

Faith leaders press DeLay on tobacco: Legislator opposes FDA oversight of cigarette sales

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Republican congressman Tom DeLay of Texas, indicted by a grand jury in his home state and bounced from his leadership position in Congress, has another distraction: interfaith groups are pressuring him to drop his opposition to Food and Drug Administration oversight of cigarette sales, which health experts say could save thousands of American lives.

Religious leaders from the theological left and right say they have leaped into the smoking issue for moral reasons. It is wrong, they argue, for tobacco companies to market lethal and addictive products, particularly to youths.

"We're really disturbed that Mr. DeLay and others have opposed FDA regulation," said Cynthia Abrams, a minister and an addictions and health care specialist at a United Methodist Church agency in Washington. "There's a lot of talk by politicians about family values. But when we're talking about the health of families and children, that's a family value."

The pressure on DeLay comes from Texas Faith United Against Tobacco, a coalition of Southern Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists and others. The group recently sent proclamations to about 200 church leaders, asking them to join the call for DeLay to support FDA oversight.

In March a related national group, Faith United Against Tobacco, wrote to DeLay, then House majority leader, saying, "We find it incredible that the FDA can ensure the safety of everyday items like macaroni and cheese, but has no authority over tobacco, a product that kills over 400,000 Americans every year."

DeLay, a Baptist who openly professes his faith while in political settings, relies heavily on support from religious conservatives. But he also has longstanding

relationships with tobacco companies, which have contributed \$134,150 to his campaigns since 1990, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan watchdog group in Washington.

In October, traveling to Houston to answer state money-laundering and conspiracy charges, DeLay flew aboard a jet owned by tobacco giant R. J. Reynolds, which has contributed to his legal defense fund and opposes FDA oversight.

Ben Porritt, a DeLay spokesman, said the congressman maintains his opposition to FDA oversight and believes the focus should be on enforcing laws against smoking among minors. Asked if faith leaders' support of FDA control might pose a political problem for DeLay, Porritt responded: "Mr. DeLay stands in the corner of the children. He supports the laws on the books and making sure we protect children. That's everybody's goal here."

About 22 percent of Americans smoke, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Every day nearly 3,900 youths try their first cigarette, and 1,500 become everyday smokers.

Last year a tax bill containing a provision for FDA control passed the Senate 78-15. Maneuvers by DeLay killed similar legislation in the House. The idea has been reintroduced by its earlier sponsors, both Democrats and Republicans, but the bills are stuck in Senate and House committees.

"We have the majorities in both houses. What we don't have is the leadership support," said William V. Corr, executive director of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Most public health experts embrace the idea of FDA control, arguing that government can confront tobacco's toll only if it is regulated as a drug. There are proposals to give the FDA power to restrict tobacco advertising and promotions, ban candy-flavored cigarettes, prohibit unproven claims about products' "reduced risks" and require cigarette makers to disclose more about products' contents and health effects.

Antismoking activists say such controls would blunt the marketing muscle of tobacco companies, which currently spend about \$41 million a day to promote their products.

It's an argument increasingly amplified by religious leaders nationwide.

"I'm sure there will be some people who think we're meddling where we don't belong," said Glynden Bode, a Methodist minister in Missouri City, Texas. "But I don't think Jesus would say this is a wrong place for the church to be. He was about bringing wholeness to people's lives. If you're sick with cancer and emphysema, what's your level of wholeness?" -*Religion News Service*