

Why I try to laugh

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 24, 2014

One of the most powerful forces in any sort of [leadership is optimism](#), and it's especially important in the church. Setting small goals and being excited about reaching them is crucial. Initiating a new mission, a Bible study, a community garden, or an outreach/evangelism plan and celebrating the achievement is vital.

It gets people out of that malaise of thinking they did everything better in the 60s. And, believe me, as someone who wasn't alive in the 60s, there's something really depressing about institutional longing for that era. It's like having a parent say, "Everything was *great...* before you were born!" It never feels good.

And there I go. I'm being sarcastic. I can't help it. Cynicism, sarcasm, rant, snark, and humor—they're my coping mechanisms. In fact, they're a hallmark of my generation.

When a church member says something really nasty to me about what I wear, how I drive, how I keep my house, or how I raise my child, I pick up my phone, text a friend, and laugh about it. When they complain about the hymns I choose, I crack up and remind them that it's only three minutes of their week. They will survive. When we get worked up about the religious trends that aren't going our way, making light of it helps us to release ourselves from that gloom and anxiety.

There's something very refreshing about being able to laugh. It disarms the situation and takes away the power from the critic. It reminds me not to take myself so seriously. It gives me perspective on the situation. It helps me not to hate myself, because otherwise I'd be crying or drinking. Or, I'd be stuffing it down into my gut, until the toxicity becomes ulcer-sized.

In an odd way, making a joke about something can also turn into empathy. To create a really clever joke, one has to understand the motives in a situation, especially when employing Southern "bless his heart" humor. Which means that I have to force

myself into another person's shoes for a few moments.

Does this mean I'm cruel? I hope not. There is a particular communal discipline that says humor is bad. Sometimes people reprimand me and quote it—something about how the use of humor belittles someone else. It's part of the Rule of St. Benedict, and people have taken this to heart.

But I just can't. Really. Taking away humor in this profession would crush my shriveled up soul. I would not have my sanity, and I would not have any stamina.

Also, I've read studies that say that healthy churches have two things—a youth program and laughter during the service. After reading this, it became my goal to make a congregation laugh at every service. I fail miserably at it about half the time. It can be really hard to get congregations to let out even a small chuckle. They can be the toughest crowds. But it's important to try. Give them permission to laugh if you have to. Train them to laugh. Tell dumb jokes. Make a fool of yourself. Just do what it takes. Believe me, to have a laughing church makes *all the difference*.

I guess the crucial thing is how to balance the sarcasm, humor and optimism. It's a delicate ecosystem—we have to employ just enough humor to make light of heavy criticism, but not so much sarcasm that it crushes that important optimism. In each service and meeting, we have to keep checking to make sure that there's a balance in the room. It's a lot of work. And, of course, there are many times when humor is not the best medicine (like when something tragic happens). We have to be smart about it. But it's definitely worth it when we can laugh at ourselves.