

A Clown for Christ's Sake

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Introduction

So you want to start a Clown Ministry? Why? This is not meant to be a silly statement, but is the first and most important question you should ask yourself.

It has been said that painting on a clown face, dressing in funny clothes, and rushing off to the nearest nursing home or hospital to clown around doesn't make a clown ministry. A clown activity only becomes a clown ministry when the people involved understand the historical and the theological symbolism of the clown, and become convinced that the clown character can be a valid vehicle through which to worship Christ Jesus.

What is a clown? Does this silly, irreverent character have a place in the church? Could the apostle Paul have been referring to any aspects of the clown's character when he said to the Corinthian church, "We are fools for Christ's sake" (1 Cor. 4:10, RSV)?

This pamphlet is written to help you answer these questions and to discover the why in becoming a clown for Christ's sake.

Historical

The first clowns were fools, but not foolish. They were clever and possessed rare intelligence.¹ Some of these clever fools, or court jesters, had great influence at court and in the households of important people. They could say what they liked, and could tell the truth when the ruler heard only flattery from those around him. Historically, these characters brought joy and laughter to those around them. They poked fun at what was sacred or serious to raise the level of consciousness about what was real. In whatever time or place in history, this basic function of the fool did not change. It was his job to raise the lowly and bring down the high and mighty, reminding the king and others that they were human, after all.

Can we take a cue from this character in molding our Christian behavior?

Theology

Prior to the twelfth century, the clown symbol was often used in Christian religious and educational life. One major task was that of interrupter. During worship or class, a small door might open in the chancel or the front of the lecture hall, revealing the clown. The clown would do or say something funny, relating his comment to what was happening or being said. The intention was to raise the consciousness of the people, not just to bring comic relief.

The word clown is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word clod. A clod was a lowly, down-to-earth person-like a lump from the soil. Floyd Shaffer says that "no matter how you read the opening chapters of Genesis, it always comes out the same way: God loved a clod. God breathed divine spirit into it, made it an object of love, and said that it was good."²The closest equivalent word in the New Testament Greek is the word *doulos*, which means the lowest form of the servant, the one with no apparent power. Christ used this word on the night before His crucifixion, and at other times when He spoke of servanthood as a lifestyle for his followers.

Even the clown's makeup has religious significance. The white face, in every race and culture, is a symbol of death. The colors and markings, applied over the white, are life symbols. The Christian meaning is obvious. To accept Christ we must die, so we can emerge as a new creature. For us as adults to accept the clown we must also do it with a childlike faith. We are on a journey from death to life. We need the awareness of where we have been, where we are going, and the reality of the present. The clown, being dead to the past, comes forth as a new creature-uninhibited, responding without fear, and worshipping with joy and laughter.

Another factor in the way the clown works is that he suspends the rules to make space for something else to happen.³ He disturbs the comfortable and confronts the disturbed. The power of confrontational clowning is to invite the audience to make conclusions for themselves, choosing-not sides of an issue-but developing a new awareness of themselves. A tension is created when the clown refrains from throwing the meaning at the audience, but beckons them to reach for it.⁴

How can these aspects of the clown meld together in worship and ministry in the church?

It is estimated that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 clown ministry groups in the United States of America. They spend substantial time visiting nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons relating one-on-one with no preaching, no pamphleteering, no labels, and no special theological vocabulary. They are there in Christian love and care.⁵ What better theology of a clown ministry than this statement of purpose of one clown group. "To show, first hand, how much of God's love we can bring to others in just a few, short hours, a ministry of offering a smile, a handshake and a sincere caring to those in need."⁶ Is this the "why?" You must answer that question.

What is a clown ministry? It involves visiting nursing homes, hospitals, going into shopping centers, birthday parties, taking part in various segments of a worship service, and even preaching a sermon.

Along with deciding on the why and the learning the how of a clown ministry, there is one other very important decision that must be made. To speak or not to speak (verbal or non-verbal). As you read the remaining sections, keep this in mind, because this decision will influence the way you develop your own style of ministry.

Programming the clown in church

Programming is divided into two distinct categories: Worship ministry and entertainment ministry. In a worship ministry, these areas may at times overlap, the end result, however, must be a worship experience of caring and sharing. Each of these is described.

The worship ministry

In the movie, *The Mark of the Clown*, the minister in the character of a clown, transformed a rather passive Sunday audience into a worshipping community. Through symbols, and without a spoken word, he showed how the clown could step inside the liturgical celebration to help the congregation understand why they were gathered. By doing this he helped restore the lost sense of the sacred.⁷ While we might think that asking a clown to

occupy the pulpit, in actuality or figuratively, is inviting the circus to church, the end result is serious business. The clown character is only a vehicle to help participants get into their innermost souls and confront their religious convictions. In the film, this is done through symbols, balloons, chains, mime, and painting the red clown dot on the face of another person. These symbols convey, without words, Christian concepts in a new way. The clown stirs the audience's imagination causing a new understanding of the mysteries of the worship.

