



# How to Get Started in Clown Ministry

*By David Suhs*

So just how does one get started in something called clown ministry? *"I'm only one person. How can I get a group going at my church?"*

To begin a clown ministry, you need to carefully consider the following:

- 1) Who will be involved in the ministry?**
- 2) How do you create interest in the church?**
- 3) How do you train a clown group and what resources are available?**
- 4) What form will your ministry take?**

## **1) Who will be involved in the ministry?**

The preference has always been to primarily involve adults in this ministry because it is easier for them to understand the symbolism, dramatic aspects, and theology of the clown. Selfishly, I feel there is more of a need for adults to get in touch with the child inside them which this ministry can so effectively provide. However, one can also effectively involve middle school and high school youth because they can understand the symbolism, theology, and dramatic aspects. For younger children, it is more difficult to get them involved because of their inability to completely understand this dramatic art form and its symbolism. Younger children can successfully do clown ministry with a family member or adult who can provide guidance. This ministry is also successful across ethnic, male or female, or denominational differences. It is a real opportunity to bring diverse groups together. Also, one should not be concerned about the number of participants. Quantity is not important in clowning with a few able to minister very effectively. As Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

## **2) How do we create interest in the church?**

There are several of ways to create interest in the church. The first is to invite a local Christian clown group to your church to participate in a fellowship dinner, a youth program, a vacation Bible school, or even a unique evening worship service. If possible, permit a time for the visiting clown group to share their experiences and impressions of the ministry and a time for questions and answers. A second way, would be to try to obtain the videos of Rolf Forsberg's *Parable*, or Floyd Shaffer's *Mark of the Clown*, *A Clown Is Born*, and *That's Life*. These videos are available through some denominational audio-visual libraries. The author also has DVD copies of *Yesu—The Life of Jesus*, the clown/mime play published by Contemporary Drama Service. This video is available for the cost of duplication and postage. These films again could be shown at fellowship dinner, a youth program, a vacation Bible school, or an evening worship service.

## **3) How do you train a clown group and what resources are available?**

**Training**—The next step is to offer clown training in either one-hour sessions once a week for about six weeks or an intensive weekend session. Once the primary training is completed, follow-up sessions would be recommended to learn new skits and skills. Ask your minister for permission to advertise the training in your church newsletter and perhaps other churches as well. It would be great to have an ecumenical experience. The optimum choice of a trainer is someone who has experience in clown ministry, however, if that person is not available you can try several things. First, read up on clown ministry in the resources provided in this article, then possibly find a drama person from the community or schools to help you on the make-up and pantomime skills. The other possibility is to obtain a copy of Floyd Shaffer's *"Clown Ministry Video."* It was

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### 3) How do you train a clown group and what resources are available?

**Training**—produced by Group, Inc., but is out of production. This video is available through some denominational audio-visual libraries or from on-line sources. The Shaffer video outlines and demonstrates an entire clown ministry training workshop.

Before you begin training, you should keep in mind that the “why” of clowning must precede the “how.” No matter how well you put on the make-up or learn the skills of clowning you first need a firm foundation of “why”. In other words, build your ministry “on rock, not sand.” The creator of the joyful musical, “*Godspell*,” John-Michael Tebelak, said it well, “The clown does not come when you put on make-up. It comes from the soul.” The following are some of the key biblical and historical points you should consider covering in your training. These points are outlined here with permission by the Reverend Floyd Shaffer, Lutheran Pastor, who has put so much of the rationale of clown ministry into words.



#### Biblical Points -

1. **Holy Fools**—When one reads Matthew 5:22, Jesus elevates the positive dimension of “fool,” a word synonymous with “clown.” Several different words were translated “fool” in the Bible. They often dealt with an attitude or behavior. Here, Jesus says that you don’t profane the name of fool any more than you profane the name of God. Therefore, one experiences a surprise revelation: There’s a strange form of holiness around the “fool.”
2. **Fools for Christ’s Sake**—Paul writes of becoming fools for Christ’s sake in 1 Corinthians 4:10. He accurately describes how clowns typically reverse ideas, attitudes, and actions. “If any man ....thinks that he is wise...let him become foolish” (1 Corinthians 3:18) follows the clown axiom that the most powerful person in the world is one who can give away power.
3. **People Lifer-Uppers**—Jesus lifted people up while the religious leaders of His day put people down. Leaf through the Gospels and see dozens of examples where Jesus lifted the poor, the sick, the hurting, and the needy with healing words and actions. See Matthew 20:16, Mark 10:31, Luke 15:30, and 2 Corinthians 12:9. The clowns’ historic task also has been to lift people up—not put people down.
4. **Servants**—When one reads Philippians 2:7, Jesus uses the word “servant” in the same context as “clown.” Clowns, too, empty themselves when they put on costumes and make-up to enter their special “servant role.” John-Michael Tebelak, again said it well, “Clowns are both joyful and tragic figures who are particularly symbolic in their sacrifice of self for the interests of others.”
5. **Parable People**—Jesus uses word-pictures to communicate meaning. He spoke of Himself as a vine, a door, a light, and the bread of life. Jesus used word-pictures or parables to help us understand greater dimensions of our relationships with God. Clowns have this ability to make words and ideas come alive in action to clarify ideas.

#### Historical Points -

Although people use many words for clown—fool and jester—are the most common in history. Clowns attempt to keep cultures in balance by utilizing a reversal of attitudes through their actions. Every culture has had people who fit this role of the clown. In most cases, they were deeply connected to the religious community and communicated spiritual truths. Among these truths were:

1. **“Holy Fools”**— These “clowns” in early Christianity wandered about in disreputable clothing. They disturbed a polite society by asking people to give up materialism and follow the path of Jesus.
2. **Court Jester** — This clown’s main task was to remind the king and the court that he and they were human. Sometimes when successful, the jester would lose his life.

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### 3) How do you train a clown group and what resources are available?

#### Training—Historical -

3. **The Heyokas**—The Heyokas of the Native American culture were religious symbols who did things backward and often engaged in inappropriate behavior. They'd ride horses backwards through the camp, pitch their tepees with poles on the outside, laugh while others cried or vice versa. Out of this behavior, laughter with its healing powers came forth.
4. **White Face**—In many cultures, white covering over the face was a symbol of death or a death mask. This white was often obtained by first covering the face and sometimes the body with a coating of clay and then dusted with ashes. In some ancient ceremonies, bright colors made from berries or other sources would be painted over the white face to symbolize joy or life over death. This, of course, could apply to modern day clowns who traditionally wear white make-up with colors added. The symbolism of the clown face could then apply to the Christian faith where one dies to his sins (white face) and is forgiven to come alive in Jesus Christ (bright colors over the white face).
5. **Divine Interrupter**—Clowns of the Middle Ages sometimes played the role of interrupter (not disrupter) in worship services. During somber times in the church year, such as Lent, the clown would do or say something to point to the joy of the Resurrection or during the joyous days of Easter. Clowns would do something to remind people of the value of repentance and carrying the cross.

#### Sample Training Schedule -

A sample schedule is offered for a weekend day-and-a-half training session in the appendix of this article.

**Resources**—Clown ministry resources are a little more difficult to find today, but DramaShare and Contemporary Drama Service are your best bet. Here is their contact information for DramaShare and Contemporary Drama Service:



#### Contemporary Drama Service

P.O. Box 7710  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80933-7710 U.S.A.

#### Office Hours:

Customer service staff is available 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.  
(Mountain Standard Time)  
Monday through Friday except on holidays.  
Customer Service: 719-594-4422  
Toll Free: 800-93PLAYS (800-937-5297)  
Fax: 719-594-9916  
Toll-Free Fax: 888-594-4436 (U.S. and Canada only)

#### E-mail:

Customer Service: [customerservice@meriwether.com](mailto:customerservice@meriwether.com)  
Orders: [orders@meriwether.com](mailto:orders@meriwether.com)

#### DramaShare

1319 Haslam Way  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7S 1G4 Canada  
Toll-Free: 1-877-DO-DRAMA!  
(1-877-363-7262)

#### E-mail:

[scripts@dramashare.org](mailto:scripts@dramashare.org)

DramaShare has number of excellent clown ministry scripts available.

#### [The Clown Ministry Handbook](#)

By: Janet Litherland with a foreword by Floyd Shaffer  
The original text on the art of clown ministry.

#### [Everything New and Who's Who in Clown Ministry](#)

By: Janet Litherland  
Two volumes in one -- profiles of the "movers and shakers" in the clown ministry field, and 75 original skits for clowning around on holidays.

#### [Fool of the Kingdom](#)

By: Philip D. Noble  
The magical, mystical world of clown ministry is all here -- and it's made accessible for beginners, yet challenging for experienced clown ministers!

#### [Clown-gregation](#)

By: David R. Suhs, Frances Townsend, Marion S. Blackshear, Irvin R. Dohner, and William Hanson  
A through-the-year collection of Christian clown skits

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## 3) How do you train a clown group and what resources are available?

