

Cartoonist brings Christian faith to the funny papers

September 1, 2006

Posted: 9/01/06

Characters
from Kevin
Frank's
syndicated
cartoon
strip
Heaven's
Love Thrift
Shop.
(Photos
and art ©
2006
Kevin
Frank,
Dist. by
King
Features
Syndicate,
Inc.)

Cartoonist brings Christian

faith to the funny papers

By Hannah Elliott

Associated Baptist Press

DALLAS (ABP)—Christian cartoons are nothing new. They're everywhere from gospel tracts to Christian magazines and newsletters. But a Christian cartoon as a nationally syndicated feature in secular newspapers? That's almost unprecedented.

Although cartoonist Kevin Frank's strip involves Christian characters working in a place called Heaven's Love Thrift Shop, he doesn't consider the strip to be Christian.

Instead, he said his Sunday cartoon, which debuted recently in Salt Lake City's Deseret News, simply takes his own angle on things as a person of faith and reflects it through his characters.



“It’s hard for me to think of this as a ‘Christian’ strip, as opposed to strips about working moms, office workers, divorced dads or single parents,” Frank said. “A Christian can be all of those things. I like to think there’s an audience for it among all kinds of people.”

He'll soon find out. King Features Syndicate recently launched national syndication of the strip in 15 cities, giving readers the chance to meet Dag, Cassidy, Wilson and Shelby—Frank's main characters and purveyors of his Christian worldview. And while Frank plans not to be too "preachy," his message about faith in God will be clear.

The comic strip, called "Heaven's Love Thrift Shop," centers on a church-owned thrift shop and the workers who spend time there. Dag is an overzealous new convert. Wilson is the older, wiser shop director. Cassidy is the centered and warm-hearted shop manager. A frequent customer, Shelby, while not necessarily a person of faith, keeps returning to the thrift shop for something she can't quite identify. Each character, Frank said, reflects a past or present aspect of his own spiritual growth.

That spirit has driven Frank, 43, since his youth. As a child, he first published religious cartoons for his rural Mennonite church bulletin.

He first drew cartoons professionally, for the local weekly, at age 14.

"I grew up in the church, and my parents were people of faith," Frank said about his inclination to insert Christianity into his cartoons. "I knew people of faith. It just became part of who I was."

Frank doodled his way through high school. He then moved from Peoria, Ill., to Chicago and joined an urban ministry called Jesus People USA, a Christian community that helps homeless people with a soup kitchen, a shelter and, yes, even a thrift store.

Frank then worked as a staff artist at Jesus People's Cornerstone Magazine from 1982 to 1998, creating an award-winning strip called "Oboe Jones."

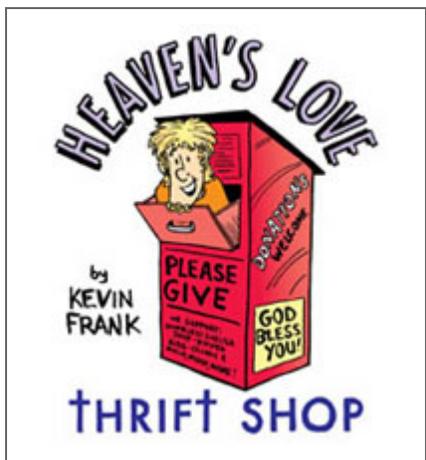
Frank impetuously sent a copy of "Oboe Jones" to the editors at King Features Syndicate. To his surprise, King management thought there might be a niche national market for his style of work. He spent five years

developing a comic strip, but King eventually dropped it.

Undaunted, he continued to hone his skills, working on various projects for Christianity Today, Tyndale House and the Discovery Channel Canada. All of it, he said, has helped refine his tone and talent. “Stylistically, you always try to learn and grow in your work. I like to think that I’m improving.”

The growth paid off when King Features took an interest in his newest strip, “Heaven’s Love Thrift Shop.”

One factor that separates it from his previous work is the subtlety of its preaching. Frank, a self-styled “connoisseur of thrift stores,” said his thrift store and charity experience helped him learn that “charitable outreach” appeals to most people, while outright Bible lessons often are dismissed by non-Christians.



“That (charity aspect) sort of gives me a vehicle to discuss matters of faith in a way that is more palatable to people, because nobody disagrees with charity,” he said. “It’s all good stuff, it’s all good works, and historically the church has a record of that.”

These days, many cartoon strips that appear in newspapers promote specific worldviews or agendas—in many circles, it’s almost expected.

Nonethe-less, Frank knows he will have to maintain a delicate balance in his strip. As a faith-oriented artist composing for a secular medium and syndicate, he expects some criticism.

Frank said he's not likely to address controversial issues like evolution, fundamentalism and politics. He's "not a political person" anyway, he said.

"I'm not that smart, but I'm smart enough to know not to jump into the debate," he said. "Let's just say people hold all kinds of views of the world and where it comes from and how it works. The same holds for my characters, allowing me to work out my own opinions and doubts through their questions and interaction."

Frank says, regardless of the size of his audience, he plans to take advantage of his opportunity with King Features.

"If I can glorify God in secular newspapers, even just a few of them, then that's success to me. That's just awesome," he said.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.