

Road to recovery from addiction

July 11, 2009

Terry Walker fell to his knees in the shower stall of a South Texas substance-abuse treatment center, crying out to God for release from the chains of addiction.

“God blessed me with the gift of desperation,” Walker said. “At that point, if God had told me I needed to stand on my head for 30 minutes a day on the roof of my house in order to get clean and sober, I would have done it.”



Walker, who had grown up in First Baptist Church of Sulphur Springs, discovered at age 15 alcohol made him “feel different and better”—at least for a short time. In the Navy, he became a binge drinker. Upon his return to civilian life, he developed an addiction to prescription drugs—so severe he landed in prison for prescription fraud.

“The state of Texas did not take kindly to me calling in my own prescriptions,” he recalled. “I was dyslexic when it came to reading the instructions on pill bottles. Instead of one pill every three to four hours for pain, I took three to four pills every hour to numb my emotional pain.”

By the time he entered a treatment center, Walker said, he would have welcomed the release death offered. Having exhausted every other option, he recalled the faith from which he had strayed as a teenager and placed his life in God’s hands.

“It wasn’t an audible voice, but I heard God say to me, ‘You’ve suffered long enough.’ God told me he would carry the burden for me,” he recalled.

Walker’s best friend, Pastor Van Christian of First Baptist Church in Comanche, described Walker’s deliverance as “the closest thing to

Damascus Road experience I've ever known a person to have," comparing it to the Apostle Paul's dramatic conversion.

But while Walker has re-mained clean and sober nine years after he said God took away the physical desire to "feed the beast," he acknowledges his life demands daily discipline.

"I can't live on the edge. I have to be around Christian friends. I stay involved working with the youth at church. It helps me maintain my focus," said Walker, who works as a hay broker in Comanche.

He expressed gratitude to First Baptist Church in Comanche for the acceptance and support the congregation has offered him, "holding my hand in the early stages of my recovery." But Walker noted Christians could do more to reach out to people struggling with addiction—not wait until they take the initiative and seek out the church, as he did.

Walker's experience should serve as a cautionary tale for churches, said Carrie Beard, substance abuse consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas [Christian Life Commission](#) .



"Too many of our folks think addicts and alcoholics all live under bridges. The reality is that on any given Sunday, there probably are teenagers in the congregation who have said 'yes' to drugs or alcohol for the first time," she said.

Christians are "probably just as susceptible to addiction as the general population, but they find it harder to talk about it," she noted.

[First Baptist Church in Austin](#) —a longstanding host to ongoing Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon 12-step recovery groups—launched a Faith Partners team ministry more than a year ago.

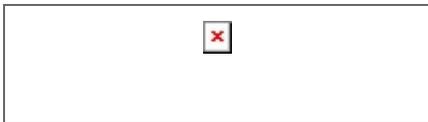
“Faith Partners is geared toward members of our own congregation who have themselves struggled with addiction and members whose families have been affected by addictions,” said Ben DeLeon, Faith Partners team leader and facilitator. At the same time, he added, people outside the church also have become involved through the invitation of members.

“We need to address addictions and the families affected by them within the context of our congregations,” DeLeon said. “It’s an issue that’s been swept under the rug for too long.”

[Faith Partners](#) , developed by the Rush Center of the Johnson Institute in Austin, involves trained laity in a team approach to addiction prevention, education and recovery.

Faith Partners has sponsored guest speakers, such as a recovery expert who discussed biblical and spiritual foundations of the 12 steps and a child psychologist who talked to parents and teenagers about prevention issues.

In addition to alcohol and drug dependency, Faith Partners also deals with such issues as gambling, food and sex addictions, DeLeon noted.



“We want to create a place of affirmation where people whose lives are affected by addictions can be embraced and accepted,” he said.

Church-based recovery programs can be tremendously successful—if churches take the time to find a program that fits the specific congregation, Baird insisted.

“Churches that have identified programs that meet the needs of their community and congregation and that have the resources to put into it are very effective,” she said.

Beaird singled out [Celebrate Recovery](#) —a Scripture-based program developed by Saddleback Church in Southern California—as a particularly valuable approach, provided a congregation has the resources to dedicate to it.

Darrel Bye works on staff at Willow Bend Church in Plano as Celebrate Recovery ministry director. He became involved in the program in 2002 after “a friend told me it was time for me to deal with the junk in my life.”

“The goal of Celebrate Recovery is not just sobriety but a changed life. Sobriety is a byproduct,” Bye explained.

While Celebrate Recovery follows to a degree the 12-step approach pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous, it grounds the program in the Beatitudes, as taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, he noted.

“If you don’t see Jesus Christ as your Savior, the program will not work for you. Our Higher Power is Jesus Christ,” Bye said. “The goal is to remove anything that stands in the way of a relationship with God. That’s what addictions do.”

The pastor, ministerial staff and elders at Willow Bend Church all have gone through the Celebrate Recovery program to learn its principles, he added.

“It’s a significant part of the DNA of our church,” Bye said. “We have an awareness that we live in a broken world, and we all need help.”

Helpful websites:

- www.drugabuse.gov/
 - www.2young2drink.com/
 - www.samhsa.gov/
 - www.madd.org/
 - www.casacolumbia.org/
 - www.ncadd.org/
 - www.mediacampaign.org/
 - www.theantidrug.com/
 - [BGCT Christian Life Commission Substance Abuse Updates](http://www.bgct.org/)
- <https://www.drugrehab.com/>

Celebrate Recovery has affected the way members of Willow Bend Church see each other and the way they welcome newcomers, Pastor Dave Jobe said.

“There’s an immediate acceptance of people where they are in the journey,” he said. “Celebrate Recovery has given us a clear path for discipleship and life transformation. It’s created an awareness that people don’t have to stay where they are, but they can grow and experience life change.”

Willow Bend has helped other churches start Celebrate Recovery ministries—even sending out three people from its membership to help launch the program in other congregations, Bye noted.

For churches seriously considering a ministry like Celebrate Recovery, it demands a willingness to be open to “people who are not church people,” he added.

“It means seeing the church as a hospital. And sick people go to a hospital,”

Bye said. “Our job is to do spiritual triage and bring people to a healthy state.”

While Celebrate Recovery demands a high level of commitment in terms of personnel, churches can offer effective ministries on a much smaller scale, Beard noted, pointing to [First Baptist Church in Bonham](#) .

“We found something that works for us,” said Lanny Burnett, who leads an ongoing Bible study and recovery ministry for patients in the substance-abuse recovery unit of the local Veteran’s Administration hospital.

Burnett drives a church bus to the hospital once a week. Patients who want to participate in the program board the bus for First Baptist Church, where they join in a simple meal—fried chicken one week, pizza the next—and a study using the [Life Recovery Bible](#) .

“We follow the structure of AA,” Burnett said. But instead of a freewheeling discussion, the facilitator seeks to steer the conversation toward how the Scripture reading for that day can be applied to the lives of participants.

“It’s really a Life Recovery group, so we pull in people from the community who are dealing with other issues like grief or divorce,” Burnett said. About 80 percent of the participants are from the VA hospital, and the rest are from the general public, he noted.

Until a change in the correctional system closed the female unit, First Baptist Church also sponsored a Life Recovery Bible study for women at the Fannin County Jail, Burnett added.

“The good thing about our approach is that one person can do it with just a little help,” he said.

Burnett, who is in recovery himself, hopes the simple and easy-to-replicate approach his church follows can serve as an example to others. Already,

members of a Presbyterian congregation in Deport—60 miles to the east—visited the Life Recovery Bible study group in Bonham to learn how to start a similar program of their own.

“I really believe the substance abusers of today are like the first century lepers,” he said. “Somebody needs to minister to them—to let them know somebody loves them.”