### Resources—

The following clown and clown ministry resources are available from Contemporary Drama Service:

#### Skits for Clown Ministry

By: Elizabeth Wilkinson  
Seven skits for a troupe of Christian clowns

#### The Art of Mime

By: Dr. E. Reid Gilbert  
An introduction to the art of mime

#### Clown Act Omnibus

By: Wes McVicar  
Everything you always wanted to know about clowning.

#### Ben Nye's Deluxe Clown Kit

Complete clown makeup kit

#### The Mime Book

By: Claude Kipnis  
A comprehensive guide to mime.

#### Mime Ministry

By: Susie Kelly Toomey  
The first complete guidebook on Christian mime.

### Resources—

The following clown resources are out of print or production, but can be found in denominational libraries or Amazon.com or other on-line sources:

#### If I Were a Clown

By: Floyd Shaffer /Augsburg Publishing House  
ISBN 10: 080662082X

#### Clown Ministry Video

By: Floyd Shaffer /Group, Inc.  
ISBN 0-931529-62X

#### Clown Ministry

By: Floyd Shaffer & Penne Sewall/Group, Inc.  
ISBN 0-936-664-18-5

#### Clown for Circus & Stage

By: Mark Stolzenberg/Sterling Publishing Co.  
ISBN 10: 0806970340 / 0-8069-7034-0

#### Be a Clown

By: Turk Pipkin/Workman Publishing Co.  
ISBN 089480-347-6

Mehron Make-up-Clown White & Liner Colors  
Costume World  
809 Franklin Street  
Michigan City, IN 46360  
219-874-7099  
www.costumeworld.net

## 4) What form will your ministry take?

Clown ministry can basically take three forms with each providing some very unique and powerful opportunities in ministry. These opportunities are in what we call Outreach, Teaching, and Worship.

**Outreach**—The first form is in the area of outreach. The clown has this unique ability to communicate non-verbally, break down barriers, touch people, and create an atmosphere of joy, laughter, and delight. God has given the individual who has that special kind of clowning that Mr. Tebelak called “coming from the soul” to truly bring joy to others. The clown ministry in your church can begin by doing just that—by visiting and sharing with those who need joy and the touch of fellow human beings. The following chart gives you ideas of the who, where, and what can be done utilizing clown ministry as outreach.

O U T R E A C H	WHO (Best Age Group to Do)	WHERE (Best Locations)	WHAT (Best Types of Activities)
	<i>(Experience has shown this order to be the most successful)</i> 1. Youth 2. Adults 3. Older Adults 4. Younger Children (with supervision)	1. Full-Care or Partial-Care Centers 2. Hospitals 3. Retirement Centers 4. Centers for the Challenged 5. Day Care Centers 6. Special Olympics 7. Schools and Libraries 8. Prisons (with special preparation) 9. Camp sites and Parks 10. Parades	1. Appropriate Physical contact (i.e. hugs, handshakes, rubbing arms, and kisses) 2. Listening and talking 3. Walk-arounds or short gags 4. Imagination play 5. Balloons and balloon sculpture 6. Longer skits 7. Regular visitation 8. Passing out appropriate gifts 9. Creating an atmosphere of fun
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### 4) What form will your ministry take?

**Teaching**—The second form is in the area of teaching. The clown can be useful in the classroom or other educational settings in two very effective ways. Firstly, the clown can create an atmosphere where learning can be a fun and enjoyable experience. Secondly, the clown has the ability to tell a story and bring new life and understanding to it. By just walking into a room, the clown has the ability to create an atmosphere of joy, laughter, and delight and to transform a classroom of students from merely spectators to participants. The clown is also valuable for his/her ability to be an effective storyteller. “The Story” is held in a new guise where the students see and experience the Scripture with a new freshness and emotional vibrancy that may be lost by sheer familiarity. The physical movement through the use of pantomime by the clown and the resulting vicarious movement by the viewer to the story results in greater interest, attention, and retention of the message. The following chart gives you ideas of the who, where, and what can be done utilizing clown ministry in teaching.

