

Young snake handlers grasp the dangerous power of faith

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS)—Andrew Hamblin's Facebook page is filled with snippets of his life—making a late-night run for tacos, watching SpongeBob on the couch with his kids, and handling rattlesnakes in church.

Hamblin, 21, pastor of Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tenn., is part of a new generation of serpent-handling Christians who are revitalizing a century-old faith tradition in Tennessee.

Gregory Coots (left) of Middleboro, Ky., and Andrew Hamblin, 21, pastor of Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tenn., embrace each other while Hamlin holds several copperheads during a church service. (RNS PHOTO/Shelley Mays/Courtesy USA Today Grace Hill Media)

While older serpent handlers were wary of outsiders, these younger believers welcome visitors and use social media to promote their often misunderstood—and illegal—version of Christianity. They want to show the power of their extreme form of spirituality. And they hope to reverse a state ban on handling snakes in church.

Since the early 1900s, a handful of true believers in Eastern Tennessee and other parts of Appalachia have practiced the so-called signs of the gospel, found in the King James Version of the Gospel of Mark: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick,

and they shall recover."

While other churches ignore this passage due to its questionable status in early Bible manuscripts or treat it metaphorically, serpent handlers follow it literally. Their intense faith demands holy living and rewards them with spiritual ecstasy—the chance to hold life and death in their hands.

"There's still an anointing from heaven. Glory to God!" Micah Golden shouted. "He'll still let you do the signs of God."

Then he flipped the lid of a small wooden box by his feet and pulled out three Southern copperheads, all entwined. Golden lifted them about his head, then swung them back and forth in front of him before handing them to Hamblin, who took the snakes in one hand and lifted the other in prayer.

Hamblin began to preach about Jesus: "The same man that walked upon the water, he said, 'They shall take up serpents.' There's a realness in the signs of God."

That led to a cascade of prayers as the whole crowd began to speak in tongues. Then the shouts died down, and Hamblin and other worshippers started a procession toward the door.

"Come on, people, let's go have church," he said.

Hamblin and other handlers say the Bible tells people to obey the law. So, he wears a seat belt while driving, obeys the speed limit and files his taxes on time.

But Hamblin won't give up serpent handling, which he says is a command from God—even though Tennessee outlawed it in 1947 after five people died of serpent bites at churches in two years.



Andrew Hamblin, 21, pastor of Tabernacle Church of God in La Follette, Tenn., holds up two rattlesnakes during church service. (RNS photo by Shelley Mays/courtesy USA Today)

Breaking the law can lead to a fine of \$50 to \$150 or up to six months in jail. The ban rarely is enforced, unless someone dies in a church.

Hamblin knows people think he and other handlers are crazy. But if more people experienced what he does when in church, they wouldn't mock it, he said.

"It is the closest thing to heaven on earth that you could get," he said. "You can feel God's power in the flesh."

For more than a century, serpent handlers have had a turbulent relationship with outsiders. Churches popped up around charismatic preachers, then faded after controversy or bad publicity. When the practice became illegal, true believers went underground.

Until last year, serpent-handling churches were in decline, said Paul Williamson, professor of psychology at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Ark., who studies serpent handlers.

That's changed as the children of older leaders have grown up and started handling serpents. Converts, like Hamblin and Golden, have joined them.

By inviting outsiders to his church, Hamblin hopes to show serpent handlers practice their faith in a responsible manner. He begins each service with a warning—"There's death in that box"—pointing to a pile of serpent boxes.

Despite precautions, serpent handlers get bitten. Hamblin almost died at 19 when a bite from a yellow timber left him hospitalized with internal bleeding.

Over Memorial Day weekend, Randy "Mack" Wolford of Bluefield, W. Va., one of Hamblin's mentors and friends, was bitten by a timber rattler during an outdoor Sunday service held at Panther State Park in West Virginia, the only state where serpent handling is legal. He was pronounced dead the next day.

Hamblin and his wife, Elizabeth, drove to West Virginia so he could preach at Wolford's funeral. He still was reeling from the shock that the friend he called Brother Mack was gone.

Hamblin planned to tell grieving mourners not to lose faith.

"The only thing I know to do is to encourage the people of God to keep on,"

he said. "Keep doing the signs of God."