

ENGAGING THE FAITH COMMUNITY IN SMOKEFREE AIR CAMPAIGNS

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“The faith community represents a powerful means of motivating and reinforcing positive behavior changes. [Congregations] can help men...[and] women gain personal empowerment.”
–David Satcher, former Surgeon General of the United States

INTRODUCTION

More and more public health advocates and supporters are partnering with religious groups and individual congregations to educate the public about the health hazards of secondhand smoke exposure and to gain strength and momentum in the fight against Big Tobacco. Many religions – including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Confucianism – have a similar underlying belief that the body is sacred and that as human beings, we all have a responsibility to practice the Golden Rule of “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” The faith community is vital in preventing tobacco-related diseases at global, country, community, and individual levels, as they give structure to community life and are an important source of encouragement, motivation, and support for social and behavioral change.

Brief Overview of Some Religions’ Views on Tobacco and Secondhand Smoke Exposure

- **Baha’i:** Baha’i teachings discourage tobacco as being unclean and unhealthy, as true health extends beyond physical well-being.¹ Baha’i teachings place a strong emphasis on scientific investigation. Given the mounting and indisputable evidence that secondhand smoke exposure results in death and disease, tobacco is considered to be a breach of trust within a community.²
- **Buddhism:** Many monks classify tobacco as a harmful and addictive substance under the fifth precept, *Suramerayamajjhapatthana*, which prohibits the use of substances that alter consciousness.³ Buddhism teaches that freedom and clarity of body and mind may be achieved by ridding oneself of addiction. The Buddhist follower understands the cause of a problem through introspection and meditation and considers the effect of his actions on others. Respect, for both smokers and nonsmokers, is paramount. In Buddhism, individuals must assume responsibility for their habits. Buddhism contends that people are fortunate to be born in human form, as within the human form one can attain true understanding of life. Thus, anything that harms the body or mind is to be avoided. It is of prime importance to do the utmost to take care of the body and mind, both for oneself and others. Buddhism teaches that positive encouragement toward nonsmoking is most constructive. Using the Four Noble Truths of Buddhist teaching, 9,173 temples in 25 Thailand provinces declared themselves smokefree zones in 2002 and 2003.⁴
- **Hinduism:** Traditionally, tobacco is seen as a *vyasana*, “a dependence which is not necessary for the preservation of health.” Hindus consider caring for the body as being a highly sacred spiritual practice, placing great importance on the health of the human heart, which is also a symbol of meditation. Since tobacco induces heart disease and cardiac arrest in both smokers and nonsmokers, it may be seen as an aggression on “the holy seat of God.” The sage Vyasa

reflected, “Doing good to others is an act of merit; harming others is a sinful act,” emphasizing the right of nonsmokers to breathe smokefree air.⁵

- **Islam:** One’s duty to protect the “integrity of the individual” is one of the five essential principles on which Islam is based, and Mohammad the Prophet said that “no harm may be inflicted to oneself or others.”⁶ Anything that may harm the life or health of a person is thought to be “contrary to the Spirit of Islam.” Although tobacco is not specifically addressed in the *Qur’an* (Islam’s religious text), many Muslims believe that the *Qur’an* would have condemned tobacco had it existed at the time the *Qur’an* was written, just as it prohibited alcohol. Islam teaches that the body is a gift from *Allah*, and it is one’s responsibility to protect this gift by keeping it in good health. Leaders of Islam teach that education based on clear messages of awareness, responsibility, and justice, is the best way to prevent health problems from tobacco.⁷
- **Judaism:** One of the great Jewish theologians of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, states, “The preservation of health is an absolute imperative and it is one way of imitating the paths of God.”⁸ Jews believe that God created humans in his image⁹ and that humans have a responsibility to keep the body healthy and to avoid anything that can harm or weaken the body that carries one’s soul. In addition, the *Torah* (Judaism’s religious text) teaches to “love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰ Secondhand smoke is known to be harmful to the body, so it is one’s obligation to keep tobacco smoke away from one’s system and that of others by keeping the air smokefree.¹¹ In March 1996, the Central Conference of American Rabbis made strong recommendations that “everything be done within our communities, schools, and institutions to develop programs to combat tobacco.” Jewish tradition proposes action through educational approaches that invite individuals to use their own common sense.¹²
- **Protestant Christianity:** Churches that developed from Protestantism, such as the Evangelical churches, the Quakers, the Salvation Army, the United Church of Christ, the American Baptists, the Methodists, the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterian Church, the Assemblies of God, the Mennonites, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Mormons deem tobacco and secondhand smoke to be a “distraction from the ideal of a pure and simple way of life and above all, a violation of the body, regarded as a temple of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ God intended for humans to live life in harmony and wholeness, through acts of justice and love. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”¹⁴ Many in the Church interpret this passage to mean that Christians should live their lives as an extension of Jesus Christ’s ministry by serving the needy, demonstrating compassion, and engaging in acts of kindness and mercy. One’s concern for health is paramount, as humans are created in God’s image, making each human life precious.¹⁵ Many Christian leaders believe that what they interpret to be modern thought (to think and act solely for personal gain) poses a problem to one’s real source of existence, to serve God and one’s community, and welcome smokefree efforts as a means of curing people’s lives as a whole.^{16,17}
- **Roman Catholicism:** In the late 1990s, the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health-Care Workers launched its initiative for “a no tobacco day in favour of the victims of HIV/AIDS.” All men and women were encouraged to abstain from smoking for one day and all the money that would have been spent on cigarettes was donated to HIV/AIDS control.¹⁸