<b>T E A C H I N G</b>	<b>WHO (Best Age Group)</b>	<b>WHERE (Best Locations)</b>	<b>WHAT (Best Types of Activities)</b>
	<i>(Experience has shown this order to be the most successful)</i> 1. Adults 2. Older Adults 3. Youth 4. Younger Children (with supervision)	1. Church (Sunday) School 2. Mid-week youth programs 3. Youth Fellowship groups 4. Vacation Bible School 5. Christian Drama groups 6. Youth Retreats 7. Children’s Church 8. Schools (Drama classes) 9. Libraries 10. Kindergarten and Day Care	1. Interpreting scripture through skits 2. Application of scripture through skits 3. Interpreting doctrine in skits 4. Moral plays 5. Drama skills, pantomime, mime, and make-up

**Worship**—The third form is in the area of worship. Congregations may find clown ministry a bit unusual so it should be gently introduced to them. You should begin the outreach and teaching forms first to introduce the idea of clown ministry to your church community. After you have had some experience in the teaching form, you might go to your minister and discuss the possibility of introducing the congregation to the clown in worship. If the minister agrees, plan a clown skit around the scripture of the day. Call the skit the children’s message and the acceptance will rise considerably. Move slowly to present a full clown message in worship. Worship is very important and should be planned very carefully. Sometimes an introduction of the clown in worship is best tried first as a special service rather than the Sunday morning service. This will attract those persons who are really interested or curious. Don’t force the clown on your congregation! As Floyd Shaffer said, “Clown worship is real worship and it needs to be done well.” It is important to have someone to do a little explanation about the clown in church prior to the worship service. A handout explanation of the symbolism of the clown in church in the worship bulletin would also be a very good idea. The following chart gives you ideas of the who, where, and what can be done utilizing clown ministry in worship.

<b>W O R S H I P</b>	<b>WHO (Best Age Group)</b>	<b>WHERE (Best Locations)</b>	<b>WHAT (Best Types of Activities)</b>
	<i>(Experience has shown this order to be the most successful)</i> 1. Adults 2. Youth 3. Older Adults 4. Younger Children (with supervision)	1. Church (Sunday) School 2. Mid-week youth service 3. Vacation Bible School 4. Camp Devotions 5. Children’s Church 6. Children’s Message (Children’s Sermons) 7. Mid-Week Worship Services 8. Main Worship Service (Sunday morning)	1. Interpreting scripture through skits 2. Application of scripture through skits 3. Interpreting doctrine in skits 4. Assist choral or musical program 5. Assist in Liturgy 6. “Divine Interrupter” role

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It is hoped that this article will help you get started in what this author has found to be a truly powerful, fun, and extremely effective special ministry. Please do not hesitate to contact me for questions through the DramaShare web site [www.dramashare.org](http://www.dramashare.org)

### APPENDIX

#### Suggested Outline for a Clown Ministry Training Weekend

##### FRIDAY (2 hours)

<u>Time</u>	<u>Activity</u>
Before Session Begins	Browse resources on display One of two session leaders in character and make-up who interacts with the participants in pantomimed games and “follow-the-leader”
5 Minutes	Introductions
1 Minute	Read in unison the “Simple Clown’s Prayer”
5 Minutes	Follow-the-Leader Movement Exercises to music
10 Minutes	Imaginary Clown Bag—Goals of the Training 1) Clown Attitude 2) Clown Skills 3) Clown Make-up
10 Minutes	Pantomime skills- “I Can See Fools Everywhere” I-Illusion of Objects C-Characterization S-Storyline F-Facial Expression E-Exaggeration
15 Minutes	Imaginary Ball Toss (Game to practice pantomime skills)
15 Minutes	Treasure Chest (Game to exercise imagination and practice pantomime skills)
5 Minutes	Break (Back rub and refreshments)
10 Minutes	Christian Clown Symbolism and Scripture
20 Minutes	Video- “A Clown is Born” or “Yesu-The Life of Jesus”
30 Minutes	Characterization 1) Facial Emotions 2) Clown Walk 3) Entire Body

##### SATURDAY

<u>Time</u>	<u>Activity</u>
Before Session Begins	Browse resources on display
5 Minutes	Read “The Clown of God” by Tomie dePaola
20 Minutes	Three Types of Clowns 1) White Face 2) Auguste 3) Character
15 Minutes	Getting Inside Scripture 1) Symbolic Interpretation 2) Contemporary Interpretation 3) Pantomimed
15 Minutes	Three Forms to Clown Ministry 1) Outreach 2) Teaching 3) Worship
15 Minutes	Guided Imaginary Walk
10 Minutes	Costuming, Wigs, and Names

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## APPENDIX

### Suggested Outline for a Clown Ministry Training Weekend

#### SATURDAY

##### Time

##### Activity

15 Minutes	Clown Make-up Video-“Be A Clown” by Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Clown College
15 Minutes	Plunge and Non-Verbal Information
90 Minutes	Make-up Session
90 Minutes	Plunge to Health Care Center or Hospital
10 Minutes	Debrief of Plunge



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