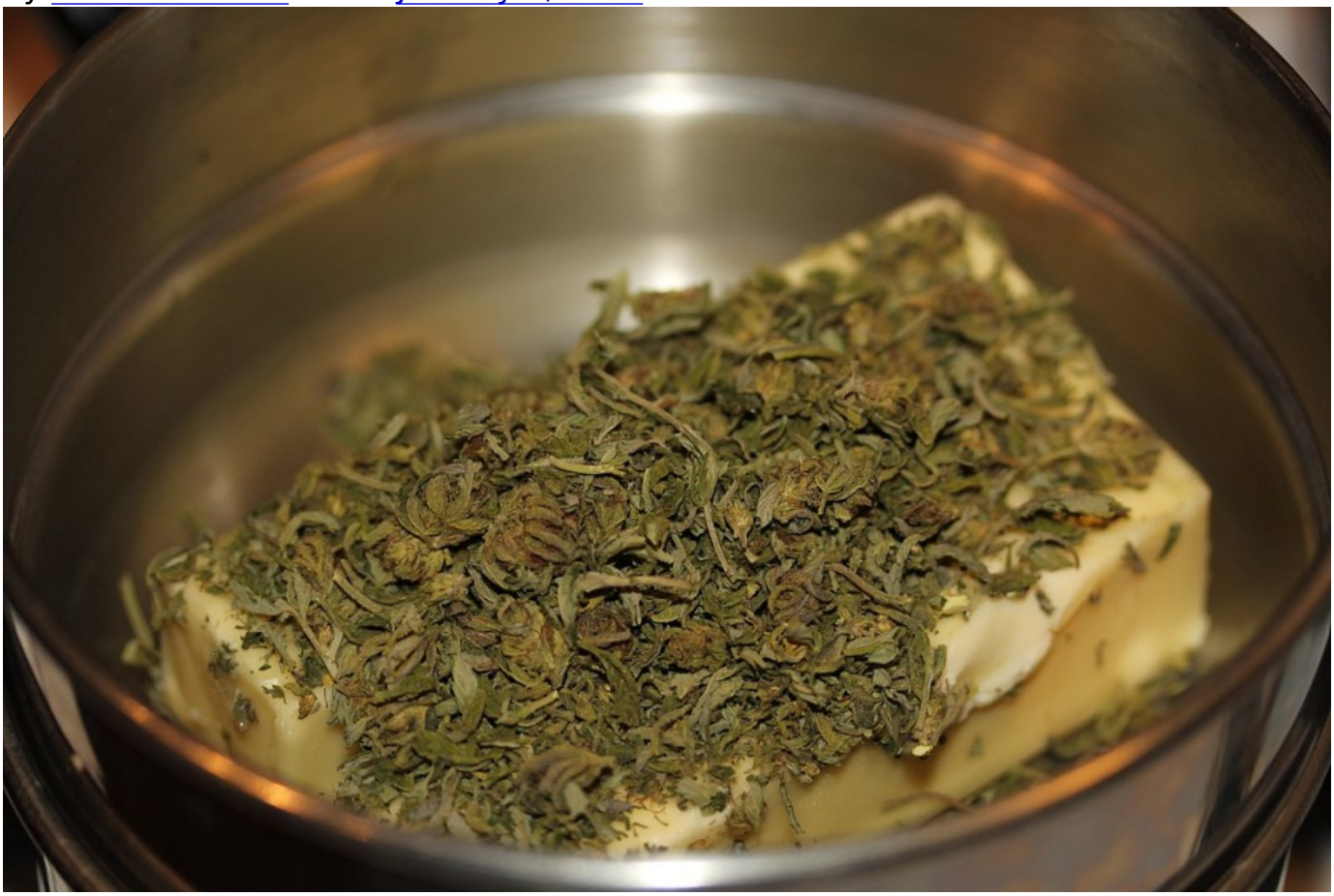
Can we talk about marijuana at church?

A Bible-belt Presbyterian woman thinks her THC cookies are benefiting her. She also thinks she can't tell anyone.

by Adam Hearlson in the January 3, 2018 issue



Baking marijuana cookies. Some rights reserved by Eli Christman.

Before brushing her teeth and getting ready for bed, Dianne Fulkerson (not her real name) eats one small cookie laced with THC. After years of struggling with anxiety and restless nights, Fulkerson was encouraged by her daughter to try marijuana to help her sleep. Fulkerson was hesitant at first; a child of the 1960s, she had once

tried her brother's marijuana cookies, and they left her feeling fuzzy and distracted.

"I sat there watching *I Love Lucy*, and I couldn't follow the story line," she told me. "And it scared me to death!"

But enough sleepless nights convinced Fulkerson to take her daughter's advice. For the first time in ages, she got four consecutive hours of sleep. "That became a life changer for me," she said. "This is great."

