

SPEAKER

Mark Gungor,
speaker, author
and funny guy

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**CRUISING
FOR LAUGHS**

All Joking **ASIDE**

Mark Gungor shows couples—and businesses—how to laugh their way to better relationships

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All Joking **Aside**

Funny man **Mark Gungor**
offers his tips on the
humor trade.

BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER



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arriage isn't always a laughing matter. Money causes stress. Kids drive you nuts. (And the in-laws? Let's not even go there.) And when time is short, so are our fuses.

Then, your spouse wants to drag you to some marriage seminar. "Really?" you ask. "What good will that do?"

Well, if it's one of Mark Gungor's *Laugh Your Way to a Happy Marriage* seminars, you might walk away with a stronger marriage — and sore abs from all of the laughing.

That's because Gungor knows how to use humor — and not just in the obvious way (to make people laugh) but in a productive way (to teach valuable lessons).



More About Mark

Gungor's marriage seminar was born out of his early days in the ministry. While he had plenty to say on a variety of topics as a pastor, the one that filled the seats was marriage and relationships.

"As speakers, we want to build talks around things people want to hear about," he says. "Find the need; meet the need. That's Business 101."

These days, he preaches on Sunday mornings at Celebration Church in Green Bay, Wis. (without taking a salary, thanks to the success of *Laugh Your Way*). During his sermons, he says, he strives to teach lessons from the Bible with a humorous style. But, he says, he knows it's not for everyone.

"Some old guy got mad and said, 'I don't think you should be up there acting like a clown,'" Gungor recalls. "I said, 'I'm not acting.'"

As if he weren't busy enough, he also records five hours of television each week for the Mark Gungor Show, which is broadcast online. While his seminars and sermons are

planned, his faith-based, humorous TV show relies on viewers, who email him questions. And this is where he really lets loose.

"It's a show of brutal honesty," he says, explaining that he often yells his advice at people. "I call it the meanest show in Christendom," he says with a laugh.

Companies also call on Gungor for relationship advice and a dose of humor at corporate meetings. A corporate presentation on marriage may seem out of place, but it's smart business.

"One of the things that sucks the life out of the productivity of their employees is when marriages go south," Gungor explains. "A healthier employee is a more productive employee." And marital health is part of that.

Plus, if employees and their spouses are attending an event together, spouses don't want to hear about the business. But get people in a room and let them laugh for a while? That's good for everyone.



“ Nothing is more uncomfortable than watching someone trying to be funny who’s not. ”

Throughout his career, Gungor has found a way to make humor a key element of what he does. Curious how to make humor sell?

Here’s your crash course, courtesy of Mark Gungor.

Humor isn’t just for laughs.

When you get a laugh during a presentation, it feels good. But unless you’re doing a stand-up comedy routine, guffaws are not your end goal. You have a purpose.

“In my case, I do relationship seminars. When you talk about relationships, there tends to be a lot of resistance from the male side,” Gungor says. “Humor overcomes the objections right away. Guys don’t want to learn about relationships; they want to laugh.”

If your subject is difficult, humor is one way to make it more palatable.

“I’m serving medicine that goes down a lot better with sugar,” Gungor says, “and humor is the sugar.”

Humor, he adds, has the added benefit of helping people to remember your message. Connecting your points with emotion is the trick.

“And humor is an emotional thing,” he explains. “I can run into people two or three years later who can remember all my main points.”

Let humor diffuse tension.

“Comedian Ken Davis once told me that humor is truth with exaggeration and a surprise,” Gungor says. That truth and exaggeration makes humor a great tool for dealing with tense moments.

As a pastor, Gungor is accustomed to dealing with issues that can cause tension by their very nature. In fact, marriage might be one of the easier subjects he broaches in any given week. But he doesn’t shy away from tough topics.

“I play off the tension,” he says. “I make it work for me.”

Two events where Gungor shines? Weddings and funerals, he says.

“You can get people laughing because nobody’s expecting it.”

During his talks, he faces some tough crowds.

