

# PRAC 11

**CROSSOVER**

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# From the Interim Director

## Have you heard the one about...

In this issue of PRAC we look at the place of humour in missional engagement. As Christians in Australia, we are trying to connect with people amidst a culture renowned worldwide for its humour and yet who often see Christians as humourless. Someone who encounters Christ should exhibit a radiance and joy that contradicts this perception. If we are applying ourselves to contextual evangelism in a culture that appreciates humour, we need to engage our funny bone. I hope you 'enjoy' this issue.

## National Church Life Survey, September - November 2011

We are blessed to have the opportunity to participate in and learn from the National Church Life Survey, the largest sample size research into churches anywhere in the world. This year, Crossover has worked in conjunction with State Baptist Unions to enable as many churches as possible to participate. We also sponsored an additional ten questions exploring missional issues. This year sees the biggest participation ever by Baptist churches. The results of the survey will help the churches in our movement to review their current missional engagement and plan future engagement with a greater degree of information and perspective.

Crossover is keen to help churches understand their results and apply it to the practice and planning of missional engagement. It is a great tragedy that critical intelligence like this often ends up in a filing cabinet. It's important that the information is interpreted and that the potential of each church can be understood, according to its particular demographics and circumstances. We look forward to working closely with churches in 2012 in this regard.

## Stan Fetting

Interim Director  
Crossover Australia



# Stop Press

Our latest iDeas DVD is arriving soon. This edition explores the topic of church planting through an examination of four church plants in totally different contexts around Australia. Our movement of churches is seeing creative and contextual church planting, is taking advantage of new opportunities and is well supported by our State Unions. This video shows just a small slice and puts out a challenge for churches to think about their response.

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# WHY YOU NEED TO BE FUNNY... SERIOUSLY

By Andrew Turner

It's hard to be funny under pressure. Hey, it's hard enough for some of us to be funny at all. But, as this helpful little column will tell you, you absolutely must be funny if you are to reach Australians at all. Must. Or there's no hope for you. You'll need to minister in some other country like Switzerland or Canberra.

So, no pressure.

There are three big reasons why humour plays an important part in reaching Australians, four of which I'll outline here:

**It's disarming.** Many Aussies are increasingly guarded against Christianity. They expect us to be Pharisees, though they use might other terms. One church I heard of recently created a sign that read *Smithfield Baptist Church: Surprisingly Uncreepy*. If you ask me, that beats *Because You're Going To Die One Day* hands down. Wish we'd thought of it before all that printing. There's something about humour that allows us all to let our guard down. When you make someone laugh, you're a friend, not an enemy.

**It's interesting.** So many Australians live lives of desperate boredom: tuning out from the millions of banal messages they are bombarded with daily, even scanning the pages of PRAC magazine for a half-decent read. (That bit was just to see if it gets past the editor.) *Editor's note: Of course it didn't, but I'll let it go for the sake of good humour.*

In an age where the medium is the message, presenting the gospel like it's a university lecture won't do. We intuitively do this in children's ministry and make it fun, but we forget that an adult's attention span isn't all that much greater. We're just better at pretending to look interested!

**It's absurd.** When you're filling the bathtub with custard, it's hard to keep the camels from escaping. Just think about that.

**It brings perspective.** All good jokes (so I'm told) start off as serious stories, and have a surprising ending that suddenly puts the rest of the story in a new perspective. This is precisely what the gospel does. Even in these increasingly dark and worrying times, Christians should have a twinkle in their eye that says, like the Dread Pirate Roberts in *The Princess Bride*, "I know something you don't know." We know the ending is different to what

people expect. The gospel brings joyful laughter to people who have found riches only when they struck rock bottom, and people who won a prize only when they stopped striving for it.

Humour in hard times can be like rain in a desert. Eric Love and I wrote this song, promoting what we call 'The Christian Swear Word', for times like that:

*When your hammer slips and lands on the wrong nail  
When you try to catch the final bus and fail  
When your washing is exported by a gale  
When you do your best, but all to no avail*

*When it all seems too much and you just want to weep  
And you don't know whether you're Arthur or Martha  
Don't say 'crikey' or 'blimey' or 'bother' or (BEEP)  
There's a better word for it- say Maranatha\**

*In the nightly news a litany of woe  
And there's nowhere in the world that's safe to go  
When disaster lands the poor a further blow  
And relief is far too distant and too slow*

