

# Chicago Tribune

## Christian comedy: And he saw that it was funny ...



Comedian Jeff Allen before performing a recent show at Ginger Creek Community Church in Aurora. (Nuccio DiNuzzo/ Chicago Tribune)

*By Kevin Pang, Chicago Tribune reporter*

*4:26 p.m. CST, November 7, 2011*

PEKIN, Ill. — There were no two-drink minimums at the First Baptist Church of Pekin. It was the first-ever Comedy Night at the church, a few hours southwest of Chicago, and on this October Saturday there were no drunk hecklers stumbling in the aisles, no cigarette smoke. The church foyer was a Christmas-like array of green Sprite cans and red Kit Kat wrappers.

High above the pulpit, Jeff Allen's image projected onto two screens — bulging eyes, raised brows, comically pursed lips. “The world's funniest, most-inspiring comedian,” it read next to his face, a dead ringer for fellow comic Tim Allen's. He insists they're not related.

“My son comes out modeling the jeans he bought. Sixty yards of denim hanging off him! Huge clown jeans,” said Allen, pacing with microphone in hand. “First time my wife washed it, she threw her back

out dragging it out the dryer. Six months she's walking around like Quasimodo. People in church go, what happened? 'Denim injury. Now excuse me, it's my turn to ring the church bells.'"

Allen shuffled across the stage hunched and the 250 people inside the church roared. Between laughter, one woman could be heard saying, "That's so true!"

The term "Christian comedy" draws interesting reactions from the non-devout. Lightweight, ironic, corny — Allen has heard them all. But it's a label the 55-year-old Sauk Village native has accepted, and in turn, Allen has carved out a living this past decade performing almost exclusively in churches.

In the comedy world, R-rated acts are the rule — Comedy Central's "Roast of Charlie Sheen," in which the troubled star was profanely skewered about his sex life and drug addiction, attracted 6.4 million viewers when it premiered in September. But Allen is a big enough name among Christian stand-ups that he'll book 80 gigs a year in front of congregations, earning in one performance the equivalent of two weeks headlining a nightclub. Allen said he grosses six figures annually. Said Dan Ruppel, honorary chairman of the Christian Comedy Association, "It's the big ignored revenue stream within American entertainment."

Still, "Christian comedy" is a label even the comics it applies to wrestle with. They view the term as both a benefit and liability: necessary when marketing to their core audience, but burdensome when seeking acceptance from mainstream comedy fans. Viewers of Comedy Central might assume Christian comics proselytize, referencing Jesus every third sentence.

"What you're talking about with Christian comedy is clean comedy," said Bert Haas, executive vice president of the Zanies Comedy Club chain. "It's about non-offensive material ... not going up there to pound the pulpit."

There was a time when the pinnacle of stand-up comedy was appearing on "The Tonight Show" and performing seven minutes for Johnny Carson. Then came the likes of Lenny Bruce and Andrew Dice Clay, who nudged comedy toward the "seven words you can't say on television" model.

What Christian comics yearn for, said Chicago-born stand-up Anthony Griffith, is Johnny Carson-appropriate humor once more. Bill Cosby and Jerry Seinfeld would be considered Christian comedians today.

"That's the big misconception, that we're going out with Bibles," said Griffith, who toured with Allen several years ago in the Apostles of Comedy tour. "Christians have financial, marital and kid problems, and those are places we can joke about too. We're the same as any other comic, the difference is it's in a Christian atmosphere."

One of Allen's first DVDs was "Happy Wife, Happy Life," a fitting title for an act mining much of its humor from domestic life. His wife, Tami, and two grown sons are frequent subjects. He has bits about seniors speeding in golf carts, receiving a 12-gauge shotgun for his wedding and adventures in roasting chicken. His act rarely veers into politics, though he'll throw in wisecracks about President Barack Obama, depending on the room.