Fulkerson is not the type of person you'd associate with marijuana. She lives in the Bible Belt and spent 20 years as the bookkeeper for a conservative Presbyterian church. Nearly her entire adult life has been spent in service to her church communities. When asked how many people in her church know about her marijuana-laced cookies, she said, "None. Just one friend." Laughing sheepishly, she tells me that her dealer is the son of her former pastor.

I asked her if she believes others are using marijuana in her church. She replied, "Oh, yeah."

According to a 2016 Gallup poll, nearly one in eight people in the United States regularly smokes marijuana. When religiosity is factored into the poll, 9 percent of churchgoers admit to using marijuana regularly. So every tenth person in the pews was high sometime last week.

Yet conversations about marijuana are rare in the church. If the subject is talked about at all, it is likely to elicit a visceral condemnation.

In my experience, the biggest obstacle in the church to discussing the merits and drawbacks of marijuana is the pervasive social stigma attached to the drug. The church doesn't want to be associated, directly or indirectly, with the stereotype of someone who smokes or sells marijuana. Conclusions about marijuana are often formed in the gut rather than the head and heart. The visceral feelings supersede the faithful discernment.

Popular imagination over the last half century has associated marijuana with "the pothead," who according to stereotype is lazy, permissive, unreliable, unfocused, reckless, and irresponsible. Moreover, the marijuana dealer is stereotyped as dark skinned and dangerous. The federal government has added to the stigma by placing marijuana in the company of LSD and heroin as a Category I drug. Not only is the

stereotypical stoner unable to participate in the polite company of our churches, he or she is also a felon. As Attorney General Jeff Sessions once said, “Good people don’t smoke marijuana.”

Attitudes and policies on marijuana are also shaped by issues of race. African Americans are nearly four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than white people, though they use marijuana at roughly the same rates. Marijuana accounts for nearly half of all drug arrests, and the penalties for those caught with small amounts are excessively punitive. The incarceration rates for those convicted of marijuana possession, though dropping, remain remarkably high, especially in states that have not legalized or decriminalized marijuana usage.

According to scholar John Hudak, marijuana has been an integral part of racist narratives since the Spanish-American War. Concerned with the influx of immigrants from Mexico, yellow journalists and the federal government fed on the racial resentment of the age by perpetuating stereotypes of Mexican immigrants as dope-smoking murderers. The word *marijuana* became the favored rhetorical term of white politicians to forward a xenophobic policy that simultaneously banned marijuana across the country and demonized immigrant and black communities. It was easier to scare white America with the Spanish word *marijuana* than it was with the more common and scientific term *cannabis*. National Public Radio reports that the term *cannabis* was widely replaced with *marijuana* after 1900.

Marijuana use is rapidly rising among those over the age of 65.

Harry Anslinger, who headed the Bureau of Narcotics from 1930 to 1962, was chiefly responsible for creating and perpetuating these racial stereotypes. For 32 years Anslinger made it a personal crusade to fight the scourge of marijuana by using a mix of racist propaganda and trumped-up science. He is reported to have justified his pursuits by saying, “Reefer makes darkies think they are as good as white men.” Anslinger’s tireless pursuit of narcotics prosecution inspired the social policy for the War on Drugs which pursued mandatory minimums and harsh penalties for nonviolent drug offenders. For the past 40 years, people of color have disproportionately shouldered the burden of this drug policy.

Marijuana is as complicated a subject in the black church as in the white church, said Brandon Crowley, pastor of the historic Myrtle Baptist Church in West Newton, Massachusetts. “Drug dealing becomes the thing that a black preacher preaches

against in order to promote upward mobility and civil respectability for their black congregants. The way to make your black congregants appear civil is to try and assume the standards set by the white norms.”

Amid performances of respectability, the black church, Crowley explained, has also tried to serve a community that includes marijuana users and sellers. “The ghettoization of the black population after slavery created neighborhoods with no resources, segregated by gentrification, low education, no resources for jobs, no upward mobility, and no civil respectability. All the reputable businesses were owned by people outside the black community. The black market was all that was left. Dealing drugs was what was available.” In disenfranchised quarters of the country, not all of the money in the collection plate comes from reputable work.

In the black church, marijuana is closely connected to racial issues of opportunity, equity, incarceration, education, and poverty. Conversations about marijuana therefore have to recognize white complicity in racist drug policies. Moreover, white church silence in the face of these intersections is a barrier to theological goals of racial justice.

The growing therapeutic and recreational use of marijuana has also been ignored by churches. Marijuana use is rapidly rising among those over 65. The church in the United States is entering into a new age of geriatric ministry, with the median age of members in historic mainline denominations now above 50. Nearly a third of congregants in the PCUSA, UCC, Episcopal Church, and the ELCA are older than 65. This population is using marijuana for both medicinal and recreational purposes at unprecedented rates.

In one recent study, marijuana use among retirement age people increased 250 percent over the past ten years. Retirees are the fastest growing marijuana users in this country. Considering the age of the church and the rate of marijuana usage among the elderly, the church is danger of ignoring the needs of its long-term members.

