

GROWING Together

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THE CASE FOR HUMOUR

Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.

No man ever injured his eyes by looking on the bright side of things.

Too often we associate religious people with dour faces, narrow judgments, and disdain for anything new or controversial. Fortunately, many people of deep faith present a much different image. They are approachable, open, tolerant, sympathetic, not always certain that they have the answers! We turn to them because they are honest and joyful, with a zest for life and time for people.

Among the qualities Christians seek to cultivate, one of the most valuable is a sense of humour. Humour lightens the load, provides perspective, and endears a person to others (particularly children).

Are people born with a sense of humour or can it be developed? Psychologists say that it is a learned response, easier for some than for others. If encouraged it starts with the very young. Children laugh, on average, 400 times a day. As they grow older, they change. They laugh and smile less often, particularly if they are lonely, unhappy, worried, or sick. As the old adage goes, "The trick is growing up without growing old." Too many adults forget to smile. In the 1950's people laughed on average 18 times a day; today, the average is five. Why the difference? Does it matter?

There is strong evidence that in a workplace, where people enjoy each other's presence, and laughter or smiles are frequent, stress is reduced, co-operation is easier to obtain, and production is higher. In times of poverty or oppression, it's hard to see the humorous side of things. But, coupled with hope and determination, a sense of



humour helps us to make the best of bad situations. Russian humour, for instance, brightened even the darkest days of Communism. As Bill Cosby puts it, "If you can find humour in anything, even poverty, you can survive it."

There were happy times, even frequent laughter, in the drought years and depression that hit Saskatchewan in the 1930s. My mother and father had that saving gift. They taught us by word and example. Dad used to calm us down, even make us laugh, when he'd say, "You might as well be where you are as where you ain't." And Mom would add: "The time to be happy is now; the place to be happy is here; the way to be happy is to make others so."

Even the most engaged crusader needs a respite, an occasional chance to relax, to assess the situation, to consider the opposition and listen to what they are saying. To be unrelentingly serious, grim, or hostile is often the way to lose the battle. It is not the Christian way. Think of Tommy Douglas, a man of faith: he won more battles than he lost, at least partly because his sense of humour gave him perspective, insight, and support. And people appreciated his humour even when they didn't agree with his politics.

How hard it must be to retain a sense of humour in troubled countries like Libya, Syria, or Afghanistan. But even there, amid assaults, suffering and death, life goes on. Despite fear and despair, there are redeeming moments of kindness and laughter. Religious people, knowing that their fate is in the hands of God, offer help, hope, and love to those around them. Andrew White, pastor of St. George's in Baghdad, observes that his congregation, despite having faced kidnapping, killing and torture, remains joyful.

Perhaps Billy Graham has made the best case for humour: "A keen sense of humour helps us to overlook the unbecoming, understand the unconventional, tolerate the unpleasant, overcome the unexpected, and outlast the unbearable."

Andrew White, *Faith Under Fire* (Monarch Books, 2011).

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