

Laughing All the Way to Heaven



KIM STRONG

LAUGHING ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN

By the Reverend Dr. Kim Strong

South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press



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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to the many family members, friends and church members who made me laugh, cry, or ponder life in the last sixty-seven years. You have given me a plethora of thoughts and ideas, which resulted in this book. You also enriched my life immensely.

I also would like to dedicate this book to the love of my life, my wife, Margo. She often told folks, “He thinks he is a comedian.” I suppose now we will find out if it is true.

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Preface

Let me begin by thanking you for taking the time to pick up this book. If you are looking for a book that offers deep theological insights, this isn't it. The words justification, sanctification, and incarnation are not anywhere to be found in my book. I looked twice to make sure.

Instead, I prefer to talk about the things that happened to, and with, me as I travel the road to heaven laughing all the way. The first sixteen years of my life I attended a church where humor was not found. You were told every Sunday that Jonathan Edwards was right: God is holding your very soul in his hand, ready to happily send your sinning soul to hell. There is nothing there to laugh about.

I was blessed to find out that God loved me even when I am not lovely. As a Christian we should be the happiest, most joyous people on earth. We should be laughing all the way to heaven because of God's unending grace.

The stories I am sharing in this book are my life stories as a minister with forty-five years of experience. The names have been mostly changed to protect the innocent. Through the mountaintops and the valleys of life, I found laughter helped calm my soul.

When I was in high school at James F. Byrnes High School in Duncan, South Carolina, I was the wisecracker in class. I had a biology teacher who didn't like me interrupting her lectures with comments.

She asked me one day, "Mr. Strong, do you stay up at night thinking of funny things to say in my class?"

My answer just rolled off my tongue, "No, ma'am, they just come right to me."

That was the day I realized I wouldn't be a brain surgeon.

Despite the best advice of my teachers in seminary, I try to bring out all the

emotions I can that are appropriate in church during a sermon. If I made you laugh several times and tear up once or twice, my job was done.

I would like to thank my wife, Margo, for making someone else's house a home and for listening to the same sermons for forty-five years. Through being together through a flood, a house fire, a tornado, numerous hurricanes, and raising two teenaged boys, we learned it's better to laugh than to cry.

I would like to thank the thousands of church members I've had who gave me great material and whose own life stories were testimonies of the power of forgiveness and love that Christ offers. I particularly want to thank the dozens of people who said, "You need to write a book." I hope you still feel that way after you read it!

God has a plan for our lives, and I think his intention for us is to laugh all the way to heaven. I hope you will join me.

—*Kim Strong, March 2024*

Introduction

As a pastor, I try to use humor in my sermons. Sometimes they were downright funny. Other times they were funny, but not on purpose. My wife often tells folks, “He thinks he’s a comedian.” I found the ministers who can’t laugh at themselves and the foibles of life are usually not in the ministry long.

The following is a story about a church that takes laughter to another level. I hope it evokes a chuckle or two from you.

Newsweek magazine published an article not too long ago titled “Giggles for God.” The story was about a new theological movement that started in Toronto, Canada. Six nights a week, a church there opens its doors to any who will come to share in a time of laughter. No jokes are told, or anecdotes shared. They found that laughter by itself was contagious. A few people would start laughing, and soon the entire church was literally rolling in the aisles. More than one hundred thousand people and seven thousand members of the clergy have visited this church to learn the process and carry it back to their home churches around the world.

Perhaps you have the same thought I had: those Canadians sure are strange people! As I read the article, however, I began to see the biblical background and significance of what laughter is supposed to be for a Christian. If a Christian cannot be joyful and learn to laugh, who can? We are the only ones who should always have something to laugh about.

Dr. Charles Barrett was a retired professor of religion from Wofford College. He taught a course in college on the humor of Christ. Jesus was not exactly an early version of Johnny Carson, but he spoke in terms and used illustrations that were downright humorous to his listeners. Imagine a camel going through the eye of a needle. That was funny stuff to the people of first-century Palestine.