“When you have a presentation called *Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage* — unlike a comedy club where people are there *to* laugh — some are thinking, “You can’t make me laugh,” he explains.

Humor lets Gungor ease the tension, allay his critics and get to the meat of his seminar.

Speaking of diffusing tension, be wary of starting with a joke you haven’t tested.

“The temptation is huge ... because you think it will relax the audience

and you’re trying to relax yourself,” Gungor says. “But if nobody laughs, your frustration and anxiety triple.”

Being funny is not the same as telling a joke.

Plenty of speakers see Gungor’s uproariously funny style and ask for his help.

“How can I learn to be funny?” admirers want to know. But you’re on your own there.

“I don’t think you can learn to be funny,” he says. “Oh, you can learn to deliver a joke — you can learn that timing and pacing.”

But ultimately, he says, you’re either funny or you’re not. “And nothing is more uncomfortable than watching someone trying to be funny who’s not.”

When Gungor is on the platform, he says, he’s simply talking the way he always talks.

“I’m not always telling jokes,” he notes.

He’s talking to people as if they were in his living room. And whether on stage or in his living room, he gets laughs.

Let age and experience work for you.

As Gungor approaches 60, he says, his age (evident in his thinning gray hair) works in his favor. While humor has always been a gift, he says that as a young speaker, he lacked credibility.

In fact, he went into the ministry in his 20s and gave up by the time he was 30. He felt he didn’t fit—that his outrageous style wasn’t appreciated or even worse, that it would get him into trouble.

In his mid 40s, Gungor was invited to speak to a group by a pastor who saw something in him.

“I stood there, and they clapped and laughed and howled,” he recalls. He asked his wife, “What’s changed?” His approach to speaking hadn’t changed. But his age and experience

had. He was older. He'd raised kids and had grandkids.

That became a secret weapon.

"The older I get, the more brash I can get," he says with a laugh. "I'll be insufferable when I'm 80."

Younger speakers can be funny, but he cautions them against brash humor.

"The more credibility you have, the more you can mock things," he says. "The younger you are, the less credibility you have. So, be cautious. It's a harder sell."

Practice, practice practice.

After doing his marriage seminar for a decade now, Gungor knows his material.

"At this point, I know exactly where people will laugh," he says. "It helps your timing because you can pause just right. The only way to know that is to keep doing it."

It's easy to misfire with humor.

"Humor is something that is hard to predict," he explains. "There are some things I've tried that I thought were hilarious, and people didn't laugh. And some things I didn't think were funny other people thought were *hilarious*."

But sometimes, that works to the speaker's advantage, because it's easy to deliver a line when you don't think it's funny.

"I'll stand there and listen to a group wheeze and laugh trying to recover from a funny line, and it's not funny to me at all," Gungor says. "It's the craziest thing."

In the end, he says, there's no magic formula. You simply need to practice, see what works and learn from it.

And when he says "practice," he doesn't mean at your next sold-out gig.

Find a small group of people to help test your material. The Jerry Seinfelds of the world, he says, go to small clubs to test their new materials.

"They do that because when it dies,

WANT A HAPPIER MARRIAGE? BE NICE.

Mark Gungor helps people improve their marriages — all while they're having a good time. Plus, he and his wife have been married for 40 years, so we couldn't let him get away without at least one tip.

"Two words: Be nice," Gungor says. "Just be nice."

He says married people who are told to be completely honest with their feelings have been led astray.

"It's the worst advice ever given. Good Lord!" he says. "Couples are emotionally vomiting on each other."

It's no wonder couples are on the verge of divorce when they aren't kind to each other.

"Just because you're married doesn't give you permission to be mean," he says.

Talk things out? You bet. But invoke kindness.

"It's not rocket science," Gungor says. "Be nice."

no one's there to notice," Gungor says. "If you get a big gig, don't get up and give a new joke! Only do the jokes you've tested and know how to deliver. Do what is safe."



From a young age, Stephanie R. Conner was told "she's not as funny as she thinks she is."

That's why she's a freelance writer and editor — and not a comedienne. She can be reached at Stephanie@TheActiveVoice.com.

