



## Humor in Young Life

by Lee Corder

In these last few months, I have witnessed the power of humor in delighting and engaging kids from China to Morocco to Portugal. I've also remembered with fondness and gratitude the passing of two of Young Life's most talented, visionary and, yes, hilarious staff: Phil McDonald and Jim Shelton. Such moments remind me of the great privilege and responsibility we share as a mission that honors the sanctity of laughter. As I thought about sharing in *Monday Morning*, I had some wonderful interaction with great program folks around the importance of Jesus-honoring humor.\*

You can be sure I always approach the topic of humor with great seriousness, for it is a sacred and holy task that demands much, even as it frees, heals and makes whole. (That of course doesn't apply to the time I shot myself in the leg while leading a camp greeting at Windy Gap.) I continue to be in awe of our mission full of people who do laughter in such creative and life-giving ways. But it's no surprise in a relational ministry like ours that our elders created a mission of joy when much of evangelism was deadly serious. From the earliest days, humor has been one of our most important tools. But humor as a kingdom expression demands we take great care in everything we do to tease laughter from our young friends.

Laughter is not just a good mission strategy; it is grounded in the very image of God. "Joy," wrote C.S. Lewis, "is the serious business of heaven."

All of us who share the privilege of Gospel proclamation understand that Jesus lived out joy and celebration. In humor, I believe we find the following Gospel markers expressed in unique and powerful ways:

- **Love** – Making others laugh is a ministry of love that prepares the way for the Gospel.
- **Forgiveness** – As we laugh, we are releasing the tension that comes with unrealized holiness.
- **Relationship** – The people we laugh with are the ones we appreciate most.
- **Freedom** – G. K. Chesterton said that "angels can fly because they take themselves lightly."
- **Healing** – Humor and laughter are God's healing gifts to us. Just ask Abraham and Sarah or their son Isaac (meaning, "he will laugh").
- **Trust** – Good humor undergirds our willingness to trust Jesus for transforming impact rather than our own cleverness.

If laughter, then, is the gift of God and its use is one of His most powerful means to meaningful relationship, we must ask whether such humor always reflects the holiness of God and the glory of His creation. But as humor can bring gracious gifts, it can also, because of our fallen nature, bring distortion in a way that demeans those for whom Jesus gave His life. The world in which kids live today teaches them to laugh at that which demeans and destroys. Such humor is often negative, abusive, sexual, sarcastic and degrading in ways enumerated in one of our old training documents that reminds us that negative humor:

- Divides us as human beings.
- Laughs at the expense of others.
- Obscures hope.
- Amplifies tension.
- Destroys self-worth.
- Destroys community.

(continued on next page)

(continued)

But just as there is negative humor, there is healing humor that:

- Adapts in difficulty.
- Laughs humbly at itself.
- Illuminates hopeful direction.
- Decreases human tension.
- Challenges prejudices.
- Builds confidence and worth.
- Involves others in enjoyment.

It is this kind of Jesus-breathed lightness that is the hallmark of Young Life humor. As stewards of that trust, our program friends offer a number of thoughtful applications that guide us into a joy that brings life. So in Young Life we:

- Always remember that humor is proclamation. Use humor that glorifies God and is consistent with His Word.
- Challenge culture as our humor lines up with the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5).
- Use humor that reminds us to laugh at ourselves rather than at others.
- Are careful to use humor and laughter that leads to the “lighter side” of life.
- Express excellence in presentation with costumes and “go the extra mile.” We don’t just announce the mountain climb; we sell it fully decked out in climbing gear.
- Create an atmosphere that allows kids to relax and “forget about themselves.”

So we work hard to offer easy laughter. We offer grace with joy. We invite our friends into the fullness of life for which they were made. As George MacDonald offered, “It is the heart that is not yet sure of its God that is afraid to laugh in His presence.” So generations of Young Life leaders have enabled kids to laugh in Jesus’ presence as they move toward full trust in Him.

*\*Thanks to Casey Dunn, Tom Hammon, Gary Wilmer, Newt Hetrick, Tim Toy, Pete Hardesty and Shelly Sadler who offered significant input around the topic of Christ-honoring laughter.*