



Christians and the GTA's War on Drugs

by Lisa Hall-Wilson

Drugs and alcohol have invaded our homes, our work places, our schools and playgrounds. Children and teens from stable homes find themselves addicted alongside those from broken and abusive homes. No one is immune.

Randy Robb, a former addict now an author and committed Christian came from an alcoholic family and sold \$8 million dollars in drugs, put over \$1 million dollars worth of drugs into his body and put a needle in his arm sometimes ten times a day. He says, "There's no longer this fear of taking drugs. Parents have given their kids pills for headaches, for colds, to avoid catching colds — there's no longer this phobia attached to taking a couple of pills to feel better. So take ecstasy: A couple of blue pills or purple pills and have a good time. It's so easy. They've been programmed to think this is acceptable behaviour."

One billion dollars is spent annually on drug enforcement; illicit drugs cost Canadians \$8.2 billion a year and

47,000 deaths annually are attributable to substance abuse. Canada is known globally for mass producing and exporting ecstasy and methamphetamines.

Organized crime has stepped into the gap to supply a product with an ever-growing demand. CSIS estimates that 950 organized crime groups operate in Canada with eighty percent of their ill-gotten gains derived from drug sales.

The misuse and abuse of legalized, prescription and illicit substances pushes individuals into marginalization: Into living on the streets, prostitution and dealing. Addicts care only about themselves and their next fix. George Schuurman, retired Toronto Police Officer and Director of Compassion Ministries at Harvest Bible Chapel in Oakville, says in his experience, "the addiction levels are worse and the drugs that are being used by addicts are more powerful compared to what was prevalent in the early eighties...people will do any crime imaginable to maintain that

habit."

Teen Challenge Canada is a faith-based twelve month drug and alcohol rehabilitation program with fifteen centres nation-wide, and they see first-hand what happens when addictions take control of a life. "Our students come to us, some of them, with nothing but the clothes on their backs because they've been living on the street, in their car or on a friend's couch. The women in our program at the newly opened GTA Women's Centre have horrific tales of abuse, victimization and survival on the streets," says Teen Challenge National Director George Glover.

So what's being done about all this? Let's frame the debate.

Government Actions

The Conservative Government has introduced mandatory minimum sentencing legislation for illicit drugs. One of the most criticized aspects of this bill is the removal of a judge's discretion. Whether

police find two or two hundred marijuana plants, for example, it's the same sentence. Opponents call this policy draconic and point to the expensive failure enforcement-as-deterrent has become south of the border where one in every 100 Americans is in prison. In Canada for every \$95 dollars spent on enforcement, five dollars is spent on treatment.

Harm reduction strategies aim to reduce the health risks, crime and other problems associated with addicts and addiction. Proponents of this strategy argue that, for some, abstinence is neither achievable nor desired and instead work to limit the harm they do to themselves and others.

Insite, the only supervised injection site (SIS) in North America, is located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Insite operates under federal drug-law exemptions allowing addicts to possess and inject illegal drugs on the premises and provides clean needles, a safe place to inject under the supervision of nursing staff, counsel-



Photo: Aerial shot of the new Teen Challenge GTA Women's Centre located in Aurora. The Centre held its official opening in late September.

Photo courtesy Teen Challenge Canada

ling and referral services.

Over two dozen studies have been published about Insite and researchers claim an increase in detox enrolments and a decrease in both drug-related litter and reported HIV and Hepatitis C cases. Users of Insite liken it to a community centre for addicts and the program has been endorsed by the UN World Health Organization.

The Federal Government wants to shut down the provincially mandated facility. Former Health Minister Tony Clement has called the site a misplaced use of tax dollars and an abomination. The Canadian Police Association has called Insite, "a well-intentioned but failed experiment". