

Church imposes tobacco ban

Eastern N.C. church wants its grounds, not just sanctuary, to be tobacco free

Yonat Shimron, Staff Writer

ENFIELD -- Members of a rural church here, surrounded by farmland, have taken one of the region's most sacred traditions and stomped on it.

Signs alerting visitors to the sacrilege appear on both sides of the church parking lot.

"Welcome to our Tobacco Free Church Grounds," they read.

Ivory Hill Baptist Church, a mostly black congregation, is among the first in this once-verdant tobacco region to ban smoking anywhere on its property. Although smoking has never been allowed inside the sanctuary, churchgoers would regularly light up in the parking lot on their way out of services, and no one gave them any guff.

Tobacco, after all, was a way of life across Eastern North Carolina -- a cash crop that bettered the lives of many. For that reason, tobacco never became a moral issue in North Carolina churches, and pastors never tried to root it out, as they might alcohol or gambling. Years ago, when the mostly white Southern Baptist Convention passed an anti-smoking resolution, the state's counterpart, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, didn't take up the issue, concluding it was best not to alienate local churches where the leaf was still golden.

It's a sign of the times that tobacco's health risks now override its economic benefits, even in Halifax County, which produced 4.3 million pounds of tobacco in 2004.

The Rev. Shelton Daniel, the pastor of Ivory Hill, is among a new generation of ministers concerned about his congregation's physical well-being. For several years, the church has stressed good nutrition. It has plans to build a gym with a weight-lifting room and treadmills.

"Biblically, we believe you should do everything you can to preserve the body," said Daniel, whose father had quadruple bypass surgery recently and whose son was diagnosed with diabetes.

The new policy, which was approved in a church meeting last month, is part of a growing awareness in African-American churches across the country of the importance of health and fitness.

"We truly believe in the mind, the body, and the spirit," said Carolyn Henderson, health coordinator at St. Joseph's African Methodist Episcopal Church in Durham. The church recently

listed "health awareness" as one of its top five priorities.

State health statistics show that blacks are at higher risk for some diseases. Blacks, for example, are three times as likely to die of complications from diabetes as whites. And black people are less likely to participate in physical activity during their leisure hours. Although studies show that blacks smoke less than whites, they have a higher death rate from some of the ailments linked to cigarettes -- heart disease, cancer and stroke.

Government and private non-profit groups have stepped in to help eliminate those disparities, and churches are their biggest ally. **The N.C. Health and Wellness Trust Fund**, set up to manage the money from the state's share of the national tobacco settlement, funded the program that encouraged Ivory Hill to go tobacco free.

The program is run by the Durham-based **Center for Health and Healing**. The center plans to enlist at least 20 more black churches, in addition to Ivory Hill, this year in its campaign to ban smoking on the premises.

Wake and Durham counties each have several other church health initiatives. Wake County's Health Promotion Chronic Disease Prevention Program, for example, awarded \$10,000 in grant money last year to churches and community organizations intent on improving the health of their members. In Durham, the Community Health Coalition encourages black churches to educate members on a different aspect of health each month. It also provides resources for blood pressure and cholesterol screening, among other things.

But though it is one thing for churches to talk about good nutrition, getting people to quit smoking, especially in Eastern North Carolina, is no easy task.

Maurice Sneed, who attended Bible study at Ivory Hill on Wednesday, is exactly the kind of person the church's new program needs most to reach. A high school senior from Roanoke Rapids, Sneed said he smokes a couple of cigarettes a week, mostly as a way to reduce anxiety. His fledgling habit could lead to a lifetime addiction and long-term problems.

"I don't smoke cigarettes hard," he said. "I know they're bad for me."

Linda Lynch of Enfield said she was glad for her church's new policy. Last year, her mother died of lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking.

"When we were growing up, we didn't think of it as causing cancer," she said.

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