), p. 68.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>154</sup> Simmons, 84.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the big picture: Where and how their story fits or doesn't fit into this story of Salvation.

Great storytellers swear on using facial expressions, body language, sounds, smells, and tastes as components of good storytelling. Improv has all these elements of good storytelling and more. We can shape the environment, we can demonstrate the weight of an object, our entire body can twist and writhe to display an emotion and *everybody* experiences it all for the first time! My pain becomes their pain, then my triumph becomes their triumph and then my joy becomes their joy.<sup>157</sup> When an Improv player picks up a “bowl of minestrone soup” with good special/object permanence, the audience (and the Improv player) can actually “see” the color of the bowl and can actually “smell” the minestrone. When an Improv player stiffly enters a scene “wearing a Lieutenant uniform,” everybody can virtually see and know the actor and the uniform he wears.

One of the biggest things that storytellers work on is their timing: “Timing can create emotion and give enough mental space so that people will notice what emotion they are feeling.”<sup>158</sup> Every night at the Improv Church there are stories with well-timed lines—everybody seems to hold their breath, they all lean forward in expectation, and then burst out howling and snorting in laughter. Sure, we *could* practice and memorize a script all we want in order to recite a “perfect” story or a “perfect” script; but we choose to act out a story that comes alive!<sup>159</sup>

### ***A Story's Effect***

The process of storytelling “gives the teller a means of connecting more vitally with people at large, and it offers people at large a context for re-experiencing collectively the wonders of being human.”<sup>160</sup> As an Improv player, I can use proprioceptivity and allow my body and mind to re-experience the reception of my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday present; and the audience, seeing me re-experience that situation, cannot help but identify and be drawn into the story.<sup>161</sup> When doing a scene that touches on one of the universal truths of human experience (such as: cookies taste best when hot out of the oven or loneliness is one of the worst feelings), people can utterly relate, recall their similar experiences, and thus “tune in to you and your message.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>160</sup> Jack Maguire, *The Power of Personal Storytelling*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998, 206.

<sup>161</sup> Simmons, 98.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 32.

The story is our path for creating faith.<sup>163</sup> Both fortunately and unfortunately, most people value their own conclusions more highly than yours.<sup>164</sup> So “it is easier to let your story land first, and then draw the circle of meaning/connection around it using what you see and hear in the responses of your listeners.”<sup>165</sup> If we can tell a story that makes more sense to them, especially one of suffering or frustrations, then they can reframe their mindset, the meanings they draw from life, and consequently the actions they will take.<sup>166</sup> A story allows the listener to link the facts together, as well as allow the listener to interpret future events.<sup>167</sup> Our values are meaningless without stories to bring them to life and engage people on a personal level.<sup>168</sup> We just pray that the audience allows the Holy Spirit to flash “conviction” into their minds.<sup>169</sup>

At the Improv Church, we have the opportunity to take humanity, the story of humanity, and the humor of humanity and then set it against the backdrop of God’s salvation. “Stories always project a ‘world,’”<sup>170</sup> so when Jesus told stories, he was trying to offer people “another option in life, another way of acting and living.”<sup>171</sup> So that *they* had an opportunity to contrast their story with the story of Hope.<sup>172</sup> A story lets people decide for themselves;<sup>173</sup> it opens their eyes.<sup>174</sup> “For the role of stories is to explain life, and the good stories, in their very substance and in the structure of their language, become revelation.”<sup>175</sup> As Christians we adopt and draw certain truths from stories, we call this Theology—making sense of God and our Christian worldview. Likewise, the secular mind can choose to draw out truths (revelations) from our stories and thus are doing bits and pieces of Theology.

If when doing an Improv scene, my pain becomes their pain, then my triumph becomes their triumph, and then my joy becomes their joy,<sup>176</sup> the experience will become a part of them. “The beauty of a story is its ability to last in memory long after the facts and figures are gone.”<sup>177</sup> There are countless times when a stranger has walked up to one of the Improv players in Wal-Mart, at McDonalds or in the park and said “Hey! You were so funny at Improv Church.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>169</sup> White, 24.

<sup>170</sup> TeSelle, 122.

<sup>171</sup> Bausch, 193.

<sup>172</sup> TeSelle 36 “It is through the Christian story that God speaks, and all heaven and earth come into it. God is an active and purposeful God and his action with and for men has a beginning, a middle and an end like any good story. The life of a Christian is not a dream shot through with visions and illuminations, but a pilgrimage, a race, in short, a history.” (Second Source Wilder, *Language of Gospel*, pp. 64-65)

<sup>173</sup> Simmons, 5.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>175</sup> Bausch, 117.

<sup>176</sup> Simmons, 99.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 122.

Remember when...” Then that random teenager recounts the scene that had taken place at a certain Improv Church (often several months removed). These events remind us of the unforgettable impact that Improv really makes.

“The destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in.”<sup>178</sup>

### **Improv Meets the Busters**

For this generation “the magic of influence is less in what we say and more in how we say it and who we are.”<sup>179</sup> Since this generation is “experience oriented,” they will “value their own conclusions” more highly than those of others.<sup>180</sup> Thankfully, stories are low pressure, so the individuals are allowed the privilege and freedom to be the ones evaluating the stories (and the truths wrapped up in them). Which is okay, because, as Christians, our stories can “demonstrate the benefits” we promise “in a way that promises can’t.”<sup>181</sup> So we simply allow our honesty and our stories to pressure-less-ly pull them into an experience that gives them glimpse of the Gospel.

Since humor and story are a much more subtle way to create a connection with the Divine, there is less resistance from a generation who by nature is ready to resist. The stories and humor can easily break down the barriers among everybody. Improv Church *is* cool. One of the most popular television shows is *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, which simply consists of four actors and a host doing Improvisation for half an hour. Both the show and the actors have received numerous awards including ABC’s 2003 primetime Emmy award (to Wayne Brady). So our target audience already knows what “Whose Line...” is and comes ready to laugh.

The environment at the Improv church is one of electricity and joy. The Improv is spontaneous and enlivening. The audience gets to literally be a part of something fun and exciting! They get to give input and help direct some of the scenes. They, themselves, can be a meaningful part of something. We aim to make the environment as warm and welcoming as possible. We set up refreshments in the back of the venue for the snacking enjoyment of the multitude. We have different types of live music, to set the ambiance. People can come dressed in anything that is comfortable, be it baggy jeans, shorts and a tank top, or slacks and a tie—everybody is welcome. It doesn’t matter if you have piercings, tattoos, bleached hair, or cowboy boots—everybody is accepted.

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<sup>178</sup> Bausch 36: Harold Goddard. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1965, 208.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, xvi.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 70.

## **History of the Improv church.**

It was Karl Haffner, Senior pastor of the Walla Walla College Church, who first conceived the idea of using improvisational theater as a means of presenting Christ to young people. The following is his account of the Improv Church's beginnings:

The Improv Church grew out of a personal sense that there must be a more effective way to present Christ to a generation of young people who seem so steeled against the church. The start of the Improv Church spotlights my own involvement and vision for harnessing an interactive art form to communicate the message of Christ.

This vision was conceived while visiting Vancouver, B.C., when I discovered Theatre Sports--an improvisational comedy club where drama teams competed by performing sketches that were based on input from the audience. The art form was so riveting that I spent the night envisioning a church using this style of communication. I was exposed to an art form that eclipsed anything I had imagined. The dynamic of audience participation, spontaneity, and free-form discovery between the communicator and the audience sparked a sense of magic that would be foundational to a dream of creating a new way to do church.

Over the past fifteen years this dream has prompted visits to Theatre Sports around the country and has propelled me into a study of why, in my opinion, the art form is so effective. I observed in my numerous visits to the improvisation clubs that hundreds of collegians flock to the venues, sometimes waiting for hours to get tickets.

Next, I interviewed both the audience members and the improvisers asking their opinions about the potential use of improvisation in a church setting. Without exception, the idea was met with enthusiastic responses such as: "Although I don't go to a church, that is the kind of church I would go to."

Fueled by the encouragement of the interviewees, I set out to

create a church based on interactive learning and improvisation. It would provide worshipers an opportunity to create a collective spiritual experience by participating in non-threatening ways. Before going public with my vision, however, I reflected on what the core values of the church would be.

### The Genesis of the Improv Church

The Improv Church was launched in February, 1999. It was based on four core values: action, community, transformation and service. These values shape the way church is done. For instance, the core value of "action" is a conviction that everyone should get into the act where worship is concerned. Thus, sermons are "created" with the audience influencing the direction and flavor. Ideally, all worshipers leave with a sense that the service was inherently different because they attended, i.e. they were active participants rather than passive observers. In contrast, it is my observation that most people leave church services feeling that the gift of worship offered to God was not significantly shaped because of their attendance.

Inherent in this programming is the notion that people learn most effectively through experience. For example, I had negative feelings against the system of apartheid based on my reading and news reports. My opinions dramatically changed, however, after I lived in South Africa for a year. Seeing the inequality and injustice while walking through the streets of Soweto and other black townships transformed my opinions and propelled me to fight all racial inequality with an assiduous intensity that would have never been present short of experiencing life in that environment. The point is: real-life experiences tend to result in a deeper level of learning and have the capacity to significantly impact a person's life. This is a foundational principle of the Improv Church. While I have not substantiated

this assumption with research, it seems intuitive based on my own life experience with improv. No doubt, this is one of many personal presuppositions that color my research and conclusions.

In 1999, Karl launched the first Improv Church at the Center for Sharing on Main Street in downtown Walla Walla, Washington. The evening included music, and a series of improvised scenes performed by the Improv team, followed by a brief sermonette by Karl. Since then, the Improv Church has changed a bit every year as the team makes new discoveries. Because of the pioneering nature of the Improv Church, the development of the Improv ministry had been essentially trial by error, and has been developing over time toward more and more effective methods.

## **What we've learned**

### *The Team Dynamic*

One of the first and most pressing matters was that of team organization. In a church driven by Improv, the Improv actors, or “players” are an essential part of the experience. Without skilled players, the business of effective storytelling and communication is more difficult.

The first year (and all other years except 2002-2003) the home of the Improv Church was the Center for Sharing in Downtown Walla Walla. The venue, with its spotlighted hardwood stage, offered an ideal atmosphere for the players. The players were recruited from the drama department at Walla Walla College, and Improv took place only once a quarter.

The second year, it was decided that, for reasons of unity and focus, a stronger screening process was needed in forming the Improv team. Karl initiated a process of audition and interview that has since been the basis for team formation. Since then, all of the Improv players have been students from Walla Walla College. A much larger team was chosen that year. 16 players formed two rotating teams of 8. Improv took place every other weekend and each team was onstage every other Improv. Karl was able to bring in some Improv players from Seattle to do a weekend of training. Other than that, however, there was no team leader. Ryan Lundsford, who was on the team for the first time that year, remarks that, “because of the two separate teams, there was less team unity and less continuity. There was also less commitment per person.”

The third year, there was only one team of ten. By that time, the team had been in existence long enough to be trained and led by one or two of its senior members. Since then, it has worked well to have a team of between 10 and 12

players. However, as long as the players are dedicated, we've learned that an Improv team of as few as four can be quite successful.

### *The Gospel through Improv*

One of the biggest challenges of using Improv to communicate gospel truths has been the aspect of linking the Improv to a theme or message. At first, the purpose of the Improv was simply to offer positive, uplifting stories, (steering clear of violence and insults, and refusing to take suggestions taking place in the bed room or bathroom) and to break down barriers between people through laughter. Eventually, however, the audience started to note a sort of disconnect between the Improv and the message of the speaker. The two weren't opposed to one another, they just didn't always match up. It became apparent that, although there wasn't an intentional link between Improv and message on the players' part, the audience was looking for one. It also became apparent that the Improv could be used in a more powerful way to enhance the message.

Using Improv in this way is a delicate matter, however. To understand why this is the case, we need to dig deeper into the principles that make Improv work.

Acceptance : One of the strongest principles that drives Improv is the idea of acceptance. When two Improv players are on stage and are about to begin acting out a scene, they are beginning a story. Neither of them knows what is going to happen. There has been no script, and no prior discussion about storyline or characters. The players must literally make it up as they go along. It is completely spontaneous—which is part of Improv's entertainment value as well as its strength as an art form. The players must now communicate within the scene to somehow discover together what is going to happen.

This spontaneity may seem frightening to most people who imagine actually doing it. Improv is, however, guided by principles that aid in the story building process. Improv is not about the individual; it is a team exercise, and acceptance is key to creating a story that goes somewhere. For instance, if Johnny starts out a scene by saying "Hey, Katie, toss me that wrench." And Katie replies, "What wrench? There is no wrench!" What does Johnny do now? Katie has just kept the scene from going somewhere. Johnny's idea has received no support and he is now afraid of offering other ideas. He could, in return, contradict Katie's statement, but that would lead to an argument, What Katie has done to Johnny is called "blocking," a mistake that can often leave other players feeling insecure onstage. If Katie had accepted Johnny's idea, the story would have progressed.

Because acceptance is imperative within a successful Improv scene, it is dangerous for an Improv player to have a

preconceived idea of where the scene should go. If a player is too focused on his or her own plan for the scene, that player will be more likely to block other players. For instance, Katie thinks she and Johnny are digging in the sand for treasure, and has planned an entire scenario of where she wants the scene to go when they find the treasure. When Johnny says “Woah! A nest of turtle eggs!” She has to suddenly change her whole concept of the scene—and will if she’s an experienced Improv player. But if she’s especially attached to her previous idea of where the scene “should” go, she might try to push the scene in that direction (even if she doesn’t block Johnny’s idea) by finding treasure under or inside the eggs. This has the potential to still be an excellent scene, but often when this happens one player ends up controlling the scene and other players’ ideas are sidestepped. This is a more subtle way of alienating fellow players, and can make a scene feel unnatural or forced. It is best for an Improv player to go with the flow and support what each player contributes to the scene—realizing directions the scene might take, but dropping those ideas willingly when necessary. This is what provides for a strong story. The principle of acceptance, therefore, makes each Improv scene an unpredictable experience both for the audience and for the players.

It is because of Improv’s unpredictable nature—which is partly why it works as a craft—that makes it difficult to incorporate an explicit message. Some people have remarked that the scenes should incorporate scripture, Biblical characters, or an obvious lesson. While some scenes do end up including some of these components, this usually occurs, naturally, without being planned. It is difficult, however, to include these aspects without forcing the scene—which ends up backfiring. We’ve found that when players end up attempting to include some sort of explicit moral message, the scene ends up being cheesy or awkward in some way. Furthermore, attempting to incorporate these components can mean that fewer discoveries are made within the scene, and the story is too predictable to accomplish its goal. The underlying reason for this difficulty is that Improv is inherently an activity of exploration, not explication. Players usually discover their theme through patterns that occur within a scene or during the course of an evening. The audience learns by watching a story unfold, or a series of stories that explore a theme.

Improv’s exploratory nature has lent to other ways of using it to enhance a message. Improv’s greatest power as a communication tool is its way of storytelling. The story is what drives the type of Improv used in the Improv Church. Therefore, the function Improv best performs in communicating a message is that of illustration. When Karl preaches a sermon, for instance, he often uses a story to illustrate an idea. The story may or may not have an explicit message in itself—it may simply be about a mouse trying to eat a wooden apple—but when *connected* to a point, this story could be powerful. The same holds true of improvised stories when connected to a message. The stories themselves may not *be*

the message, but they allow the audience to experience the speaker's point more fully.

