



Do The Churches Fail Families?

by Stephanie Abbott

Leaving church services, a pamphlet in the rack of the vestibule caught her eye: "Do You Have An Alcoholic In Your Family?" Pretending to be studying the booklets on religious education, she stuffed the pamphlet in her purse hoping none of the other parishioners saw her choice. She hurried to the car, not able to wait to read, not able to wait until she got home. And she didn't want the children to see the booklet!

Eagerly she opened to the first page, anxious for a solution to the problem that was destroying all her family's happiness and her marriage. What did it say? What did it recommend? Was there a procedure she could follow that would restore her husband to what he had been before drinking had become his life? To her despair, the only advice was...pray. She had already nagged God, promised Him anything if He could show her the way out of the mess her life had become.

This was a few decades ago, before treatment centers advertised, before 12 step groups became a common part of the culture, before intervention books were written and before therapists became educated. There is no question we do a better job today supporting families with addiction. But have the churches and synagogues changed much?

EVERY church is touched by substance abuse. It is a good start if clergy are educated, but is that education reflected in action? Are Alcoholics Anonymous, Al Anon, and Alateen groups encouraged to meet in parish meeting rooms at night? Are those meetings mentioned weekly in the church bulletins? Clear, concrete knowledge needs to be shared with every member of the congregation. Clergy can reach an entire congregation from the pulpit with references to the spiritual aspects of chemical dependency. Everyone should know the symptoms of the disease, the risk factors, the local availability of treatment, how intervention works and how everyone can help. Many religious leaders avoid useful programs because of the pain of their own addiction, or that of their own parents or other family members. Or they may honestly believe that their own congregation is immune, that religious practice prevents alcoholism.

Pastoral counseling initiated by a family with a troubled teenager or a marriage in trouble often reveals a problem with alcohol or other drugs. The wise and experienced counselor will know how to get to the root of the matter, so that useful help becomes possible. Premarital counseling should always include information about the possibilities of addiction to substances, and what early problems should not be ignored or denied.

"I estimate that some 60% of any non-bereavement hurt I hear in my conference room has its genesis in the parishioner's own problems with addiction or with a relationship with an addicted family member," comments a long-time Catholic pastor in northwestern Ohio. "Clergy and faith community-related family services need to understand that many couples are entering marriages with COA impairment. They need to understand that much of their teaching and therapeutic efforts are somewhere between futile and counterproductive when active chemical dependency or untreated/unhealed family alcoholism wounds are present."

Addiction negatively affects and can destroy the spiritual life of a family. The support of a nurturing church community can intervene and then support the process of recovery. There is nothing that clergy do that is MORE crucial, since alcohol and drug abuse is the largest single threat our country faces, and is an important factor in divorce, child abuse and other violence, as well as premature death.



Do The Churches Fail Families? (cont.)

Fortunately there are faith communities committed, and not just on paper, to providing help and direction in alcohol/drug education, prevention and even treatment. The Episcopal Diocese of Washington, DC has an alcohol intervention team. The First Community Baptist Church in Detroit conducts a "Laymen's Rites of Passage Boys' Group" that meets on a weekly basis. Adult male church members act as positive role models. These boys have shown improvement in academic performance and behavior. This type of program develops personal traits that protect youngsters against the use of drugs and alcohol.

B'nai B'rith's program "Parent Power: Keeping Our Kids Drug Free" reflects a commitment to family-based religious life and instruction that is central to Judaism. As with so many other effective substance abuse efforts, the program was planned with the needs of a very specific population in mind.

The United Church of Christ recommends that its ministers always try to balance descriptions of substance abuse problems with reflections about the obligation to help those who are dependent, and the characteristics that help protect individuals from succumbing to abuse.

Some communities have taken the major step of implementing an independent treatment program in areas of the country where adequate resources do not exist. The Queen of Peace Center in St. Louis, for example, was developed to meet the needs of adolescent, chemically dependent girls.

The Churches Intervention Project (CIP) believes that, when churches and synagogues deal with alcoholism and other drug dependencies in members of the congregation and their families, they are fulfilling their mission to address the totality of their congregations' spiritual needs. Addressing the disease of addiction bravely and directly increases spiritual connection and growth. Even when adults are not receptive to intervention and help, the children have a right to see their church as a place of solace, support, and appropriate guidance.

Stephanie Abbott, MA, specialized in the family aspects of addiction, created the family program at Brighton Hospital in Michigan, taught at Marymount College in Arlington VA and is the editor of NACoA NETWORK.