

Humor & honesty help evangelist connect with youth

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Douglas Runkles, otherwise known as "Runks" to youth ministries across the country, shares the gospel through humor.

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By Leann Callaway

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LEVELLAND—"Funny name, funny guy, deep message"—that's the slogan

of Douglas Runkles of First Baptist Church in Levelland, better known as “Runks” to youth ministries across the country.

As a popular youth communicator, he likes to see his teenage audiences laughing so hard it hurts, because he has discovered humor serves as his best tool to connect with students. And after he captures their attention, he shifts gears to describe his own life struggles and challenge young people to trust God to overcome their struggles and addictions.



For most of his life, Runkles kept a dark secret. At age 7, he was sexually abused by two of his cousins.

“That set me off on a road of hating myself and shame,” he said. “My parents were godly people, and we attended church regularly. But I never told anyone what happened, because my cousins said they would kill me.

“When I got to junior high and high school, I was overwhelmed with anger and bitterness from being sexually abused. I started drinking and partying like crazy. I was the class clown and life of the party. It would make me feel good until I came home. Then, all those feelings would come rushing back. When I reached my junior year, I realized there had to be something else.”

During his junior year in high school, a friend led Runkles to faith in Jesus Christ by showing him what an authentic Christian life looked like.

“There was this guy in my geometry class, and it was driving me crazy, because I couldn’t figure him out,” Runkles said.

“He didn’t get involved with the stuff that I was doing, like partying and drinking. I started watching his life, and after two months, I asked him: ‘What’s the deal? What do you have that I don’t?’ He told me about Christ. He didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know, but it was someone my age telling me how Jesus made a difference in his life. At that moment, everything became real to me.”

Soon after he made his profession of faith in Christ, he felt God’s call into ministry. “It was a huge transformation. I went from being the class clown to the preacher. People couldn’t believe that I was the same person,” he said.

After high school, Runkles went to McMurry College in Abilene and then earned his master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

He was a youth minister seven years. In 1998, he began traveling around the country communicating the gospel to teenagers, college students and adults.

In his messages, Runkles discusses issues relevant to teenagers and also presents ways to defend the truth of Christianity to a postmodern world.

“More than anything, I love pouring my life into teenagers,” he said. “I’m 40 years old, and my heart still beats for teenagers. I love talking with them and getting to know them, especially kids that are hurting—the misfit or the loner—and being able to help them.

“That’s really become one of the joys of my life—to be in a position now where God could use the horrible stuff that I’ve been through to help kids who are going through the same thing.”

Runkles has spoken at a variety of events, including the Texas Baptist Youth Evangelism Conference, DiscipleNow weekends and youth camps.

“I try to balance the message between lost kids and saved kids,” he said. “In the last two years, what God has done in my life has been an absolute miracle. Because of the abuse issues in my past, I carried that throughout my life. A couple of years ago, I got to the point where I was tired of keeping this secret. I finally told my wife, and I went through two years of therapy. Now it’s really become a focus of my ministry, because I’ve come to terms with it, and I am able to share that message with hurting kids.”

Statistics say one out of six girls and one out of four males are sexually abused by age 18, he noted. “So, that’s at least 25 percent of my audience. Because of what I’ve gone through in my life, I definitely have a heart for hurting kids,” he said.

Last summer, after Runkles shared his story at a youth camp, youth leaders were flooded with students seeking counseling and desiring to overcome their addictions.

“Before camp, the youth pastor had told me that the high school kids were really hard to reach and didn’t really care about church. I shared my story about the things I had been through and my addictions and was real with them. There’s something about transparency that God uses,” he said.

“It’s so liberating to me that I don’t have secrets anymore. I’m not Superman, and I’m not wearing a mask anymore.”

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