Is there anything more humorous than watching a pew full of people trying to stifle the giggles in the middle of a church service? How about at a funeral service? Weddings are notorious for the many funny things that can go wrong. I remember one groom at a service I was conducting who could not repeat his vows. I kept telling him what to repeat, and he kept messing it up. I finally gave him the *Book of Worship*, pointed to the page, and asked him to start reading the highlighted words. The bride thought it was funny, but her mother was not amused.

There are enzymes the doctors say are released into your system only through laughter. God has wired us in such a way that we can only function at 100 percent of our potential when we laugh. It's only natural, then, that church would be a place where people go to share joy and laughter as well as tears and fears.

Another professor I had at Wofford, Dr. John Bullard, often told us to never do two things as a minister. We were never supposed to go on *Jeopardy* and try to answer religious or biblical questions, and we were never supposed to try to tell a joke in a sermon. The irony in those two statements was not lost on me.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was an Anglican minister who had a muted sense of humor. Now the largest Anglican church in London often has more than two thousand people cram into their old sanctuary for a "laughing service" on a Sunday night.

Job wrote that "God will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy." If Job could find something to laugh about, surely we can find some humor in our own situations in life.

So, the next time something funny happens in church, don't try to stifle your laugh. That's bad for your sinuses, anyway. Let it roll. Laugh out loud. Laugh till you cry.

I am sure laughter brings a smile to our creator's lips and a snarl to our tormentors.

Chapter 1

How I Became a Character

In The United Methodist Church when a ministerial move is in the works, the prospective church and pastor have what is called an introductory visit. This sometimes becomes a high-pressure event where the church members and the pastor and family look each other over and decide if this is a marriage made in heaven or one made somewhere else.

The minister tells the church a little bit about themselves and their achievements, and the church tells the prospective pastor what they are looking for in their next minister.

The role of the superintendent is to act as a facilitator, making sure things stay on an even keel and no embarrassing questions are asked. An example of such a question could be, “Pastor we see your church was averaging two hundred in service before you came and seventy-five now. To what would you attribute this?”

The pastor could possibly retort that the Asian flu was particularly bad last year, and he had one hundred twenty-five funerals.

He then could ask the church, “I see where you have not had anyone join the church for the last six years. I was wondering why?”

The reply from the church could be to blame the evangelism committee and the sermons of the last minister.

The superintendent’s job is to avoid such questions at all costs.

A few years ago during an introductory visit, we all sat down and broke bread together. In the midst of the conversation, the superintendent pointed out that the last two ministers they had were certainly a couple of characters. She then told the committee she knew I would feel at home here and I would fit right in.

I was not amused. A character? Moi? Why in the world would she think such a thing about me? What have I done to be lumped into such an undistinguished category?

I thought about this long and hard and came up with some possible answers. First, it could be the beard. I have worn facial hair since I was twelve. Even if it got a little boost from my mother's eyebrow brush, I had a moustache. In the words of the late George Carlin, "See my beard, ain't it weird, don't be scared, it's just a beard."

I had worn my hair a little long when I was younger. Maybe it was my appearance when I was a young man.

I got the minister's book off the shelf and started to look at my fellow colleagues. Some of their pictures were downright scary. Next to some of them I look like a card-carrying member of the Republican Rules Committee. Maybe that wasn't it.

Maybe she was placing me in the club because of some of my well-known hobbies. I ride a motorcycle. Not just a motorcycle, a Harley-Davidson. I like to ride down the road with my gray hair flowing in the wind and bugs bouncing off my teeth. I have a Harley-Davidson tattoo on my right shoulder. A simple H-D. My wife says it stands for a hundred dollars, which is the least amount I have ever spent in a Harley store on a shopping trip.

Maybe she heard about me playing guitar in a rock band called the Purpatrators. The lead guitar player was a church member who served on the church board and recruited me to play. We played oldies stuff from the seventies on Saturday night and in the church praise band on Sunday morning.

Maybe it was because of the athletics I was involved in over the years. I coached sporting teams for several recreational organizations and officiated high school basketball for more than sixteen years. Putting on a striped shirt and calling a game in front of several hundred angry, jeering fans was great preparation for a career in the ministry.

I have arrived at the conclusion that I am considered a character because of the things I have not done. I never became stuffy or out of touch with real life. I've never adopted one personality in the pulpit and one outside the pulpit. I am what I am, for better or worse.