Allen grew up an atheist in a religion-indifferent household. His father aspired to be a painter but could only support his family as a construction worker. The only time his father was happy was when they listened to comedy records together, Allen recalled. Allen could recite Woody Allen and Cosby recordings verbatim.

He graduated (barely, he said) from Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights and soon after began performing stand-up professionally in 1978, hopping between smoke-choked clubs in indistinguishable small towns. Allen remembered a series of dates at an all-night disco, where showtime was 2 a.m. The travel and menial pay were humiliating — "I was baby-sitting drunks," Allen said — and soon the road took its toll on him in the form of drugs and alcohol. He called this period in his life "angry and bitter."

Both his finances and marriage fell into disarray. Allen was close to filing divorce papers, he said, when his wife had a change of heart. Then Allen said he began reading Ayn Rand and listening to Bible study tapes.

Around that time he was performing a show in Denver, when, after the show, a woman came up and said, "I think you're very funny, but why do you have to be so blasphemous?" Allen realized he'd unwittingly been saying "goddamn" throughout his act. He was using it as a crutch.

“That never left my conscience,” Allen said. “Every time I said it, I heard that woman’s voice. If it’s (intrinsic) to the joke, then do it. But it wasn’t. It was just the way I talked.”

There wasn’t one moment of epiphany that led to his conversion. It was a slow build that culminated Aug. 17, 1997, the day Allen said he gave his life to Jesus Christ.

## **Finding a niche**

In the 1970’s, Dan Ruppel helped form what was considered the first Christian sketch comedy group, “Isaac Air Freight.” Ruppel went on to work for CBS Television, becoming in the 1990s a West Coast supervising producer for “The Late Show With David Letterman.”

After he left Letterman, Ruppel found himself in Nashville, Tenn., in 2002 at a gathering of fellow Christian comics. (Among the 35 or so in attendance was Allen.) The group decided it would form an organization to help members network. Ruppel was voted its founding president.

One issue came up: what to name the group. The comics’ concern was that including the word “Christian” might pigeonhole the group, stigmatizing it among the larger, secular audience.

“We finally decided (to go) with Christian Comedy Association,” said Ruppel, now the group’s honorary chairman. “It’s a two-edge sword. On one hand, the fact that you’re a Christian comedian, you’re embraced by the Christian community. But I think it could sometimes be detrimental because of a lack of awareness among mainstream venues in what we’re going to do.”

Part of the Christian Comedy Association’s mission today — there are 350 active members — is convincing comedy club owners they’re missing out on a lucrative market. Ruppel points to the success of “The Passion of the Christ” in 2004 as the moment Hollywood finally saw Christian entertainment as a viable demographic: The film has grossed \$611 million to date.

As the live comedy business declined over the past 20 years — television was a factor — comics have struggled to find new audiences.

At comedy’s height in the late 1980s, Chicago and its suburbs were home to 17 full-time comedy clubs. Today it’s fewer than a half dozen. (The Second City will launch UP Comedy Club at its Old Town headquarters this month; Los Angeles’ The Laugh Factory plans to open in the shuttered Lakeshore Theater.)

Local comics realized they couldn’t make a living just working in Chicago. They had to tour on the road, traveling six months a year to sustain a living wage. Many have taken to motivational speaking and corporate gigs, performing at holiday parties and trade shows.

“The boom has been over for a long time,” said Chicago comic Michael Alexander. “Comedians are just adapting like nature, finding different places to work.”

Two years ago, a relative of Alexander’s girlfriend was looking for fundraising ideas for her church. St. Margaret Mary Parish in Rogers Park typically went the silent auction route, but that year, it decided to try stand-up comedy. (Many churches view nontraditional entertainment nights as an outreach mechanism to attract non-churchgoers.) Two hundred people attended at \$25 a ticket that first year; the following year drew more than 300.