A Rewarding Partnership

Faith communities have the potential to greatly contribute to and influence the outcome of a smokefree campaign. **Faith-based groups can offer:**

- **Expertise.** Many faith-based groups have a particularly good assessment of the needs of the community at large.
- **Diversity,** as people from varying social, political, ethnic, and economic backgrounds compose faith communities; thus, they transcend social barriers and provide a more accurate representation of your community.
- **Additional credibility** to a smokefree campaign. Faith groups have legitimate moral authority, so partnering with them adds validity to the coalition's outreach efforts and public and policymaker education efforts. It is more difficult for policymakers and the public to ignore the testimony and words of spiritual leaders and faith communities on issues of community health, because they are not, directly, public health advocates, so they cannot be accused of having "vested" interests.
- **Volunteers** who have the time, faith, and commitment to spend long hours on smokefree campaigns. Congregations can call and write letters to elected officials, attend community hearings, and canvas for smokefree air.
- **Access to large audiences,** as spiritual leaders have a regular forum to address secondhand smoke as a health issue. Leaders of the faith community can develop position papers, newsletter features and opinion pieces, and other educational materials on secondhand smoke exposure and the tobacco industry's manipulation of religious symbols to promote tobacco; and they can incorporate tobacco into sermons and religious text discussions and study groups.
- **Additional resources,** such as people, funding sources, and educational materials.
- **Co-sponsorship of community programs,** such as cessation programs and counseling for those wishing to quit using tobacco.

Faith-based groups equally benefit from partnering with public health advocates and supporters for smokefree air. **Smokefree coalitions and supporters can offer:**

- **Knowledge** of evidence-based intervention and resources, of funding streams and grant writing assistance and evaluation experience that is not as readily available to the faith community, and programmatic assistance. Smokefree coalitions can also facilitate access to science-based prevention materials and resources to bolster faith-based cessation efforts.
- **"Stewardship"**, the assumption of responsibility for the well-being of the world. We, as human beings, must care for, nurture, and protect one another and our environment. Stewardship is the mantle under which many social causes, such as the smokefree movement, operate.¹⁹
- **Participating** in public policy advocacy, which raises the profile of the faith-based organization and assists in leveraging resources.

- **Sustainability** because smokefree coalitions that can demonstrate their value and effectiveness in the community may attract people and resources. Coalitions may assist faith groups in shaping the messaging around tobacco issues so that their tobacco prevention and cessation efforts will endure with their own congregational membership.

BE CONSCIOUS AND RESPECTFUL

The main purpose and function of the faith community is religion. Although faith-based groups promote health and well-being, they have a strong and, many times, specific sense of mission, values, and ways of operating. In this respect, they may or may be able to fully adopt a smokefree coalition's mission and goals, which is okay. So, be prepared that not every spiritual leader you approach will be readily available or interested in a smokefree air campaign. Coalitions should be conscious and respectful of the faith community's priorities, values, and mission, and should reach out, be receptive to, and offer assistance to further a faith-based group's mission and priorities.

Most importantly, **be conscious of religious sensibilities and be respectful.**

- **Be aware** of religious differences.
- **Be inclusive.** Do outreach to all faiths and be diligent about seeking support from faith groups and bringing them to the table early on in your education campaign.
- **Think** about and ask how the smokefree coalition can assist and partner with them, not what the faith community can do for the coalition.
- **Incorporate and collaborate early and often.** Try to avoid "Rent-A-Faith" situations, in which the coalition calls upon the faith community solely for photo opportunities or quotes.
- **Be mindful of a faith's decision-making structure.** For some religions, one must obtain the support of a senior, decision-making leader (for smokefree air) before approaching another clergy member to get involved. Many faith-based organizations are hierarchical, so be sure to be attentive of this structure.
- Do not forget about the **power of the people** (the congregation), as well as the power of the spiritual leader.
- **Be flexible.** Many faith groups may not be used to political and strategic planning; so, be supportive, listen, teach as you go along, and reexamine goals and outcomes along the way to ensure that collaboration stays on track.
- **Recognize** that faith-based groups may be used to different methods of working.
- Faith is about personal experiences, personal connections, and personal emotion. **Don't be afraid to get personal and speak from the heart.**

APPROACH CONGREGATIONS EARLY AND OFTEN

If approached early and included in the planning process, faith-based groups are likely to support smokefree policies. The following tips will assist in the successful partnering with faith communities for smokefree indoor air.

