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Tackling addiction

[August 22, 2011](#)

The church's public witness
By the Rev. Cynthia Abrams

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Alcohol and drug addiction are serious matters that confront every community. That's why it is crucial to participate in National Recovery Month in September.

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A recent article cites that over 70% of young people are underage drinkers. This is a disturbing statistic because people who started drinking before age 21 are much more likely to become lifelong addicts.

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United Methodist Social Principles
Alcohol & Other Drugs

We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons.

Local churches and their pastors often do not become aware of serious problems such as underage drinking until something tragic occurs. In the midst of such an environment, it is vital to foster ongoing open dialogue with factual information about

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We support abstinence from the use of any illegal drugs.

Since the use of illegal drugs, as well as illegal and problematic use of alcohol, is a major factor in crime, disease, death, and family dysfunction, we support educational programs as well as other prevention strategies encouraging abstinence from illegal drug use and, with regard to those who choose to consume alcoholic beverages, judicious use with deliberate and intentional restraint, with Scripture as a guide. ...

—¶162L Book of Discipline

addiction prevention, intervention steps, treatment and long-lasting recovery.

A critical step for a holistic approach to addiction is to offer opportunities for church members to become engaged in addiction advocacy and ministry.

The first step in dealing with addiction is developing a full understanding. The United Methodist Church has spoken forthrightly about alcohol and other

drugs for decades. United Methodists work diligently on effective methods to combat these issues in important ways around the globe.

The United Methodist Social Principles [¶162L](#) (2008 *Book of Discipline*) and [#3042, Alcohol & Other Drugs](#) (2008 *Book of Resolutions*) provide important information for pastors and teachers to open discussion about addiction and offer compassion for addicted people in our congregations and communities.

Unfounded notions

Too often, we hear of the pain caused by unfounded notions about addicts and addiction. Judgmental attitudes toward addicts create negative feelings among those who suffer from addiction and facilitate stigma rather than compassion and active healing. These unfounded notions are often based on misunderstanding of addiction and its causes.

For instance, leading experts in the field of medicine and science point out that physiological changes happen in an addict's brain. These changes make it difficult to recover from addiction without addressing brain change alongside behavior therapy and spiritual support. (*Healing the Addicted Brain* explains more about this. It is listed among resources at the end of this article.)

These changes make it difficult to recover from

addiction.

Addressing recovery physiologically enables the brain to return to its normal state. Coupled with traditional behavioral and spiritual approaches, this has led to new hope for lasting recovery in people with deep-seated addictions. Too often, these people have not been able to achieve recovery and maintain sobriety through behavioral therapy alone.

Public health facilities, counselors and law enforcement agencies are often well-aware of addiction problems within their communities. Individuals and families who face addiction can be reluctant to share problems with their pastor or local church, though, for fear of judgment. Or, they may contact a pastor only after the problem reaches a crisis stage. At that point, conveying a judgmental message further harms the addicted person and his or her family. It also damages the church's faithful witness to suffering people. An opportunity is lost, preventing effective, credible ministry.

12 steps

A common way that local churches address addiction is to simply open its doors to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other 12-step groups. The church's members spend little, if any, time learning about how to engage in a comprehensive, systemic approach to addiction prevention and recovery. Such an approach integrates this ministry into worship and regular study and programs of the congregation.

AA and other 12-step groups are important programs whose primary approach encourages recovery through a support-based model. Twelve-step programs have affected millions of lives and offered hope to many people who are now in life-long recovery. Providing space for these programs is an essential tool to combating addiction.

Education about addiction and advocating for effective public policy are critically important too.

Education about addiction and advocating for effective public policy are critically important too, however. These are additional tools that congregations need to embrace alongside recovery programs.

We are called to dig deeper and go further in our own education and advocacy by addressing the systemic, stealthy ways that

addiction infiltrates our society. Extending addiction ministry to prevention and advocacy addresses the systemic root causes that lead people to need recovery programs in the first place.

For example, the Center on Alcohol Marketing & Youth (www.camy.org) points out the correlation between alcohol advertising targeted at young people and higher rates of underage and binge-drinking. Two experts at a recent policy symposium described the connection between the number of alcohol outlets in a community and the rates of crime and risky behaviors among young people.