*When it all seems too much and you just want to weep  
And you don't know whether you're Arthur or Martha  
Don't say 'crikey' or 'blimey' or 'bother' or (BEEP)  
There's a better word for it- say Maranatha*

*When the Lord says He's preparing us a place  
And a day when we will see Him face to face  
And reward for those who persevere with grace  
Be assured, it's not just talk, but it's the case*

*When it all seems too much and you just want to weep  
And you don't know whether you're Arthur or Martha  
Don't say 'crikey' or 'blimey' or 'bother' or (BEEP)  
There's a better word for it - say Maranatha*

\*Maranatha means 'Come Lord Jesus'

But as I say, it's hard to be funny under pressure, week by week. It can't be cranked out. It's the fruit borne naturally from deep roots of peace and joy in our wonderful, outrageous, hilarious God, who loves Aussies and whom Aussies will love.

**Andrew Turner is the Church Development Facilitator for the Baptist Churches of SA. His blog Sacred Agents ([sacredagents.net](http://sacredagents.net)) is worth a read, or you can follow him on Twitter (@\_Andrew\_Turner).**

"Some people think it's difficult to be a Christian and to laugh, but I think it's the other way around. God writes a lot of comedy; it's just that he has so many bad actors."

- Garrison Keillor

The nicest thing that has ever been said about my spirituality was in my first year as a Christian. A friend said, "I can see Jesus in your laughter." And it was true. Encountering Jesus at a time when I had wanted to end my life had a revolutionary effect on me. I was filled with hope and my mourning was replaced with joy. I was subsequently an extremely happy young man. I laughed a lot and made others laugh too.

Many things have since been said about my spirituality, none of them quite as complimentary (an occupational hazard of pastors). More to the point, nobody has since connected laughter to my spirituality.

Things got pretty serious soon after that compliment was paid. I was pressured into getting rid of my music collection, advised to turn off "secular" radio and the process of becoming a seriously committed evangelical through retreating from "the world" began. The little humour left in me was then hammered out during my time in Bible College, where we wore a collar and tie to lectures because this "denoted an attitude of seriousness" when it came to preparing for ministry.

My subsequent experiences as a pastor have underlined the seriousness of church life. I have endured conflict on anything from Constitutional changes through to the replacement of pews with chairs, and a memorable battle to install air conditioning in the tropics. I have seen people traumatised by their experiences in church and I have been traumatised myself. From this perspective, the Gospel is no laughing matter. The typical caricature of Christians as a humourless and severe people is partly true. This perception that we are collectively a judgemental and joyless bunch presents a significant stumbling block to many Australians even considering Jesus as an option. This is despite the large portion of the population who have a spiritual yearning. The spiritual openness of many Australians does not extend to considering the claims of Christ, and Christians shoulder at least some of the responsibility for this massive bypass of the church. Consider the churches just in our movement alone who have split or are in turmoil. Consider the issues over which we find ourselves in conflict and often divide.

### Will the real Jesus please stand up?

Could it be that in turn our perception of who Jesus is informs a large part of the joylessness we often encounter in the church? A number of years ago I was confronted by a book I read by Michael Frost entitled *Jesus The Fool*. In the

book, Frost attempts to help us reframe Jesus and to see him in a new light. The Jesus of evangelicals could hardly be accused (as he was) of being a "drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:33-34).

"As imitators of Christ should we not reflect the Jesus we encounter in the gospels? Would those outside the church imagine in us the Jesus who performed his first miracle at a wedding in Cana saving the day when the wine ran out, the man who stopped to watch the lilies of the field swaying in the breeze, who laughed and played with children, who was criticised for enjoying himself too much, the enchanting storyteller who told parables that were often humorous, the orator with a satirical twist who saw logs when others pointed out splinters, the radical with a whip who dared call those who were trying to cash in, the jester who showed up the hollow logic of the Pharisees, the man who had no place to lay his head, the curious miracle worker who spat in the mud, the host to social lepers, the bridge builder to undesirables, the king who chose an ass for his grand entrance to Jerusalem, the man more at home with a saw than a sepulchre, the Saviour who died with a mocking sign above his head that was actually true?"

Frost relates the story of the legendary Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo who, as a young boy, decided to alter a painting of Jesus that he found too stilted. He recreated it into a new picture of Christ. "Upon their return home, the Murillos were aghast to see their Lord has been transformed. The stern, unflinching face now had a lively grin. His eyes were alive with mischief. The halo had become a battered straw hat and the plastered down hair had become tousled and unruly. His crook had been transformed into a gnarled walking stick and the limp and sad looking lamb at Jesus' feet was a now a troublesome puppy. The shepherd boy had become a lively and excited hiker in search of adventure."

Perhaps it is time we took the picture down off the wall and made changes to our own image of Jesus where it has become out of whack with the Gospels. I am convinced that often people equate becoming a Christian with adopting an approach to life they find very unattractive. I don't blame them. I became a Christian because I was willing to take a punt that when Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, life in all its fullness" (John 10:10) it was true. I became a Christian because I wanted to exchange my sadness for joy and my brokenness and bitterness for healing. Encountering Jesus put smile on my soul and my face.

### The Gospel as a laughing matter

A few years ago I found myself in charge of our annual Christmas Carols. Bereft of any other ideas I wrote a play that described the events of the Christmas story through the eyes of the fictional barman at the Bethlehem Inn and a local barfly who propped up the bar

every day. We had great fun with Mary and Joseph, especially when Joseph told us that his wife was pregnant but not to him, and then the revelation that it wasn't actually another bloke. We fell about when the shepherds turned up, and gave the wise men stick (yes I know they came later). I played the barman and my pastoral colleague played the barfly. Our cynical take on the events appeared to be aided by the drinking of more beer, but so did our willingness to explore the ramifications of the rather unbelievable story turning out to be true. There was no fairy tale happy ending, but the events did get us thinking, and asking the kind of questions you would hope the Christmas story poses. The feedback was interesting. A number of church members did not care at all for the script, for predictable reasons. However, the feedback from people who did not normally go to church and did not count themselves as believers was enthusiastic. Some communicated that they had not expected to come to church and laugh. Some expressed great surprise that the actors were pastors in real life. Most expected a traditional portrayal of the Christmas story, and many had simply come because their kids were performing in a choir.

It reinforced what I already knew to be true: that people who aren't Christians don't expect to laugh when they come to church. Many expect to be bored and to encounter humourless, judgemental people. When they find themselves laughing it changes everything. Having their preconceptions of Christians changed, they are then more open to comprehending the claims of Christ. Not having to become something they dislike opens up new possibilities.

The Gospel is no joke, but laughter is inextricably linked to salvation. The joy and happiness that come with our liberation from sin and the bestowal of hope and grace are direct outcomes of the Gospel. Churches can try and be funny if they want to be (and there's a lot to be said about humour), but the best laughter comes from a freed soul, a healed heart, and a hopeless person who has found hope in Christ. In this way, laughter can be an essential ingredient to our missional intent. We need to put aside those things within our church culture that are joy quenching, and learn to laugh again through Jesus. Then we may find a more receptive audience.

Quotes from *Jesus The Fool* used with permission.