Marijuana is quickly becoming a common prescription for the aging, because marijuana appears to be particularly helpful in coping with the myriad of side effects of other drugs, especially opioids. A recent study showed that prescribing marijuana for pain can help lower opioid addiction rates in the elderly, an underreported but growing problem. In addition, the study reported that medical marijuana is

especially helpful in defraying the cost of prescription drugs and health care for the elderly.

But even as the medical and financial merits of medical marijuana for the elderly are becoming clear, and despite the rapid growth of use among seniors, the retirement set is still the least likely generation to turn to marijuana for health needs. The reason, again, is the stigma associated with it.

Without a theological framework, abstinence devolves into a purity test.

Dianne Fulkerson believes that the use of marijuana is a positive force in her life. She also believes that admitting her drug use would stigmatize her among fellow church members. Not surprisingly, the generation most affected by the decades-long national message about the dangers of marijuana is most likely to resist accepting the drug as an appropriate medical prescription.

Sue Artt, UCC conference minister of Colorado, noted that the cultural stigma is almost impossible to relinquish for some. “It is hard to get into those deep difficult conversations when a stigma has been so embedded, for so long,” she said. But this is not a compelling reason to refrain from a conversation about marijuana, she noted.

An invitation to talk about marijuana is also a chance to talk about pleasure. The taboo surrounding marijuana is loosening in states that have legalized the recreational use of the drug and where its purpose moves beyond the therapeutic to a pursuit of pleasure. This also is not an easy maneuver. The church rarely affords people the opportunity to speak frankly and honestly about the place of pleasure in their lives and whether a drug like marijuana might be an appropriate form of pleasure (as alcohol is for many Christians).

As the inheritors of a tradition that fears the body and associates pleasure with sin, marijuana is a helpful test case for Christians. What does a responsible pursuit of pleasure look like? Can one smoke marijuana and still be a responsible member of the community? Can the pursuit of pleasure, including pharmaceutical, be embraced as part of God’s call to joy and delight? What claim ought sobriety have on our lives? For what reason do we abstain from pleasure?

Christopher Gilmore, pastor of the Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ in Denver, sees a helpful model for conversations on these issues in Our Whole Lives, a sex

education curriculum for churches. OWL provides opportunity for people of all ages to talk about sex, intimacy, bodies, and God. OWL has a range of curricula to meet the educational needs of adults.

Gilmore notes that though OWL is ostensibly about sexuality, it has a broader scope. In the OWL program, “we talk about issues of intimacy and life and death and God.” Gilmore suggests that, following examples like OWL, the church can encourage discussions of pleasure and healthy consumption.

Basic to the assumptions of OWL is that education is freeing. Education can combat the visceral fears that keep us silent. When people see that the church is willing to have conversations, they love it, Gilmore said. “They find freedom and liberation.” Moreover, they gain deeper affinity and loyalty to the church that struggles alongside them as they search for meaning. For Gilmore, conversations about marijuana could signal that engaging such issues is “an accurate representation of who we are as a church.”

Bound by taboo, abstinence from marijuana poses as faithfulness. Yet without a theological and ethical framework, abstinence devolves into a purity test. Faithfulness is not about blindly obeying the rules. Christians should shoulder the burden of thinking and testing their moral conclusions about the world.

Ideally, this type of thinking and testing is done in community. Rather than propping up the federal government as the final moral arbiter, the church is called in every generation to think together, listen to the children, the elders, the neighbors, and the ancestors about the meaning and consequence of our actions.

Greg Rickel, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia in Washington State, told me about a conversation he had with a young priest who had led a men’s ministry camping trip. The priest said he had been sitting around a campfire with the men of his church, young and old, when someone started smoking marijuana. The joint was passed around and was eventually offered to the priest.

“Bishop,” the priest asked. “What should I have done?”

Discussing marijuana offers the church a chance to talk about pleasure.

Rickel admits that if the issue were alcohol instead of marijuana, the priest’s question would be less notable. In most Episcopal congregations, the presence of

alcohol in a social setting wouldn’t raise eyebrows. Drinking from a whisky bottle around the campfire does not bear the same social stigma that still accompanies marijuana.

At the same time, Rickel noted that just because marijuana is legal doesn’t mean that smoking it is wise. He said he is regularly invited to smoke marijuana by someone close to him. After a recent invitation, Rickel replied, “Look, when I retire I will smoke with you, but I am not going to do it right now. It comes with too much baggage and explaining.”

The threshold for appropriate consumption differs among congregants and communities. The taboo is loosening, but it still exists. “Legislating change,” said Rickel, “doesn’t legislate a heart.”

A priest’s responsibility around that campfire is to decide how his behavior will affect his ability to be the priest to these people. Rickel put it this way: “Will smoking a joint with the congregation compromise his ability to do his job?” This is a good question, one that could start a fruitful conversation.

Caught between silence and stigma, between a changing world and the past narratives, abstinence might be wise. But without a corresponding call to conversation about what it means, it is not faithful.

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