



# RAISE THE ROOF

HIRE AN EVENT LINEUP THAT WILL DRAW A CROWD

*BY JENNIFER BABISAK*

**WHEN** planning a conference or event, the sheer amount of decisions required can be overwhelming. Find an appealing and accessible destination. Secure an appropriate venue. Lock-in group accommodations. The list goes on and on. Often relegated to second-tier priority, booking quality speakers and entertainers is actually a key element in a successful conference.

In fact, some potential event attendees commit to conferences based on the speaker and entertainment lineup

alone. Prioritizing this aspect of the event planning process and striving for a high quality speaker/entertainer lineup can have huge ramifications for the attendance—and the financial success—of a conference.

But with thousands of fascinating speakers and entertainers appropriate for religious conferences, how do you find the right people to meet your group's needs? Larry Weaver, entertainment agent and author of the book "How to Hire Comedians" offers tips to streamline the process.

## DATE

Weaver points out that setting the event date and finding a venue before contacting entertainers is a good strategy. It will allow you to weed out speakers and entertainers who aren't available during your dates. "Knowing your budget for the entertainer will further narrow down the list," Weaver said. "If you then contact an agent with these three key pieces of information (date, location and budget), the agent can recommend specific acts for your event."

## BUDGET

Often, event planners are tempted to skimp on the speaker/entertainer budget. Unfortunately, it's nearly impossible to secure a quality entertainer on a shoestring budget. As well-known personalities are often a huge draw, allocating a reasonable portion of the event budget toward this area can go a long way toward creating a dynamic event.

## SPACE

Logistical considerations also factor into your choice of an entertainer. A comedian may require minimal equipment, while a large band will need significant space. Weaver recommends a raised stage and quality sound equipment for entertainers playing to groups of 50 or more.

## AUDIENCE

Another important decision involves deciding what type of entertainer would best suit your event. Do you need comic relief to break up a chunk of dry or serious content? Do you need a dynamic musician to wake up the room and infuse the audience with energy? Or would a motivational speaker best serve your audience's interest? Figure out if your audience needs to be entertained or inspired, or both.

## INTERACTION

Assess the level of audience interaction you want a performer to incorporate. Do you want audience members being called up on stage or do you want them to be able to just sit back and enjoy the show? "The level of interaction you desire depends on your group," said Weaver, "If you have a close-knit, lively group, you may want a high level of interaction. If your audience is more reserved or has experienced a long day of physical activities or meetings, they may prefer just to sit back, relax and be entertained."

## SPEAKERS

Inspiring or motivating speakers can captivate an audience and leave them with advice to implement long after the conference is over. The list of talented Christian speakers is long (see page 30 for some of our favorites) but it's tough to do better than a speaker with an inspiring personal story. Such is the case with Missy Jenkins Smith, who was critically injured in a 1997 West Paducah, Kentucky, school shooting. Smith, whose injuries left her paralyzed from the waist down, now shares her story of courage and forgiveness with groups all over the country.

"It's something that's a pretty difficult subject to discuss," Smith said, "but God's given me the ability to do that." Smith even views her speaking career as a form of therapy, saying that sharing with others has helped her work through her own trauma. "I've seen that keeping things in only causes you to explode in the end," Smith reflected. "I saw that with the [shooter] that was bullied a lot and never told anyone, and then the shooting happened. Holding tragic things in can overtake you."



MISSY JENKINS SMITH



LESLIE NORRIS TOWNSEND

## COMEDIANS

Bringing in a comedian is a great way to relax a crowd and help them enjoy an event. But care must be taken to find a comedian that indulges in an appropriate form of humor for your group. "A comedian that is funny without vulgar language, racy commentary or sexual innuendo will be a hit in any environment and for any audience," Weaver said. "As the person responsible for planning entertainment for your event, there is no reason good enough to risk having a performer that might offend your group."

One such performer who has branded herself a "clean comedienne" is Leslie Norris Townsend. The comedienne believes so strongly in the superior comedic value of a clean act that she hosts an annual conference called The Clean Comedy Challenge.

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After a decade as a stay-at-home mom, Townsend delighted in returning to comedy by performing for churches and religious events. "God allowed me to get back into standup," she said. "He blessed me with it, and the church opened up its arms, and I got back into the swing after being home with the kids for 10 years." Now she views her performances as an opportunity to share her faith and bridge the gap between believers and non-believers. "Many people think it's so hokey to be a Christian with so many rules," Townsend said. "But the reality is we have just as much fun as anybody. If you can be a little hipper in the way you witness, which could be through laughter, you could reach people."

## CHARITABLE SPEAKER

Inviting a representative from a charitable organization to speak at your event enables participants to learn about service opportunities and unites event attendees around a common cause. World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization serving children, families and communities in nearly 100 countries, maintains a roster of nearly two dozen speakers available to address conferences and events on topics like human trafficking and slavery, and humanitarian and disaster relief.

In addition to enlightening conference attendees on serious international humanitarian issues, World Vision enables groups to make an impact for good. Speakers share information on service projects like the 30 Hour Famine (a fasting fundraiser to fight hunger) or child sponsorship opportunities. When speaking on fundraising or child sponsorship, World Vision may be able to provide a speaker for little to no cost.

## ILLUSIONIST

Even adults find themselves fascinated with sleight of hand and illusion, making this form of entertainment a lighthearted way to capture the attention of your audience. Comic magician Lyndy Phillips served 15 years as an ordained minister before turning to a performance career, so he understands the importance of collaboration between ministry and entertainment.

“A humorous entertainer brings great value to a conference by getting people to laugh,” Phillips said. “Laughter breaks down barriers, brings people together and helps create an enjoyable atmosphere. It opens the door for God’s joy to fill the room.” Phillips brings this joy to events by combining sleight of hand with impromptu comedy and plenty of audience participation. “Seeing and hearing people laugh and the joy of the Lord on their faces brings me great joy,” he added. “Like the Proverb says...a merry heart does good like medicine.” 🌱

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LYNDY PHILLIPS