*Jesus The Fool – The Mission Of The Unconventional Christ*

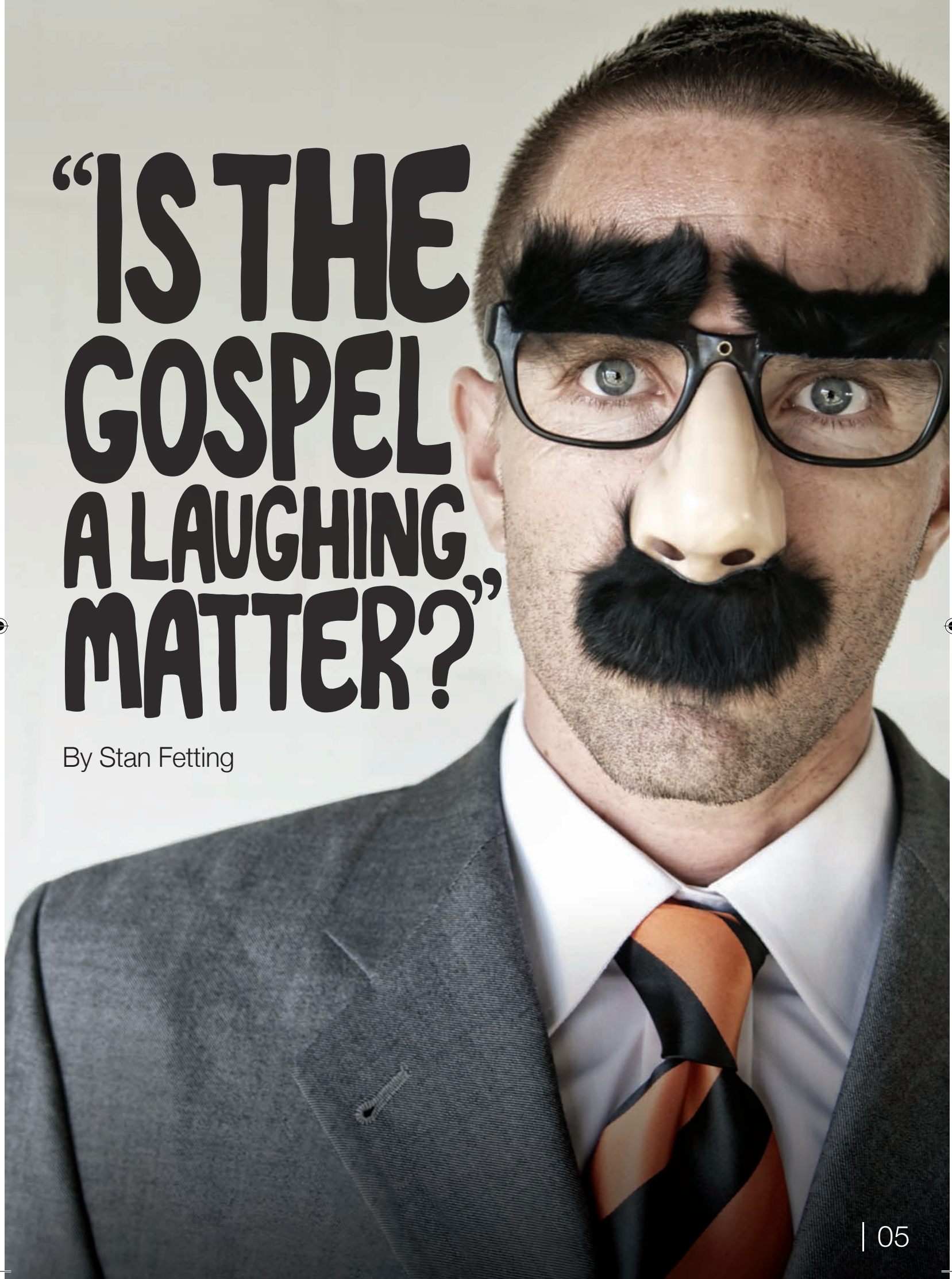
Urban Neighbours of Hope Publications  
Springvale, Australia 2007

Stan Fetting is Interim Director of Crossover. He used to be a really funny guy.



# “IS THE GOSPEL A LAUGHING MATTER?”

By Stan Fetting





# FINDING HUMOUR IN THE LITTLE THINGS

Interview with Peter and David Bissell - Professional Clowns

It's not often you meet a professional clown, let alone two, but for twins Peter and David Bissell, clowning is just a part of their extraordinary lives. Each diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis at birth, they've had more than their fair share of challenges to overcome. Recently, they sat down with PRAC to share some of what they've learnt about life and the importance of laughter.



### **Can you start by telling us a bit about yourself and the work you do?**

**Peter:** I've been married to Shirelle for 16 years and together we have a beautiful daughter who will turn three in November. I have been a professional clown entertaining kids and adults alike for 15 years. The majority of our work is performing at children's parties at the weekends. The adults enjoy us so much at their kids' parties that we get invited to clown at their parties as well. We also perform at corporate gigs, schools, fetes and donate our clowning to help charities such as Cerebral Palsy League and the Royal Children's Hospital.

**David:** I am married to Ilona Bissell and my occupation is a professional clown. Like Peter, I have been performing shows and entertaining children and adults for the last 15 years. My clown name is Dagwood and together we are Peebo and Dagwood.

### **You've both faced significant issues with your health over the years. Tell us a bit about what you've had to overcome.**

**Peter:** Both David and I were diagnosed at birth with the life threatening illness Cystic Fibrosis (CF). Living with this illness has certainly had its challenges. Over the past 20 years I have had nearly 100 admissions into hospital with the average stay in hospital lasting anywhere from 10 days to 3 weeks. As you get older, CF leads to damaged lungs through repeat chest infections and the only option becomes a double lung transplant. In early 2005 I was listed on the lung transplant list as my total lung capacity was below 20%. I was only on the list for 6 months when I got the phone call saying they had found a match for me. The operation to transplant the new lungs went well, but in recovery things started to go wrong. I had major setbacks post transplant that landed me in intensive care with a small chance of survival. After 14 weeks and a weight loss of 22 kilograms, I was finally discharged from hospital to commence my new life with my new lungs.

