

Churches Urge Compassion For Alienated Smokers

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As smokers increasingly become social pariahs and smoking is banned in more public places, some Christians would like to see them welcomed more in church -- the smokers, that is, not the smoking.

Their concern extends beyond the risks for smokers' bodies to the eternal destinies of smokers' souls. Are some smokers hesitating to come to church, where they have to refrain from lighting up for an hour or two on Sunday morning? Do some even mistakenly conclude they can't surrender their life to Christ unless they quit their habit first?

Colette Walden grew up in a family where both her parents and her sister smoked. While her parents managed to quit smoking, her sister died of cancer in 1998 at age 37. Colleen Messner started smoking while in youth group in a denomination that didn't discourage smoking.

Walden says her sister's suffering makes her more sensitive to smokers' predicaments. "I know how much she wanted to quit and was unable to," says Walden, of Springfield, Missouri. Although Messner was unchurched when she died, her suffering eventually led her to reconnect with God.

Smoking cessation programs exist in a few churches, but smokers aren't about to become an unreached people group. "A few people have asked for prayer to stop smoking," says Pastor G. Mark Denyes of Emmanuel Christian Center (Assemblies of God) in Minneapolis. "Nicotine is very addictive."

Before the U.S. surgeon general initially linked cigarette smoking and health 40 years ago, few churches spoke against it. Denyes says he used to preach against smoking, but doesn't anymore because of the widespread knowledge of its harmful effects. Emmanuel Christian Center has a subtler approach now: Ashtrays are outside each entrance.

Barna Research Group reports that 39 percent of the unchurched smoke, compared to 20 percent who are born-again Christians.

Some smokers have told Assemblies of God Chaplain Robert Leathers that they feel ostracized by "religious people." One smoker said he felt his habit made him appear to Christians as though he was part of a leper colony.

Rick Salvato of Assemblies of God HealthCare Ministries says team members who travel around the world advise smokers of the dangers of tobacco when they encounter them. "For a Christian who really wants to quit, the power of the Holy Spirit is the way to go," he says. "I don't think

you can do it through willpower alone. Nicotine is just too addicting."

Active support from churches can make a significant difference. Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore has worked with pastors to put hundreds of church-based smoking cessation programs in place, according to Dr. Diane Becker, professor of medicine and public health. In a yearlong study, researchers found that nearly twice as many smokers who received support from pastors and fellow churchgoers made progress toward quitting as compared to those who only picked up a self-help pamphlet at their churches.

Dr. Grat Correll, a family practice physician in Bristol, Tennessee, suggests that congregations put emphasis on middle and high school students, who often feel socially isolated. "Teenagers smoke for social acceptance," Correll says. "They see their friends smoking and want to fit in."

Correll says Christians should create an atmosphere at church that is nonjudgmental. "Smokers need to feel loved and accepted as they are, not as though they have to change their lifestyle before they can come," Correll says. "If they smoke before or after the church service it's OK as long as they're hearing the gospel message and are being exposed to something that can potentially change their lives, including the smoking behaviors."

Underlying spiritual problems cause many people to use tobacco, Correll says. "The symptom is smoking, the disease is insecurity, or a teen's desire for acceptance by a peer group, or stress and a lack of understanding of how God can comfort in those times," he says. "Pointing them toward Christ is probably equally if not more therapeutic than nicotine patches and gums."

A/G rodeo chaplain Paul Scholtz says "cold turkey" is the best method for addicted smokers. "As with Teen Challenge's direct and successful approach, this is the technique with the most success," Scholtz says. "Strict accountability and rapid change of environment or peer group seems to be the only way. Almost no one possesses the will to quit alone in this culture."

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