How can symbols and non-verbal communication do this? Basically, they cause each person to interpret the meaning of the symbol for himself-not letting each just hear a truth and then hear it's interpretation. For example, if a person enters the service wrapped in chains, as happens in the film, each person might interpret what the chains represent in his life. When the participant in chains receives the red dot on the cheek, the mark of the clown and the chains fall, again each person will reflect how the touch of Christ releases the chains of his or her own uncertainty, indecision and sins. Powerful messages can be conveyed through nonverbal means.

If a group is not familiar with the way the clown character is used in creating worship, it is essential that some explanation be given prior to entering the worship phase of the program. This is typically done by first giving a brief overview of the clown, its history, culture, theology, and the symbolism of white face and other makeup. After this introduction and with appropriate background music, apply the makeup and suit-up in the clown costume to make the transformation into the clown. The clown then leads the audience in clapping, bowing, and throwing candy kisses (group interaction). This introduces them to a nonverbal approach to the service, and, through pantomime, prepares them to accept the symbolism of the sermon. At the conclusion, the clown silently walks away leaving the group to conclude the service. A worship experience has taken place with a crazy new character-a clown as the facilitator.

The Entertainment Ministry

In planning and conducting an entertainment ministry, it is essential that the emphasis is on ministry and not on entertainment. Keep in mind that the religious clown is there in the name of Christ, loving and caring. Without this as his motive, he becomes just as sounding brass.

To minister through entertainment requires continual review of the purpose of each entertaining activity. Why is this activity being conducted in this way, in this place, and at this time? In what way does it enrich the lives of the audience? It will help to remember always that the basic purpose of the historical clown was to bring happiness and joy.

There was a purpose in discussing the historical and theological aspects of clowning first because there is a need to understand the reason one wants to begin or join a clown ministry. Without this understanding and a conviction, that clowning is a valid way to worship and serve Christ, clown ministry could become just another clown wandering around shaking hands and acting the fool.

How, then, does one actually become a clown?

Getting the act together

After one decides in what direction this clown ministry will go, the next decision will be to develop the clown character. Costume and makeup alone do not give character to the clown; there is still a person underneath who is communicating verbally or nonverbally through the clown.

The character will develop either the worship or entertainment aspects of the routines according to the purpose and direction of one's own clown ministry. It is even possible that different characters will develop, depending on the variety of ways one will use the clown.

There are several aids that will contribute to the program and activities of clown ministry. These are costuming, makeup, props, balloons, illusions (illustrations), and music. How do you put this all together to produce a total program for the church clown ministry?

Costuming

Start with the idea to under-dress rather than over-dress and forget any stereotyped ideas you may have about how an authentic clown should look.

First, look around the house for oversized and ill-matched pieces of clothing. Try on bright patterned shirts, old pants, out-of-style ties and hats, old shoes, and gloves. If you have an old wig, try it on for effect. While we often think of a clown as having curly hair, a straight wig might give just the effect you want. Hold up oversized trousers with suspenders, or a rope. Plan the costume so that no skin is exposed. Do not attempt, at the first try, to put together the costume you expect to live with forever. As your character develops, your costume might need to change. Goodwill, Salvation Army, and other thrift stores are treasure houses for costuming clowns.

Makeup

Each clown's face is a unique image belonging to the wearer. Therefore, it should be created to be comfortable and should be an outgrowth of the clown personality one wishes to show. While there are standard steps in applying clown makeup, you can become completely overwhelmed when reading directions for applying it. However, after a little practice you can easily master the basic technique until it becomes quite simple.

What do you need?

The following list is basic: Clown white greasepaint; colored liners (stick or soft) in black, red, and blue (optional); small makeup brushes for soft liners; powder, with puff or powder-filled sock; soft baby brush or shaving brush; wet sponge or spray bottle; tissues; and baby oil

How to:

- (1) Clean face with cotton soaked with alcohol or witch hazel, or a towelette, to remove any oily residue.
- (2) Outline major features of the clown face with black eyebrow pencil or black china-marking pencil.
- (3) Leaving areas outlined in step 2, cover face with a thin coat of white greasepaint. Apply sparingly to just cover the face. Avoid the tendency to use too much white. Pat with fingers to achieve a smooth, even look.
- (4) Powder over entire face to set the makeup.
- (5) Brush excess powder from face using the soft baby brush or shaving brush;

- (6) Blot face all over with wet sponge, or gently spray with water, using a very fine mist. If using mist, blot with a tissue. The water will set the powder.
- (7) Using lining stick or soft liner and brush, fill in area outlined in step 2.
- (8) Powder and brush excess and set with water after each color is applied. Keep features small at first. You can change, enlarge, or even decrease features as you gain experience.
- (9) Add a wig, hat, and costume.
- (10) Use baby oil to remove makeup.

