

Funny Man
(Leadership Journal)

“He’s just so funny,” she said.

Jennifer paused, gathering her thoughts. “He got our attention by being so funny...then he could tell us the serious stuff. I wish we could hear him more often.”

I had asked my students what they thought of the famous speaker at a recent conference. The rest of our students agreed. Remember-when’s and wasn’t-it-great’s erupted around the room.

I smiled and nodded. I understood. The speaker was a gifted communicator. It wasn’t difficult to see how he had risen to national fame. He had delivered several wonderful messages and my students had responded positively.

I was glad my students had enjoyed the conference. But inside, I was fighting a bitter feeling of insecurity as I listened to my students praise this speaker.

It’s so hard not to play the comparison game, even when you’re likely to come out on the short end of the stick. And, let’s face it, when you’re comparing yourself to a man or woman with gifts of the sort that catapult them to national attention, it’s easy to come out with a slight inferiority complex.

In my mind, I worried that my students wished I was more like this speaker. Worse, I suspected they wished *he* was their pastor. After all, *he* was exciting. *He* was funny.

I can be funny too, I thought. *I try to be funny*, to get their attention. I even have a few stories that are as funny as the ones *he* told.

The problem, I decided, was partly a matter of exposure. With a little care, national speakers, who address a different audience every week, can get almost unlimited mileage out of a tale.

Pastors, speaking to the same crowd week after week, only get to tell *their* outrageous stories once.

Famous Christian speakers belong to a broader category we might call religious celebrities. Each type of Christian ministry - youth, worship, music, drama, church growth - has their own celebrities. Taken together, these are individuals of national renown who profoundly influence the efforts and self-perception of ministers working in local settings.

There is a tremendous temptation in pastoral ministry to imitate the celebrities of our various fields. But not every pastor can *be* a celebrity. No matter how many men and women of national fame march out boldly under the Christian banner, the rank and file of Christian ministers will toil along in relative obscurity. For every Christian speaker on Newsweeks’ “must consult” list there are a thousand ministers whose insights will never grace the back page of the local paper. Is their ministry any less significant? Obviously not, but the temptation to imitate Christian celebrities can be a serious obstacle to doing such ministry faithfully.

Even beyond the temptation to imitate them, Christian celebrities impact the work of local your workers. In a variety of ways, the pastoral task is made easier, harder and just *different* by their presence in our midst.

We ought to keep in mind that religious celebrities are nothing new. John the Baptist drew people in by the thousands and Jesus wasn’t exactly a small-venue player. Men, women and children came in droves to hear Charles Finney and Spurgeon’s congregation would have made any mega-church proud. Larger-than-life personalities have always been a part of our religious landscape.

It may be true that religious celebrities are nothing new, but one wonders if they have ever been as prolific or as influential as they are today. What were once widely separated way-stations, intriguing stops

along the Christian frontier, are now mileposts that inform our faith-journey every step of the way.

While it is true that religious celebrities are nothing new, we seem to be dealing these days with a new *breed* of them. Charles Finney and John the Baptist, though separated by centuries, were not so different from one another. They were both preachers who taught the Scriptures.

Today's religious celebrities are rarely theologians. Certainly a few of them are, but there are also musicians, actors and even comedians mixed into the lot; all good things, but not the stuff of Christian fame in the past. It is almost impossible to find a famous Christian musician from the previous 19 centuries who was not also a respected theologian.

Christian celebrities these days are not necessarily theologically adept (a point of pride to some) or pastorally inclined, but we give them a certain religious credibility and authority nonetheless.

There is no need to be opposed to Christian celebrities per-se. However, it's important to recognize that they exert considerable influence in the Christian world these days. More importantly, they often do it without having the same qualifications of well-known Christian leaders from our past. The qualities which make them famous have changed considerably.

The new foundations of Christian celebrity today impact the work of the average minister by changing the expectations placed on them. In the past, it was reasonable to expect that the minister from First Baptist Church in Podunk, Nowhere, would deliver to his parishioners a message similar to the one they had heard at the big revival over in Central City. Maybe not quite as eloquent. Maybe not quite as fiery, but at least a message of the same *kind*. A message dedicated to unpacking the Scriptures and their importance for their lives.

These days, Christian celebrities bring us stand-up routines, stirring choruses, and dramatic monologues. So, when the local pastor gets up to give us...theology, how will he be received? In a culture where there's a Christian celebrity around every corner, it's easy for people to develop expectations of pastors that they can't possibly meet.

Why are there so many Christian celebrities today? Is it just that the mass media have so expanded our horizons that we can see stars previously hidden from sight? There's probably more to it than that.

We live in a culture where relationships are few and far between. We sit at computer terminals in office cubicles. We drive home to houses surrounded by fences and pull into private garages. We get the low-down on the world by television and the Internet. We go without seeing our closest neighbors for days or even weeks at a time. We are independent, isolated. And yet, we crave connection and intimacy, especially with people we admire and respect. Celebrities salve that need by helping us to feel as if we know someone we can look up to.

I know of a man who speaks regularly in large churches. He is often asked to sign Bibles after a talk...a rather strange request in and of itself. Recently, in scanning previous autographs on a page he had been asked to sign, he came across a surprising entry...his own name! He had already signed this person's Bible and here the young man was, asking again! Neither the speaker or the young man remembered the previous signing.

Asking for an autograph says, "I know you well enough to like you...we've connected in some way." And yet, as this incident illustrates, the connection is an illusion. Celebrities and those who admire them don't know each other at all.

People desperately want intimacy and connection. Thankfully, that's something that local church youth ministry can provide and youth workers can help set the tone by understanding why kids often feel close to celebrities. One of the reasons that students feel close to celebrities is that they often appear to be so *vulnerable*. Listening to a famous speaker open up about personal experiences may well be the closest thing to an intimate conversation that many young people have had in months.

It's easy for a popular Christian speaker to reveal not only experiences, but personal weakness and struggles as well. They're speaking to audiences they'll never see again. The embarrassment factor is minimal.

Not so for the average youth minister. Having revealed some private warp of the soul, she will have to look her audience in the face again and again. The temptation for the pastor, then, is to try to imitate the wit, panache and flair of the celebrity while avoiding their self-disclosure. But if we're to learn anything from the popularity of Christian celebrities, it may be that most of us are imitating the wrong things. If students are attracted to famous speakers or musicians in part because such individuals are vulnerable, then we need to be willing to let students see the real us, faults and all. Students are craving connection. Youth workers can set the tone for deeper levels of intimacy within their groups by opening up their lives to scrutiny. Here is a positive lesson to be learned from Christian celebrities.

Of course, not everything we learn is positive. On the negative side, celebrities have a tendency to generate Followers instead of Disciples. Followers are attracted to personality and flash. A youth worker's job is to develop Disciples. Disciples are committed to principles and substance.

This is not to suggest that Christian celebrities can't, or don't, have principles and substance. Many of them are deeply rooted in both. But the single-shot nature of their ministry can encourage students in the audience to fixate only on personality and flash. Christian celebrities have a tendency to impress kids with surface traits and people caught up in appearances are Followers.

When youth workers attempt, on a regular basis, to imitate the things that help celebrities hold a stage for short, intense performances, one of two things will happen. Either they will fail at the gargantuan task or, they will succeed. But, success will mean that they end up building groups of Followers, attracted to the youth worker's personality. When the youth minister leaves, so will most of the kids.

Ask yourself a tough question. If you were to leave this ministry next month, even under good conditions, how many of the kids would stick with the program? If the answer is few or none, chances are you're a kind of local celebrity.

Youth ministers who want to develop Disciples, in a religious landscape dotted by celebrity, must work hard to do what celebrities can *not* do. We must know our students well, so that we can see where the next steps of spiritual growth must be taken. To do that, we must build relationships on foundations laid when we're not leading a small group or giving a talk.

Relationships aren't built from the stage. We need to stop worrying about things that play well in the spotlights but fade to insignificance in a face to face conversation. We need to stop trying to be bigger than life and worry more about being real.

Will this mean that we won't draw in big crowds? Will it mean fewer accolades and, God forbid, smaller numbers to report to the elder board? It might.

Let's be realistic. Jesus was an attractive personality and he drew His share of Followers. But when he began to reveal more about who he was and where he was headed, his popularity experienced a sudden dip. When he began to challenge the crowds with depth and substance, "many of his followers went back and walked with Him no longer" (Jn 6:66). Only the true Disciples remained.

The language in this verse is illuminating. They "went back" and no longer "walked with Him." These are travel-words. Jesus was taking His Disciples on a journey and some of the tag-alongs decided they didn't like the ultimate destination.

Youth workers are called to do the same thing: to lead those with whom they work on a journey. Celebrities can never do that. They can provide important mile-markers. They may even be beacons on the horizon, beckoning people to take an important next step. But they cannot walk *with* them.

Celebrities can speak of the road ahead. They can tell kids which forks to take. But they do not walk with them and so they cannot point out the best places to tread on lonely stretches of broken ground. That's what youth workers do.

Let's not vilify Christian celebrities. Like just about everything else, there are positive and negative facets to what they do. What we need to do is understand the difference between what famous Christian personalities contribute to the faith and what the multitude of nameless youth workers bring. We need to stop blurring the lines between the two. And, as youth ministers, we need to give ourselves permission to stop trying to be something we are not.