**David:** We turn 38 this year and that is a milestone in itself. We were born 8 weeks premature and the doctors didn't expect us to survive our first year – the first of many hurdles. Thirty-eight years ago not a lot was known about CF except that life expectancy was only 3 to 4 years. Doctors told our parents that there was a good chance we wouldn't live past childhood, but we did and we are still here today. In recent years we faced another huge hurdle as we got to the point when we needed a transplant to continue on in life. Yet another hurdle we had to face. But we had no other choice other than to keep going. In 2005, we both received lung transplants – first me in February and then Peebo in October. The greatest gift a person can receive is life and, for us, a second chance.

### **Your profession seems to contradict your health predicament. How do you make others laugh whilst facing such adversity?**

**Peter:** You have to put your own predicament to one side when focusing on making others laugh. I believe you need to make each day count. For someone like me, living with an illness only reminds me of the importance of this

each and every day. The motto we choose to live by is "Live Life, Love Life and Laugh." With this in mind, letting others forget their worries and problems through laughter is priceless. As we get older we tend to lose the child in us that laughs all the time. Clowning allows us the licence to make others laugh through our humour.

**David:** We find that laughter is the best medicine and making others laugh is a gift we both share. It's a win/win: we gain so much out of it and others do as well. As Peter said, our motto is to Live Life, Love Life & Laugh and we chose to do this every day of our lives. We believe having a positive attitude and zest for living not only helps us in our journey, but everybody around us. We know we live with a limited life expectancy every day. We don't know how long we have or what challenges may just be around the corner so we chose to make the most out of life and enjoy the time we do have. Life is not measured by quantity but rather by quality.

### **What are your observations about the effect of humour on people?**

**Peter:** Humour and laughter leaves you feeling a positive experience, a natural high without the help of any substance. When you laugh or know how to make others laugh, people are drawn to that. What I have learnt over the years is that memories of laughter stay with people for life.

**David:** Humour is great for people. When people laugh they feel good, and that filters through into other areas of their lives. You might be having a bad day but when you laugh it seems to override anything else you might be feeling.

### **Christians are widely perceived as being too serious or even humourless at times. How do you think churches can use humour to engage with people?**

**Peter:** We have performed our clown show in many church services over our years of clowning. We had a booking with one particular church to help with their Christmas carols each year. They mentioned to us their predicament of an aging church so we offered our services as clowns to help attract a younger audience to their morning service. Normally they got 40 to 50 people to the service but on the day we performed they had over 130 packed into this small church, mainly young folk with kids. They loved it.

**David:** Humour and laughter is usually associated with fun times and we all can remember those fun times in our lives. We have been invited on many occasions to appear at a church service and we have found it not only brings people along to the service, but the people seem to have lots of fun. It creates a family environment. Laughing and humour doesn't discriminate, that's the beauty of it: People of all ages, from infants through to the elderly, enjoy a good laugh.

### **Can you give us some trade secrets on how to crack a tough audience?**

**Peter:** I think you have to know your audience before each gig, as this will generally determine how you approach your show. Performing at

little Sally's 5th birthday with all of her friends is very different to performing at an aged care facility where your audience has trouble hearing, seeing and sometimes understanding you.

**David:** We have experienced some tough audiences along the way. To crack a tough audience you have to quickly get a good feel for who they are. Once you do that, you can start build a rapport with them. You must find out what makes people laugh and what doesn't and focus on the stuff that does. Not everyone has the same sense of humour. The other thing we have learnt is that you can't please everyone.

### **You make plenty of others laugh, what makes you laugh?**

**Peter:** People often ask me where we learnt how to clown and make others laugh and I tell them it was the "school of life." Our training comes from reading countless Mad and Far Side comics growing up and laughing at movies such as Police Academy and anything with Leslie Nelson in it.

**David:** What makes a clown laugh? Good question. We tend to make each other laugh a lot, in costume and not in costume. I have my favourite comedy shows and comedians and I find them enjoyable to watch.

