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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

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Herb Miller

The Fun Factor Asset in Congregational Climate

Any meeting Charlie chairs is fun. People don't resent giving time to it. They enjoy the discussions. Afterward, they linger to chat. Why? Charlie's attitude and style creates a positive emotional climate.

Any meeting Andy chairs feels dreary. People attend reluctantly. They exit like rifle shots as it ends. Why? Andy's attitude and style creates a negative emotional climate.

As with every type of human group, every congregation possesses a distinctive emotional climate. Some churches are joyful places. Some are depressing. Some are angry and blaming. Why? The active laypersons and the pastor unconsciously set the congregation's emotional thermostat (sometimes *previous* lay leaders or pastors set the thermostat in ways that still exert influence).

Emotional climate is among the most influential causes of congregational effectiveness and vitality.

How Does a Fun Climate Foster Effectiveness?

Emotions are contagious. The emerging science of MRI brain research reveals that "mirror neurons" in our brain's amygdala make the feelings we witness in others flow through us—even when we don't want them to. When people around us display a strong emotion such as sadness, disgust, or joy, our facial muscles and internal feelings automatically start to mirror those feelings. Like a virus, people quickly catch emotional feelings from others in their group.

Even more dramatic research data reveals that when we feel chronically angered, depressed, or encouraged by people with whom we frequently spend time, the experience physiologically rewires our brain's neural circuitry! Our thinking patterns become similar to, and thus perpetuate, the emotional climate of individuals with whom we frequently associate.

Crowd contagion happens in the smallest of groups. When three people sit with one another in silence for a few minutes—in the absence of a power hierarchy—the person with the most emotionally expressive face sets the group's emotional climate. The other two people soon feel the same way she or he feels. Their shared feeling biases how each person processes new information and the decisions they prefer. (Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence* [New York: Random House, Inc. 2006])

What Are the Positive Results of a Fun Climate?

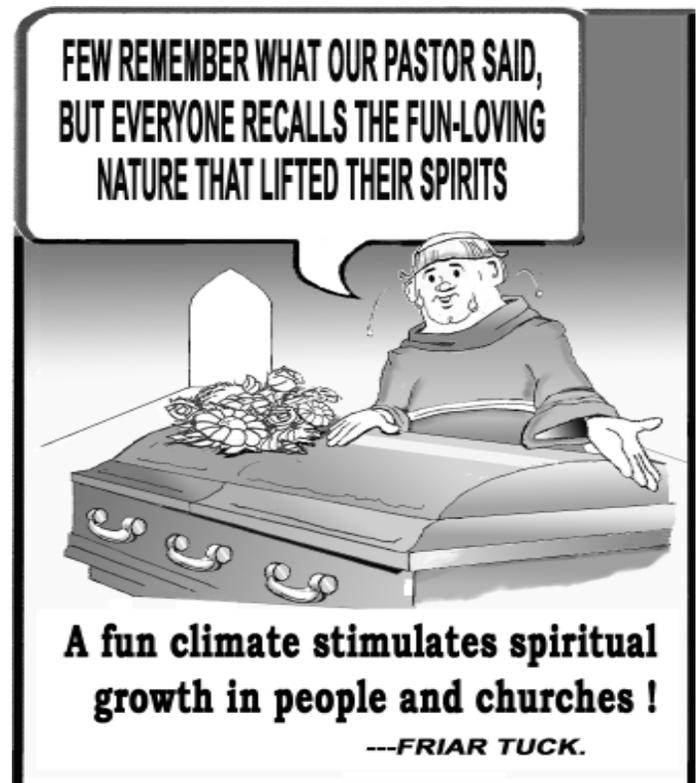
Congregations in which the fun factor dominates the emotional climate experience at least a dozen benefits:

1. *People feel better.* A fun climate stimulates the release of serotonin (95 percent of which is secreted in the digestive tract). Serotonin is the neurotransmitter that generates feelings of well-being in the brain.

2. *People feel closer.* Humor creates camaraderie. Laughter is often the shortest distance between two brains, infectiously spreading an instant social bond.

3. *People learn more.* Excellent schools are ones in which kids have fun. Remember the teacher from whom you learned the most? Was he or she sour or fun-loving?

4. *Better communication.* The percentage of humor required for effective communication differs across cultures and centuries—often influenced by how other important communication happens. In a TV-saturated culture, serious messages totally devoid of humor are often like the proverbial tree falling in an unpopulated forest.