“The priest was sitting in the second row of that gymnasium. I was making fun of him, and he loved it,” said Alexander, a former staff writer for “The Arsenio Hall Show”. (This year’s “Comedy & Cocktails” takes place Saturday.) “Probably not even 5 percent of that audience had ever been to a comedy club. It’s a completely untapped market.”

Comic Pat McGann grew up on the South Side, where people often identified themselves not by their neighborhood but by parish. He saw that friends and family weren’t going to the comedy venues he frequented. The nightclub and parish crowd, he said, rarely overlapped.

So, several years ago, McGann had an idea: bring comedy to the parishes. These days — though he doesn’t consider what he performs to be Christian comedy, more comedy appropriate for an all-ages audience — he organizes a handful of shows each year, bringing in fellow Chicago comics like Dwayne Kennedy to perform.

“I probably did have some apprehension at first, but once I was up there, people are laughing and it’s just another show,” Kennedy said. “What

would be a Christian show today could've been the standard of performing on television in the '70s. It's not so much what you say, but how you say it."

From a comic's perspective, church audiences are more forgiving. Brad Stine, considered one of the country's best-known Christian comics, said club audiences sit down already judgmental of the performer. There's an "I paid you, now you make me laugh" mentality.

He said: "Even if you bomb, the church audience will say, 'Oh, you did it for the Lord, bless you.' You're working with a group of people who aren't trying to find a way to not like you."

### **'Let them see you, not me'**

After Allen became a born-again Christian, he tamed down his act but continued working in clubs. He said it did wonders for his comedy. Allen was forced to find humor without relying on expletives, which made him a more focused writer.

After working the Tropicana hotel in Las Vegas — on Sept. 11, 2001 — Allen decided he was done with nightclubs and casinos. He asked his manager if churches would hire him. It began with one church that first year, then it snowballed. Allen averages two shows a week now, and he's no longer away from home for month-long stretches. He and Tami celebrated their 25th anniversary in July.

"What I do now is the most comfortable I've ever been in my skin," said Allen, who now lives outside Nashville. "I know it's not clever, not hip, not edgy, but I'm over trying to be something I'm not."

Two weeks after the Pekin show, Allen was inside the Grand Ballroom of the Oak Brook Marriott Resort, performing for 500 lawyers at the Christian Legal Society's conference. He prayed before going on stage:

Lord, let them see you, not me."

The house lights went dark and Allen went 75 minutes straight, a machine gun of words, all muscle memory at this point.

"I believe teenagers are God's revenge on mankind," he said. "One day God is looking down over his creation and says to himself, 'Hey, let's see how they like it to create someone in their own image who denies their existence.'"

Allen doesn't do too many religious jokes, but that line drew the night's heartiest laughs.

"I looked through the Bible cover to cover, and it never mentions how old Satan was when he finally rejected God's authority. My guess? Sixteen."

### **A few bits from Jeff Allen**

"I got knocked unconscious once by a chairlift. Of course the insurance company refused to cover the head injury. Guy called me up at home and said, 'You got hit in the head by a chairlift. That makes you a moron, and we consider that a pre-existing condition.'"

"My oldest son was 7 when he was diagnosed ADHD. Doctors wanted to put him on Ritalin. Of course I said, 'Sure. Based on my family's history of alcohol and drug abuse, let's get the kid on the crank as soon as possible.' One chromosome from my side of the family and he'd be 9, saying, 'I don't think the 5 milligrams is doin' it for me, dad.'"

"My wife's idea of dessert is rice cakes. Are you kidding me? Cake? I think 'caulk' would be a better word. It's not food; it's insulation. Told her we could save a few bucks and just eat the Styrofoam peanuts that came with her ThighMaster."

"I have ADHD, and I am a hypochondriac. But this is how God looks out for his children. It's my ADHD that keeps the hypochondria manageable. On those days that I am convinced I am dying and need an ambulance, by the time I get to a telephone to call one, I have been distracted four or five times. Usually wind up in the kitchen holding a telephone and can't remember why. And that's when I order the pizza."