Another intransigent problem is the outsized influence the well-financed alcohol industry has on our elected officials. This influence has a far-reaching effect on public policy, often to the detriment of public health and best practices related to addiction.

These examples should emphasize that addiction can never be successfully fought without addressing systemic problems through concerted advocacy and education. Churches, in particular, are well-equipped to “connect the dots” and help affect public policy. We educate members about a wide variety of issues every week. We call them to faithful living and acting in the world. The local church is an environment ripe for activating people in efforts to thwart the social costs of addiction and ultimately save lives.

National Recovery Month

In September, National Recovery Month will be observed. This year’s theme, “Recovery Benefits Everyone,” highlights the positive effects of recovery beyond addicted individuals. The observance is an ideal opportunity to introduce or provide educational events and resources in your local church to engage members on alcohol addiction, prevention and recovery.

A free downloadable toolkit to assist in educating church members and others in your community is available at recoverymonth.gov. The General Board of Church & Society mailed toolkits this month to bishops and other Annual Conference leaders, including Church & Society chairs, Drug & Alcohol coordinators and communicators, to promote this observance in your annual conference.

Worship tool and ideas: To assist you in featuring the issue of addiction in a worship setting, we have prepared a downloadable [template](#). We also ask you to send us your order for worship if

you develop a unique service for your church so that we can share ideas with others. Send it to cabrams@umc-gbcs.org.

Editor's note: The Rev. Cynthia Abrams directs the General Board of Church & Society (GBCS) work area on Alcohol, Other Addictions & Health Care.

Resources

The United Methodist Social Principles [¶162L](#) (2008 *Book of Discipline*) and [Resolution #3042](#) (2008 *Book of Resolutions*) provide important information for pastors and teachers to open discussion about addiction and offer compassion for addicted people in our congregations and communities.

Information and study questions on addiction advocacy are available on the GBCS Web site. They were prepared as part of this year's "Alcohol Free Lent" campaign.

- "[Drinking socially or for health?](#)" (*Faith in Action*, March 18)
- "[Confronting alcohol's global impact](#)" (*Faith in Action*, March 29)
- "[Alcohol marketing and young people](#)" (*Faith in Action*, April 6)
- "[Ministry with alcoholics](#)" (*Faith in Action*, April 14)
- "[Cheap alcohol's high cost](#)" (*Faith in Action*, April 21)

For more on alcohol and other addictions, visit the Alcohol & Other Addictions page on the GBCS Web site: [Alcohol & Other Addictions](#).

Faith & Facts Card. Bulletin-sized insert ideal for introducing topic in local church setting. Cards are great tools for Bible study and advocacy. Two-sided four-color study card has biblical references, United Methodist Social Principles and resolutions, facts regarding the issue, and steps you and your church can take to make a difference. Twenty-five cards per pack, available through GBCS [Online Store](#).

[National Alcohol & Drug Addiction Recovery Month](#). National observance promotes recovery. The General Board of Church & Society helps plan this month each year as a member of the National Recovery Month committee.

[Faces & Voices of Recovery](#). National organizing community for advocates of effective recovery policy and for people in recovery.

National Assn. for Children of Alcoholics (NACOA). Provides online training to faith leaders and other spiritual caregivers. Training events sponsored by NACOA are held around the country. For more information, contact [Cynthia Abrams](#).

Center on Alcohol Marketing & Youth. Features important research and monitoring of the alcohol industry and its impact on young people.

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA). Trains local grassroots groups, known as community anti-drug coalitions, in effective community problem-solving strategies, teaching them how to assess their local substance abuse-related problems and develop a comprehensive plan to address them.

White Bison and The Wellbriety Institute. Provide culturally based healing for American Indian people.

Special Program on Substance Abuse & Related Violence (SPSARV). United Methodist Church special program addressing substance abuse and related violence.

Reducing Underage Drinking, A Collective Responsibility. National Academy of Sciences resource. This report features important research that outlines recommendations for combating underage drinking.

Healing the Addicted Brain. By Harold Urschel, M.D. a resource to understand the physiological effects of addiction and learn more about a recovery methodology utilizing the latest medical science.

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