I never became cliquish, running with the in crowd to become politically viable in the conference of the church. My folks were the ones who sat in the top row of the auditorium during conference reading a book or catching up on the news with old friends.

I am not a prodigy. My grandfather or father were not United Methodist ministers and had no coattails upon which I could ride in my career. My father preached, but only to Mom and me and whoever else was within earshot when the news came on at night.

I am a character and proud of it. I don't look or sound like most other ministers. I go my own way, dress to suit me, live in the real world, and like it. Just like God intended.

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Chapter 2

Never Follow a Rental Truck Too Closely

Author's note: In forty-five years of ministry, my wife and I have moved fourteen times. We once moved three times while pastoring the same church. We found that liquor store boxes were the best boxes to move in. They're sturdy, come with inserts, and best of all, they are free. They also give you a good excuse should a parishioner see your car parked in front of a liquor store. I wrote this story after a difficult move having said goodbye to folks we spent seven great years with. I hope it explains why you should never follow a rental truck too closely.

The United Methodist Church has a most unique system of supplying their churches with pastoral leadership. After several months of secretive meetings, pastors and churches are informed around April 1 of where their new assignments will be and who their pastor will be. After a short introductory visit to the new church, the pastor and their family return home to pack up their worldly belongings.

Moving day for every pastor moving is the last Wednesday in June. The minister must be out of their old house by noon and in their new house by nightfall. In just a few short hours, they leave behind the life they have known for four, five, or more years and start all over in a new place with new people, a new house, and a new church.

There is something freeing about leaving some places. You can pack up all your troubles and leave them behind in a trail of dust. Whatever, or whoever, was driving you crazy in your last church is gone forever. Your ministerial slate, both good and bad, is wiped clean. All the goodwill and trust you built in your last church has to be earned again in your new home. The folks you won't miss are left behind, but they have a way of showing up in your new

church in different bodies.

Packing up all you own is a cathartic event. You must decide what is really important to you, what you want to keep, and what you can't live without. We usually find at least one box that we never opened after moving the last time. Boxes marked "mementos" and "keepsakes" are safely and securely placed on the truck each move, or they ride snugly in the trunk of your car where you keep your valuables.

Moving day is a time of bittersweet memories and heart-racing anticipation. As I have grown older, moving has become less exciting and more laborious. I have followed seven ministers who were retiring on moving day. They usually started the moving process months before and just gently slid into retirement on moving day.

Saying goodbye has become harder as I have aged in time and ministry. I have learned that the friends we were going to stay in touch with have faded from memory or gone to be with Jesus. Despite good intentions, friendships are never as close or as lasting. New friendships are formed, bonds forged, and memories made.

Through this process I have learned to never follow a rental truck too closely. Chances are it is being driven by a person who has just said goodbye to one part of their life and is in the process of starting over somewhere new. They are driving a strange vehicle down the road alternating between tears and a smile, between yesterday and tomorrow.

We are never sure of how many moving days we will have in life. We all are assured of at least one more when we slide into eternal life. Life is what happens between those moving days, not the anticipation of the next moving day.

The secret is to be ready to meet your mover when your moving day comes.



About the Author

The Reverend Dr. Kim Strong is a native of Duncan, South Carolina, and a child of the late Elbert and Ruby Strong. He and his wife, Margo, have been married for forty-four years and have two sons, Matthew and Jonathon, and five grandchildren, Andrew, Kylee, Jonathan, Jacob, and Carolina.

Strong attended James F. Byrnes High School, Wofford College, The Candler School of Theology, and Erskine Theological Seminary. He did post-graduate work at the Harvard Divinity School, The Universidad de Valencia, and the Berklee School of Music. He has served appointments in the South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church since 1979.

Strong also served as a military chaplain in the United States Air Force Reserve from 1987-1994, leaving service as a captain. He served on active duty during the first Persian Gulf War.

Strong has written numerous articles for the *South Carolina United Methodist Advocate* and has written an Easter musical, "Are You the King of the Jews?", which has been performed in many churches. He has also written more than fifty songs, some of which he can remember without the words.