

# Religious comics pray to find joy in living

By David Briggs  
The Associated Press

Take 60 dour-faced Presbyterians, then have them touch their knees and toes together, stick their tongues out and sway back and forth, all the while warbling "Singing in the Rain."

It's all in a day's fun — er, work — for Sister Mary Christelle McAluso, who earlier this month inducted 4,000 people into the so-called Order of the Fun Nun at a national conference of religious educators.

Their initiation was to recite "Mary Had A Little Lamb" with their right index fingers on the nose of the person to their right and their left index fingers on the nose of the person on the other side.

As you might guess from her tactics, religious comics like McAluso, who bills herself as "The Fun Nun," are a different breed. They eschew the staples of some contemporary comedians — cruelty, profanity and cyni-

cism — in favor of a brand of humor that encourages people to find joy in the human condition, laughing with, and not at, each other.

Religious comedy is not their job: It is a vocation.

In McAluso's theological world view, God is unfathomable love. When she helps another person feel better, she says, she receives a joy beyond human understanding.

It doesn't matter if it's 60 people at a small church or 4,000 people at the national conference in Anaheim, Calif., says McAluso, a Sister of Mercy at the College of St. Mary in Omaha.

"If I've been able to make one other human being smile," she says, "my life on this Earth has been well-rewarded."

Liz Curtis Higgs slept with more men than she could count, and used alcohol and drugs with abandon during her "lost decade," starting at age 17, before she made a commitment to Christianity.

Since that day in 1982, coffee has been her strongest stimulant, and she is happily married with two children.

That she changed her life around wasn't the surprising part. What she didn't realize, she says, is that being religious could be so much fun.

"I think the Lord gave me a sense of joy again and a purpose, and that helped me laugh more," says Higgs, a comic writer and speaker based in Louisville, Ky. "When you clean out a lot of areas of your life, your laughter can be a lot more genuine, and not a cover-up."

In her frank book, "One Size Fits All and Other Fables," Higgs holds little back as she talks about the dieting roller coaster she climbed onto at age 10 and the related problems of self-esteem that led her to seek affirmation in casual sex and alcohol abuse.

"I really felt like I lost my sense of humor. Life wasn't fun for me. I really began to get depressed," she says.

Today, the comedian from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

is an unapologetic size 22 who bills herself as "a big, beautiful woman in a narrow, nervous world."

With her belief in the resurrection of Jesus, Higgs says she takes her attitude toward life from the 31st chapter of the Book of Proverbs: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come."

A sense of humor has never been more critical for clergy, says the Rev. Ronald Weinelt, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Rincon, Ga.

Low pay and long hours are two traditions churches have clung to when other barriers fell. There are also the added indignities of being broadly tarred with the brush of sex-abuse scandals and being placed under greater pressure to attract new members in a weak economy.

Add the natural tendency of clergy to sacrifice their lives for others and of congregations and denominational leaders to encourage workaholicism, and being a minister has turned into a

"brutal occupation," Weinelt says.

"Instead of getting strokes," he says, "we're getting kicked in the you-know-what for trying so hard."

The son of an alcoholic, Weinelt says he had to make a choice whether to rage in self-pity at the extraordinary demands placed on clergy or "look at myself and say how silly and funny it is."

His response was to form the Association of Battered Clergy, a support group that offers broad doses of humor to help the healers help themselves.

The association's newsletter, The Parish Chute, dispenses advice on topics ranging from the politically correct way to refer to a eunuch — "gonadically impaired person" — to ecclesiastical oxymorons such as "yuppie pastor."

If some of the humor has a hard edge ... well, that's life, he says. And it helps relieve the stress.

"There's no way I would be able to survive it," Weinelt says, "if I wasn't able to laugh at what happens."

# Indoor skating rink may be constructed in south Lincoln

By Melanie Brandert  
Staff Reporter

The newly formed UNL Hockey Club may be able to practice closer to home if a proposed indoor ice rink in south Lincoln becomes a reality.

Brad Ellis, vice president of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Hockey Club, said club members had to travel to Omaha to play hockey because there were no facilities in Lincoln.

A new rink in Lincoln would cut down on the time spent commuting, Ellis said. It also would generate more interest in the club because members could skate year-round.

Brian Knutson, secretary of the UNL Hockey Club, said he had talked to people who had attended and enjoyed Omaha Lancers hockey games and were interested in seeing hockey in Lincoln.

Hockey players and fans aren't the

only ones hoping to get an indoor ice rink in Lincoln.

Penny Rinehart, a junior Spanish major, said she just started to skate this winter and skated at either Holmes Lake or Oak Lake if it was cold enough.

"It would definitely be used by a lot of people that I know of — hockey players and ice skaters," she said. "I'd be there all the time."

Mark Claydon, a real estate broker, has made a proposal for an indoor ice rink that would cover about 35,000 square feet and contain a 85-foot-by-200-foot ice surface with hockey boards. The proposed rink would be constructed in the west portion of Peterson Park at Highway 2 and Southwood Drive.

Claydon said he realized Lincoln needed and could support an ice rink because of the massive growth of indoor ice sports brought about by the

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—Claydon  
Real estate broker

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Olympics. He also said the facilities in Omaha were filled to capacity, and he reasoned that the demand there would overflow to Lincoln.

He has ordered a feasibility study and a business plan.

Claydon said the rink would be open and accessible to people of all ages. He anticipated scheduled ice times would be available for those

who want to book the ice for hockey or ice skating. Figure skating lessons, learn-to-skate programs and open public skating also could be available.

"It's a high-quality, pleasing environment where the community could assemble and enjoy athletic recreational activities at no cost to the taxpayers of Lincoln," he said.

Rates for reserving the ice have not yet been set, Claydon said, but would be kept as low possible. The rink's hours also have not been determined, but he said he would like it to be open from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m.

He said the construction of the rink would improve the variety of recreation in Lincoln by making ice sports available year-round. The sports won't be at the mercy of the weather, he said.

Claydon also said it would be a high-quality place where figure skaters and speed skaters could train.

"We may have Dan Jansens and Bonnie Blairs in Lincoln and not know

it until we get this rink built," he said.

Claydon has not yet met with the City Council about the proposal. However, he met with Lincoln Mayor Mike Johanns and presented the preliminary results of the study.

He said the mayor gave his full support for the rink.

Claydon said Johanns did not find any fault with the preliminary results of the feasibility study and thought it was thorough and accurate.

He said the mayor was impressed with the effort put into the project over the past 12 to 18 months. He said Johanns made positive comments that the city of Lincoln would have a nice rink.

The next step for Claydon is to find investors and owners for the rink.

"We've laid the groundwork and the legwork for Lincoln to have this rink," he said. "The next step is to find investors and talk to potential owners."

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