5. *Increased motivation.* People not only pay more attention to a speaker; they more often read letters and show up at meetings.

6. *Receptivity to new ideas.* Smiles reduce resistance to unfamiliar concepts. The human brain prefers happy faces, an effect that neuroscientists call “the happy face advantage.” Why are people more receptive to leaders who possess charisma? Such individuals, especially if they have an effective sense of humor, quickly engage others into synchrony with their feelings and opinions.

7. *Greater creativity.* Why do humor and creativity often travel together? Both qualities tie two things together in a new way. A fun-permeated group gains a creativity advantage.

8. *Faster problem solving.* Capable facilitators often launch a brainstorming session with humor. Example: a business leader asks attendees to give their names, jobs, and one thing they might prefer to do instead of spending time in this meeting.

9. *Better teamwork.* Any time people share strong emotions—positive or negative—they become more energetic team members.

10. *Tension reducer.* A smile and humor buffers the pain of an inappropriate gaff by someone in the group. Fun doesn’t eliminate the disappointment or bad news, but it helps reconstitute a group’s good mood. Using humor to defuse a tense situation helps people regain perspective and stay cool under pressure.

11. *Fewer negative reactions.* Less negativity translates into more regular worship attendance, greater participation in various ministries, and less backdoor traffic toward inactive status or membership transfers.

12. *Transmits God’s love and acceptance.* One of the major ways churches transmit the gift of God’s love is through fun-filled social interactions. No, the gift and the wrapping paper are *not* identical! Humor cannot substitute for substance. Yet, for many people, the feel of a congregation’s social-interaction package influences their receptivity to the best gift on earth.

How Do We NOT Create a Fun Climate?

Everyone has witnessed inappropriate, no-no methods. Five prescriptions:

1. *Avoid puns.* More than one pun per hour overdoses the typical listener. People often feel that nonstop punsters make a greater contribution by their absence from meetings.

2. *Avoid sarcasm and cynicism.* That style of humor often masks hostility and resentment—negative qualities instantly noticed by hearers but seldom recognized by sarcastic speakers.

3. *Avoid classic joke-telling.* More than two per hour subtracts more from a fun atmosphere than they add. Rarely does an old joke successfully address the topic at hand. More often, it negatively focuses attention on the jokester.

4. *Avoid substituting humor for positive personality traits.* He is always cracking a joke, but friends often describe him as intimidating, bad-tempered, self-centered, a blamer, and arrogant. Humor never compensates for the absence of qualities such as great listener, encourager, empathetic, humble, takes responsibility for mistakes, and shares authority.

5. *Avoid letting fun-making rob task-effectiveness.* An overload of frivolity gives a group the same feeling as eating too much cotton candy. Blend fun with getting the work done, but don’t try to substitute it for engagement in meaningful ministries.

How Do We Create a Fun Climate?

Many laypersons and pastors experience the climate-setting aspect of their leadership roles as a challenge: they lack natural aptitude and fear mixing humor with serious goals! A few tips:

1. *Have fun at your own expense, not someone else’s.* But even here, don’t push self-denigration too far! Laugh at yourself in a self-effacing way, not in a self-derogatory way. Self-effacing is non-threatening to others and shows your humanness. Self-derogatory humor usually illustrates negative and self-centered personality traits.

2. *“Modeling” fun is effective.* A humorous item on your desk such as a cartoon, a quote, or a statue helps others feel it is OK to have non-serious thoughts.

3. *Add something funny to routine memos and announcements.* Humor in mundane communications erases stuffiness. People see that while you are serious about the church’s ministries you don’t feel pompous about your leadership role.

4. *Learn from funny things others do or say.* No two people have an identical sense of humor. Don’t be too quick to dismiss humor that is not your style—as long as it’s not offensive.

5. *Watch for ironic connections in daily life.* Comedians are not people to whom more funny things happen than to normal people. Comedians are people who recognize the humorous aspects of what happens to everyone.

The Bottom Line

Congregations engage in serious objectives. But humor is not inconsistent with seriousness! Think how often people tell funny stories at funerals.

Yes, effective congregations stay focused on high standards and effective delivery of quality ministries. But churches whose climates feel like an undertakers’ convention accomplish much less than churches whose emotional thermostat is set on fun. Lighten up!