Since the realization of Improv's potential role in communicating a message, we've been discovering new and better methods of incorporating theme. During the summer of 2003, five of us went to do Improv for youth at two camp meetings and two summer camps along the west coast. We often did Improv once or even twice a day, and each time, we strove to communicate a spiritually edifying message. The trip was exciting in that we witnessed close to 50 young people make decisions for baptism as a direct result of the Holy Spirit working through Improv. Our summer experience also allowed us (and sometimes forced us) to explore new methods of using Improv to communicate a point. Here are a few examples of methods we've tried: One is to simply have the Improv players focus intentionally on exploring a certain theme while creating six different scenes—usually about 3 minutes long. Between these scenes, players can read scripture, do monologues, or whatever else might help them keep the focus on the theme from scene to scene. Afterward, the speaker, who chose the theme and already has an idea of what he or she will say, can draw from the Improv to illustrate the theme. With this method, the speaker must be intentional about gathering ideas from the scenes and making notes while the Improv is taking place.

Another method is for the speaker to decide, before hand, the types of situations each scene will explore. For example, one Improv talk was about the teachings of Jesus. The speaker focused on five of Jesus' teachings as illustrations. These teachings were listed on a sheet of paper at the door, and, as people entered, they were asked to place a check next to the teaching they felt would be most difficult to put into practice. Each scene that evening explored one of the five teachings—from easiest to most difficult.

Another Improv talk was about the things that keep us from trusting God. As people came in the door, they were asked to write down one thing that would keep them from trusting someone else. Six of their answers were chosen and used as suggestions for the scenes that evening. This type of method can be exciting to the audience because it increases the amount of audience influence on each scene, and enhances audience anticipation of seeing their suggestions incorporated.

Exploration of theme can be quite effective. Each method can vary in its effectiveness, however, depending on the skill level or particular focus of a team. When it works well, it creates an atmosphere in which a person's mind can marinate in an idea, and by the time a speaker begins to share, the audience is already with her.

### ***Advantages of Christian Improv Humor***

In our experience working with the Improv Church, we have discovered several things about using Christian

humor. Since it is easier for a person to laugh at oneself after laughing at somebody like oneself,<sup>182</sup> the Improv players offer themselves as guinea pigs that explore the incongruities of life. The Improv players have several different tools to present material in such a way so that the incongruities are side-splittingly vivid.<sup>183</sup> The closer the incongruity comes to connecting and reflecting real life, the funnier it will be.<sup>184</sup> Thus, some of the best humor has to do with our humanity, because “this is who we are and what interests us the most.”<sup>185</sup> “Surprise...an almost necessary ingredient of humor,”<sup>186</sup> is another element that brings freshness to Improv. When both the audience and the Improv players create an inside joke (usually growing out of an incongruous event), whenever the Improv players make reference to that previous event, there is almost a “double incongruency.” This inside joke now becomes something that all of the participants have in common and tool that builds up the community atmosphere.

As human beings we own certain perspectives on life and humor, we are capable of accessing certain perspectives, and we also at times adopt certain perspectives.<sup>187</sup> Because our Improv humor starts with the incongruencies of humanity, we begin with the same vantage point as the secular audience. Yet as Christians, we have a Christian perspective that we can access to see life’s incongruencies. Similar to when we set up the parameters for our Improv scenes (which invites the audience adopt the new vantage point from which to identify the humor in the next scene), we introduce them to the Christian perspective on humor as well. A secular person may not yet have access to a Christian perspective of humor, but they can adopt one. If we tell a joke to a foreign exchange student; they might not “get it” right away. But when we explain to them the vantage point from which we see it, they can adopt that perspective to appreciate the humor in the joke. If one particular perspective is adopted often enough, it becomes a perspective that begins to be accessible instead of just adopted. Like the foreign exchange student who becomes more familiar with the new culture’s vantage point and they themselves are eventually able to access that unique perspective. In this way the Christian perspective of humor subtly enters into the secular mind.

It is the Christian perspective of humor that brings out “the important incongruities.”<sup>188</sup> But since the Christian vantage point also reflects on human behavior,<sup>189</sup> we engage the audience in something that they already know how to do—laugh at themselves. This “laughing from an alien perspective is not merely an exercise of the imagination, as it

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<sup>182</sup> Roberts, 185.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>184</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “Smiling with God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor.” *Faith and Philosophy*, (April 1987) : 168-175, 169.

