



KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

HEAVENLY HUMOR

Kevin Frank blends faith and the funnies in his new comic strip.

higher power He puts faith in 4 funny panels

By MARK I. PINSKY
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

For a century, newspaper cartoonists have been drawing on the divine for inspiration. Most of the time, these are innocuous gags about heaven and hell, or embarrassing moments at church in cartoons such as "Dennis the Menace" and "Family Circus."

Recently, some comic strips have taken on a satirical edge, such as Doug Marlette's "Kudzu," which features a buffoonish preacher named Will B. Dunn as a regular character.

Kevin Frank is taking a distinctly different path, with a wry, gentle strip called "Heaven's Love Thrift Shop." The Sunday-only strip, which de-



KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

'Heaven's Love Thrift Shop' is a Sunday-only strip, which debuted last month in about 20 newspapers, mostly in small and middle-sized markets.

buted last month, is built around a church (denomination not specified), and is syndicated nationally by King Features. It now appears in about 20 papers, mostly in smaller and middle-sized markets.

The strip's three main characters include the store's director, its manager and one of its workers, a recent, zealous convert to Christianity. Proceeds from the shop go to support charitable work, such as soup kitchens and homeless shelters.

Frank, 43, began doing cartoons for the church bulletin of his rural, Mennonite congregation near Peoria, Ill. For 15 years he lived and worked with a national youth ministry,

Jesus People, USA, as a volunteer in homeless shelters and soup kitchens, as well as thrift stores. He now lives in Ontario, Canada, with his wife and three children. An evangelical, Frank has a greater purpose in mind for the strip.

"I do see it as a ministry," he says. "My simple goal is to remind people there is a God, and that God loves them. If I can communicate that God loves people in newspapers across America, then I'll consider it a success."

King Features' editor Jay Kennedy had wanted to launch a Christian comic strip for 10 years, he says, adding, "Faith is a way a lot of people define themselves."

Frank's supporters are

hopeful, given the long odds for survival, much less for success. A similar attempt in the early 2000s, "Wildwood," failed to develop a following before being withdrawn by the artist.

The Rev. Robert Short, author of *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, and other books about religion and comics, likes Frank's first few strips.

"What you have here is a combination of two things that are hard to find together," he says. "A very explicit expression of Christian faith and, at the same time, it's very funny."

"Usually when artists are explicit about faith, it stops being funny. If it insists on being funny, the faith takes a hit. This strip seems to combine

these successfully. At the same time, it comes off as hilarious, not pious, not milquetoast, but explicit in its expression of faith. That's hard to find."

Still, the artist recognizes that his explicitly Christian faith, as it is presented in the strip, may be a barrier to some readers — and to newspaper editors.

"There is no doubt that the word 'Jesus' has the potential to offend somebody," says Frank, but it's a risk he and the syndicate are willing to take. "You know in advance what you're getting — it's going to say 'Jesus.'"

Mark I. Pinsky can be reached at mpinsky@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5589.