### **Trying to be funny can often go horribly wrong. What advice would you give when it comes to injecting humour?**

**Peter:** My best advice is if you don't know how to laugh yourself or find humour in things then don't try and manufacture it. It has to come naturally and from within.

**David:** There are times when be funny is not appropriate for whatever reason. If you find yourself in that situation it's best not to persist with it, but rather pull back a bit. Knowing your environment, the people and when to be funny are the keys. Opportunities to be funny present themselves all the time, so my best advice is simply to take them when they come.



# A PLACE FOR THE POET IN CHURCH & EVANGELISM

By Emma Wyndham Chalmers

A few years ago now, I happened across a church blog entry entitled “poetry is not a luxury.” I recognised its title, borrowed from an essay by Caribbean-American writer, poet and activist Audre Lorde, and was immediately struck by a magazine article extract it contained entitled “How one justice-seeker was redeemed by beauty.”<sup>1</sup> As one who is equally passionate about working for social justice and the importance of art in culture and society, it was one of those serendipitous discoveries that gave voice to what I had been, until that point, unable to articulate. It read,

***“We can be so harsh and ascetic as we fling ourselves against the needs of the world. Art is accused of being bourgeois because much of the creation of art takes time and solitude and staring out the window. And how can we give ourselves permission to do that when people are starving and there is work to be done?”***

***I think of Judas bemoaning the fragrant ointment that could have been sold to feed hundreds of hungry people but instead is poured in that single lavish, revolutionary gesture onto the head of Jesus. He views the profligate gesture as sin, and feeding the poor as the only good.***

***I know that voice. It comes from my own lips. But if we always see only those who are starving, we will continually wander the desert of the frantically working and overwhelmed. What we need – desperately – is to not be overwhelmed. And the single thing that keeps us from being overwhelmed is imagination.”***<sup>2</sup>

While we might not claim to be poets or “arty” in some other obvious fashion, there are few people who could say that they had never been touched or moved by art of some description – a film, a piece of music, a psalm – and probably fewer who could say that they have never been overwhelmed by the task of bringing God’s light to the world’s dark places.

Enter the poet. More specifically, for the purposes of this article, enter Melbourne-based performance poet Cameron Semmens. I have seen Cameron perform a number of times in varied contexts, most recently at last year’s Micah Challenge Voices for Justice event in Canberra. Each time, I have been struck by his ability to take the situations, questions, and ponderings that are familiar to us all and reveal a new perspective and insight, along with the encouragement of fellowship in life’s journey. It is the gift of the artist and the power of art that gives voice and form to our universal experiences.

*Love Is The New Black*<sup>3</sup> is one of a number of books Cameron has published and contains a wonderful collection of poems and prayers based on and inspired by various Bible passages, including twenty-three versions of Psalm 23 and Christmas stories with a twist. The title poem is based on Colossians 3:12-14 and other inclusions include fresh explorations of familiar passages such as 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. I’m still trying to decide if my favourite is his succinct summary of “The Life and Death and Life of Christ” or his tongue-in-cheek ode to modern media, “A Current-er Prayer.”

23 x Psalm 23  
Christmas  
stories  
with a  
twist  
Poems  
Prayers

LOVE IS THE  
NEW BLACK

Cameron Semmens  
Illustrated by Paul Toms

Whether it’s used alongside the church service Bible reading, during a small group study, sharing with a friend, or in personal reflection, poetry such as this both wrestles with and illuminates the mystery our faith with humanity, wonder and humour. This is a fresh, articulate and insightful take on Scripture and matters of faith that will touch the hearts of people who have heard it all before as well as those who have never heard of it before. As we work hard amidst endless need and things to be done, we do well to allow a place for the poet to restore our vision and awaken our imagination.

Check it out at [www.webcameron.com](http://www.webcameron.com).

1. *Geez: Holy Mischief In An Age Of Fast Faith*, Issue 9, Spring 2008, pp 94 - 95  
[www.geezmagazine.org](http://www.geezmagazine.org).

2. *Geez: Holy Mischief In An Age Of Fast Faith*, Issue 9, Spring 2008, pp94 - 95  
[www.geezmagazine.org](http://www.geezmagazine.org).

3. *Love Is The New Black* by Cameron Semmens, [www.webcameron.com](http://www.webcameron.com).

**Among other things, Emma Wyndham Chalmers project manages the production of PRAC. She lives in Melbourne with her husband James and Gilbert, their labradoodle.**