<sup>185</sup> Roberts, *Sense of Humor as a Christian virtue*, 178.

<sup>186</sup> Wesley, 200.

<sup>187</sup> Roberts, *Sense of Humor as a Christian virtue*, 182.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. 179.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. 187.

were, but something closer to a genuine participation in the Christian perspective.”<sup>190</sup> In short, the perspective actually becomes a part of the participant (audience).

Most people can see the humor in a contradiction or incongruity, but less are able to “see and face the fundamental contradiction in [their] own existence—to smile and laugh over [themselves].”<sup>191</sup> At the Improv Church, the audience has the opportunity to see their identity more clearly. Improv humor allows us to actually “enjoy the messiness of existence, and to laugh relative to the very things that otherwise frustrate and dismay us.”<sup>192</sup> With this different perspective, these events appear hysterical and so we are able to stand in defiance of the frustrations and thrashings of life—and so “by laughing, people create freedom in a flash.”<sup>193</sup> This liberating laughter<sup>194</sup> brings about a smile, which “becomes the doorstep to the human *and* to the divine.

Humans “gobble up the story like ice cream, subjecting [themselves] to a disturbing alien vision and the frightening possibility of sanctification.”<sup>195</sup> This becomes a sort of “seduction” that is the “great moral power of moral humor.”<sup>196</sup> Not that everyone who laughs has a Christian sense of humor, but rather that this humor is an avenue to the Christian way of thinking;<sup>197</sup> a “window” into Christianity.”<sup>198</sup> Thus humorous vantage point can help the audience subconsciously move into our Christian perspective, so they are already with us on a subconscious level when we unmistakably share Christ during the message.

The Improv atmosphere involves people in the fun and energy of the event. It is similar to a mob mentality, in which the people have no choice but to laugh at the actors and at themselves. This laughter brings all the different people with their struggles, closer together. During a state of laughter, one can look around and see all of the other humans, which at one moment so different from oneself, but now “we” are all one family enjoying the moment together; “a cheerful heart is good medicine.”<sup>199</sup> We strive to create this community atmosphere by using “humor that unites, not humor that divides.”<sup>200</sup> For instance, we avoid violence and insults in scenes and do not accept audience suggestions about the bedroom, bathroom or booze.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>191</sup> Evans, 182.

<sup>192</sup> Hyers, 201.

<sup>193</sup> Kuschel, Karl-Josef. “The Destructive and Liberating Power of Laughter: Anthropological and Theological Aspects.” *Bright Side of Life*, trans. John Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 2000) : 114-121, 118.

<sup>194</sup> Kirby 11: “laughing lowers blood pressure, increases muscle flexation and triggers a flood of beta endorphins, the brain’s natural morphine-like compounds that can induce a sense of euphoria.” Furthermore, natural killer cells that destroy viruses and tumors actually increase during a state of mirth. Gamma-interferon, a disease-fighting protein, rises with laughter as to B-cells, which produce disease destroying anti-bodies, and T-cells, which orchestrate the immune system.”

<sup>195</sup> Evans, 188.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>199</sup> Proverbs 17:22.

<sup>200</sup> James R. Barnette, “A Time to Laugh: Principles of Good Pulpit Humor.” *Preaching* 11 (Mar-Apr 1996) : 5-11, 10.

Understandably, for most people, Improv humor in a more formal church setting would not be acceptable. People have differing opinions regarding acceptable humor, but the level of humor doesn't necessarily signify the spiritual maturity level of the individual. We do Improv in a more "secular" setting in order to meet un-churched people where they are at. We realize the pulpit should not be used as a comedy club; the difference is that we use humor in a public setting to draw people to Christ.

### ***The Future of Improv.***

Improv Church has influenced young people in the Walla Walla Valley (and beyond) in a number of ways. Some have given their lives to Christ because of the influence of Improv. A few baptisms have resulted directly from encounters with Improv Church. Other people have simply become interested in religion for the first time. In a survey given at Improv Church, about 75% of those surveyed aged 18-33 said that Improv Church had affected them spiritually. Among the most frequent reasons given were that fact that it helped them see religion from a different perspective, it helped promote positive values in a fun way, that they enjoyed worshiping in a spontaneous way, and that they felt accepted there. Ryan Lundsford has observed the amount of high school students who attend, and notes the positive influence of seeing college kids having fun at a religious event on their own time on a Friday night, instead of going out drinking and partying. Overall, the Improv church has received positive feedback from the community, and has broken down barriers between young people and religion.