Quicker method: If your program requires that you makeup and dress in front of the audience, the use of pancake white makeup will greatly speed up the process. With this method you will need: makeup, sponge, and a small container of water.

How to:

- (1) Wipe face with towelette.
- (2) Apply clown white pancake with wet sponge, and fan to dry. This method used no powder.
- (3) Apply features in color using either stick or soft line. Stick liner is quicker.
- (4) Add wig and costume.

If you are using background music, the time to makeup and dress should require about 5-7 minutes-or the time of two recorded songs. Applying makeup and dressing before the audience can aid in the mental transition from you to the clown.

Props

Props are various objects used to help tell the story. They can range from a large feather to tickle, to an elaborate devise to illustrate a point, to get attention, or make a religious application. Some can be found around the house, while others are made or are purchased in toy or magic shops.

A word about magic. It is better to use the word illusion or illustration to describe this aspect of the entertainment ministry. This avoids any negative attitudes that might arise in people's minds. Some useful props are: feathers, feather duster to dust furniture or shoes, a changing bag in which you place in one thing and out comes another, a wilting flower, love balloons, chocolate candy kisses, pencil balloons for animals, large canvas bags, multiplying balls, silk scarves, ropes, flash paper, etc. When pantomiming, "God Gave the Song," a broom is used to sweep the floor, it then becomes a baby, a balancing stick, a gun, and finally a cross.

Programs

In earlier sections, we discussed the worship aspects of clowning. This could be accomplished by using various props to from which to build a Christ-centered object lesson or to lead the audience in meditation or worship. Whichever ultimate purpose you have, there should be a theme on which to build to a climax. If you are a talking clown, keep the message simple in order to give the audience maximum opportunity to use their imagination in discovering the message. If you are a silent clown, pantomime will be used to convey the message.

Music can play an important part in creating a mood, as background, for singing, or to help tell the story. It can either be carefully selected to coincide with the development of the theme, or just provide a background. Easy-listening, secular, as well as religious music can

be used effectively. Often, the listener will attach significance to the selection of music even though you did not have any objective other than just mood music in mind when the program was put together. If you listen to the easy listening FM stations, listen to the words and jot down the names of those songs which have some possibility.

Let me give you an example of this. The theme song from the movie *The Rose* was high on the popularity list of teens during the summer of 1980. At a retreat that year, the youth had an hour of celebration each morning, which was devoted to singing, announcements, a little joking and meditation. "Mission to the World" was the program on the last day. A silent clown gave a sermon to send the group away supercharged-with a zeal for missions to the world. Three songs were selected to do this: "Share His Love," "The Rose," and "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand." "The Rose" was to be used as the sermon. The words of this song tell how people describe love-it being fluid, changing, cutting, but, in reality, hidden in each of us ready to burst forth like the rose. With this as the central idea, the clown entered and sat on the front of the stage. Through pantomime he indicated for the group to turn to the hymn, "Share His Love," and sing. Immediately following this song, the sermon was given in pantomime to "The Rose." When the song ended, the clown revealed a hidden rose. For the benediction, the group held hands and sang, "Reach Out and Take Somebody's Hand." The program was-we were asked to share His love, we are the source, and it should be done by reaching out and touching somebody.

Conclusion

Does an understanding of the historical clown, the clown's role in theology, its funny face and clothes, and its actions make a clown? It has been said that another ingredient is also important. That is, practice, practice, and practice.

Think of your clown as an extension of your own personality with the capability of growing and changing as the inner person gains new understanding of his or her mission as a fool for Christ's sake.

Endnotes:

1. Toby Sanders. *The Compete Clown*. (New York; Stein and Day, 1978).
2. Floyd Shaffer. *God Loves Clowns*, 1981, Clown, Mime, Puppet and Dance Ministry Workshop Notebook.
3. Patrick Forbes. *Gospel Fools*. Clown, Mime, Puppet and Dance Ministry Workshop notebook 1981.
4. Margie Brown. *Clowning and Taboos*.
5. Patrick Forbes. *Gospel Fools*.
6. Dr. Thomas Niccolls. *The Praise of Folly* (1)
7. "The Mark of the Clown" *Activity and Discussion Guide*. Mass Media Ministries, 2116 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218.

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