Do Your Homework

1. Know your faith community.

- What religious groups do you seek to work with, and what are their religious beliefs?
- What is the terminology used? Find a common language to discuss smokefree environments (i.e., instead of “youth ministry” use “youth work”; instead of “minister” or “pastor” use “clergy” or “spiritual leader”; instead of “church” use “congregation”).
- What proportion of the congregation’s membership smokes? Does the spiritual leader smoke? Will offering a cessation program be a congregational priority?
- Does the congregation or spiritual leader have previous political advocacy experience? If so, on what issue(s)?
- Find out what faith-based groups are currently doing in your community. Are they already involved in tobacco prevention and/or use efforts? Has the congregation adopted a smokefree resolution or a smokefree congregational policy? If so, what is it? Can it be strengthened?
- Are there interfaith groups or alliances in your community? They are a great way to identify committed leaders.

2. Know the faith-based group’s priorities.

- What are the faith group’s primary concerns? Explore ways to incorporate its top priorities into your list of priorities.
- Find out where secondhand smoke fits into their mission and values and incorporate this information into your coalition’s mission and goals. It will make initial discussions with spiritual leadership more fluid and relatable.
- Be thoughtful. Faith leaders are very busy individuals, many of whom hardly have enough time to do everything they are called on to do, such as running their congregations, visiting the sick, performing weddings, writing sermons, helping the poor and needy, etc. Provide them with what they need to know about secondhand smoke and their community and their potential role within the coalition in a way they can identify with, such as a sermon outline, workshops on tobacco cessation, etc. Faith leaders may not address tobacco or secondhand smoke until they are seeing tobacco of personal importance among their congregants.

Initial Steps

1. **Building bridges:** Start with your own spiritual leader. Faith groups may be more likely to get involved if they personally know someone who is involved in the coalition. Also, try to get involved with your faith organization on another social justice issue, such as feeding the homeless or visiting the sick.
2. **Collaborate:** Collaborative agreements should come from the faith leadership themselves. Remember that collaboration cannot be forced; it takes time. To inspire a partnership:
 - Establish common ground and scope by defining mutual priorities and goals.
 - Listen, communicate, recognize one another’s talents, take turns, contribute, and build consensus.

- Plan ahead to clarify goals, roles, responsibilities, and activities.
 - Invite faith leaders to coalition steering committee meetings and request their input, support, and advice.
 - Invite faith groups to participate in coalition events.
 - Contact faith groups' outreach workers and volunteers (these experienced people can be enthusiastic advocates for collaboration and capacity building).
 - Relate that the congregation may gain more funding opportunities and greater visibility from its involvement in the smokefree air campaign.
3. **Celebrate:** Kick off the campaign with a party and invite community stakeholders, representatives from the faith community, and other interested community members to the first few smokefree coalition strategic planning meetings, events, trainings, etc. When sending out invites, be sure to look beyond the largest and most powerful churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and monasteries in your community. Extend an invitation to the smaller and mid-sized faith groups.

Framing the Issue

- The human body is sacred (“Love thy self”), to be kept healthy and free of contaminants that inhibit true spirituality and clear thinking. Tobacco contaminates the body and the bodies of those around you.
- Treat other human beings with respect and consideration (“Love thy neighbor”). Secondhand smoke endangers the health and well-being of your fellow man. We all have the right to breathe smokefree air and have the right to free will in making decisions, healthy or otherwise. Smokefree environments bring wholeness and wellness to congregation members and the larger community.
- We all have a responsibility for honesty and truth in communication. The tobacco industry's well-documented deceptive and manipulative tactics and practices to target and mislead consumers and the general public, and to buy the favor of politicians and administrators to oppose smokefree laws are great injustices. Tobacco companies must be held accountable for their unethical behavior, which is a breach of public trust. The faith community – and the community at large – must respond effectively to confront this issue.
- A smokefree world can be achieved through education on the health effects of secondhand smoke, positive messaging, and community support.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The **National African American Tobacco Education Network**, www.naaten.org, has developed a number of materials for congregations on how to adopt smokefree congregation policies and to promote smokefree living. One of NAATEN's objectives is to provide technical assistance on tobacco control policies within African American faith-based institutions and groups. NAATEN's “Be Free Indeed!” program has successfully educated and trained African American spiritual leaders in six states to teach and preach about tobacco as a health issue, not a sin, asserting that those with clean minds are able to serve God's will and those with healthy bodies are better able to serve others. Contact NATTEN at naaten@healthedcouncil.org, (916) 556-3344, or toll free at (888) 442-2836.

The **National African American Tobacco Prevention Network**, www.naatpn.org, is a national organization dedicated to facilitating the development and implementation of comprehensive and community-competent tobacco control programs to benefit communities and people of African descent. One of its many successful programs includes hosting a national meeting of African American clergy on tobacco control. Contact NAAPT at thenetwork@naapt.org or at (888) 4NAAPT.

Faith United Against Tobacco, www.faithnottobacco.org, is a partnership of religious groups and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a national public health advocacy group. Religious groups participating in this campaign include United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, National Council of Churches, Seventh Day Adventists, American Muslim Foundation, Church Women United and Church of the Brethren. For more information, contact Vinnie DeMarco at demarco@mdinitiative.org.

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