



# WORDS OF WISDOM

## From the Older Adult Ministry of the Kentucky Conference

### **THE GIFT OF LAUGHTER:**

#### **What Exercising the Funny bone can do for Older Adult Ministry**

Everyone likes to laugh. It is not only enjoyable, but it is good for us. Laughter can improve a person's mental state and physical well-being. Several studies indicate that laughter can reduce blood pressure and stress, alter the mood in depressed individuals, and lead to social bonding. Older adult leaders recognize that laughter also has a spiritual value that goes well beyond the endorphins and relaxation it produces. Laughing is a known coping mechanism for those enduring suffering, a distracting technique to use with those who are experiencing profound grief. It reorients people who are struggling with despair toward a more hopeful outlook.

The spiritual and therapeutic value of laughter has proven itself over the course of history. It was celebrated in Jewish life and even used by Jesus with his disciples. Elton Trueblood, in The Humor of Christ notes that Jesus used irony, satire, and humor to help make his point with his disciples. After the publication of this book, a flood of books followed that recaptured the sense of humor of the ancient Middle East.

Humor also proved to be a survival factor in the experiences of those interred in the concentration camps in WW 2. Various survivors recounted how powerful laughter was in helping them survive the horrors of the camps.

Laughter is not only therapeutic, but it is fun entertainment for fellowship meals, vacation Bible school, and church school openings. Laughter can even be a part of devotions or worship. Indeed some churches include laughter as a part of special worship services, such as a post-Easter and Christmas Sunday worship or as a Summer Vespers Worship Service. When they do, they call it a "High Holy Humor Sunday Worship or Celebration." Usually a feature of such services is members being allowed to tell their favorite jokes (there should be rules in place to do this, such as humor should be kept clean and not be abusive of any group) and Scripture lessons and proclamation being built around scriptural passages of humor. Laughter can also be used in pastoral care situations by clergy and lay volunteers when visiting homebound members. One church produced a video of their favorite jokes and laughter exercises and included it as their Christmas gift for homebound older adults. The technique is easily adaptable

to a variety of ministry contexts. One older adult termed it her older adult ministry duct tape: “Because just like duct tape, you never cease to find new uses for it, and it always seems to help hold things together.”

Laughter is a gift from God. Humans are the only animals in the animal kingdom who laugh on demand in response to emotional and intellectual stimuli. Laughter reaches a part of our spiritual selves as well. Even people with cognitive impairment laugh, and laughter is a coping mechanism for people who are enduring fearful and hurtful situations. It is something older adult leaders should try in their work and program design. Following are some resources for exploring humor.

### **Books**

Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life by James Martin, HarperOne Reprints (2012). Contains numerous humorous stories, jokes, and puns, but also theorizes about how and why laughter is a gift from God.

The Humor of Christ by Elton Trueblood, Harper & Row (1975). Still a classic and a great sourcebook in helping older adults to allow themselves to laugh in various serious situations.

The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible by Earl F. Palmer, Regent College Publishing (2001). Great source book for clergy wishing to preach on humor in the context of a High Holy Day of Humor worship.

### **Websites**

Christian Joke Collection Website: <http://jokes.christiansunite.com/#>

TedTalks Humor Channel: [https://www.ted.com/talks?topics\[\]=humor](https://www.ted.com/talks?topics[]=humor)

By Will Randolph