Although Improv Church has been a positive influence on the community, there are still ways in which it could increase its effectiveness. Since The Improv Church's second year, a worker from Australia has been given the taskforce position of Improv Church administrator and leader. So far, this arrangement has been as definite asset to the ministry. The downside, however, is that a different person rotates into the administrative position each year. Thus, continuity in leadership is affected. Since the Improv Church receives its support from the college community, the team also suffers from a lack of continuity as experienced players graduate and new players rotate in. Often, players who rotate out take with them a developed sense of the Improv Church's vision, which cannot always be communicated to incoming players. Given nature of the support base for Improv Church, these problems regarding continuity cannot be easily fixed. However, permanent leadership on the administrative and perhaps even the team level would be a major boost to the ministry's effectiveness.

Another way in which the Improv ministry could be even more effective would be to attach it to a permanent

community. As we have discussed, the Improv community at the moment is largely made up of college students. Thusly, people are constantly coming and going. Improv also meets every other week, and follows the college schedule, only running from September to June. This makes it difficult to establish a community into which new people can become integrated and feel belonging. In addition, the Improv Church is a satellite program, and is not able to receive full-time attention from leaders. The Improv ministry could be more effective if Improv Church was its own entity, and ran full-time, year round.

One more need that has become apparent is that of dedicated players. In order for Improv Church to be a successful ministry, every member of the team must be dedicated to its vision, and be willing to take part in sharing the gospel. The players are the face of the Improv ministry. They are the most influential factor in breaking down barriers, and once barriers are broken down, the players also have the most potential to connect with the audience as speakers. The most powerful Improv ministry will be the one in which the Improv players are all ministers of the gospel.

### ***Our Vision for Improv Church***

The Improv Church in Walla Walla has made some groundbreaking moves toward developing a method of sharing the gospel message with the Buster generation. Improv is still in the process of developing as an evangelistic tool, but we can already see that it has amazing potential.

Improv is an effective tool in ministry geared toward (but not limited to) the buster generation. A church driven by Improv can provide a new way to invite Busters into the church community. Improv is a communication tool that is engaging, experiential, and non-didactic. These aspects, as well as its focus on discovering the truths in life through storytelling, may be part of the reason Improv is so appealing to Busters. Not only does it create an accepting atmosphere and break down barriers through laughter, it allows the audience to experience the story along with the players; everyone participates.

Here's what a church plant driven by Improv might look like: It could incorporate two services—One on Friday evening, and one on Saturday. The Friday evening service would be a “seed” service to connect people with a more church-like Saturday service. This seed service would mostly consist of Improv, with a simple message attached. Since this service is intended to be accessible to people who would not consider attending a church service, it would be light on dogma. It would be the prime place for outreach and evangelism, however, in the sense that the Gospel would be presented in a non-threatening way, personal connections would be made, and people would be able to see religion in a new light. It would also be a point from which to invite people to attend the next day's service.

The Saturday service would be geared toward the church community. It would still, however, incorporate Improv, contemporary music, and other worship styles that are more accessible to the Buster generation. It would be a contemporary service, weighted more on the side of music and scripture.

The difference between the "seeker" service and the "seed" service is that the seeker service is designed for those who are already seeking God--hence, the focus on worship and scripture. The seed service would be designed to plant a seed in the minds of those who aren't yet seeking. These two services would take place in the same venue, Ideally In a populated downtown area where people would find it easy to come in off of the street. This is just one way in which Improv could be employed to share the Gospel; the possibilities are many.

We are excited about the amazing potential for using Improv as an evangelistic tool. We invite you to give your support to the Improv ministry and its mission: "To connect young adults to Christ through Improvisation and Interactive learning."

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