

Young snake handlers grasp the power of faith

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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c. 2012 USA Today NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) Andrew Hamblin's Facebook page is filled with snippets of his life.

Making a late-night run to Taco Bell. Watching SpongeBob on the couch with his kids. 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.

While older serpent handlers were wary of outsiders, these younger believers welcome visitors and use Facebook to promote their often misunderstood -- and illegal -- version of Christianity. They want to show the beauty and power of their extreme form of spirituality. And they hope eventually 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 a little-known passage 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 or treat it metaphorically, serpent handlers follow it literally. Their intense faith demands sinless living and rewards them with spiritual ecstasy -- the chance to hold life and death in their hands.

Brother Micah Golden felt it first while standing in the parking lot with other worshippers, waiting for church to start during a three-day revival in early May. It began with a tingling in his hands that spread over his body. Then he began to moan and pray.

"There's still an anointing from heaven. Glory to God," shouted the 22-year-old convert, holding the first syllable of "Glory" out for 10 or 12 seconds and stomping his feet. "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 together.

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.

Other men took out timber rattlers, putting one hand on the snake's midsection, the other by the head and neck. They held the serpents up in front of their faces, almost staring them in the eyes for a moment, then lowered them down and up in a gently swinging motion. The snakes began winding and unwinding in their hands, forked tongues tasting the air, trying to get their bearings.

Women standing nearby raised their hands in prayer and wept.

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 he 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.

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

Because most handlers like Hamblin catch their own snakes and keep them for months at a time, they're also running afoul of other state laws. In Tennessee it's illegal to capture wild animals or have poisonous snakes, said Walter Cook of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

"As far as snakes being used in church, that'd be up to the district attorney whether to prosecute," Cook said.

Hamblin knows that 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.

"Most of the people who were in leadership back in the 1990s have gotten older, and there was a concern for several years that no young people were taking their places," he said.

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 that serpent handlers practice their faith in a responsible manner.

His one rule: Visitors stay away from the snakes. Serpent handlers say the Holy Spirit keeps them from harm when handling snakes. But they aren't reckless.

At Hamblin's church, kids stay clear of snakes. Provoking snakes is banned as well. When new people -- or women -- handle a snake, a more experienced handler watches over them.

Hamblin begins each service with a warning -- "There's death in that box" -- pointing to a pile of serpent boxes. He's also careful about which snakes are handled.

On a Saturday night, a latecomer brought a newly caught rattler into the service. Its buzzing tail was heard between the songs and prayers. That snake stayed in the box.

Despite the precautions, serpent handlers do get bitten.

Hamblin almost died at 19 when a bite from a yellow timber left him hospitalized with internal bleeding. Rattlesnake venom is hemotoxic, meaning it destroys blood cells and makes it hard for blood to clot.

Serpent handlers see it as a badge of honor to refuse medical care when bitten and to rely on prayer. But it's no shame to go to the hospital for younger believers like Hamblin -- though he didn't get treatment after being bitten on New Year's Eve and on Good Friday.

Bites are rare because timber rattlesnakes and copperheads would rather flee, said Vince Cobb, a herpetologist at Middle Tennessee State University.

While the snakes can't be tamed, they can become used to being handled. A gentle handler who doesn't make fast motions near a snake's head is unlikely to get bitten.

Over Memorial Day weekend, the Rev. 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; Wolford's father, also a preacher, died from a rattlesnake bite during a service in 1983.

Hamblin and his wife, Elizabeth, drove to West Virginia so he could preach at Wolford's funeral. He was still reeling from the shock that the friend he called Brother Mack was gone. Hamblin said he planned to tell mourners not to lose faith in their grief.

"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."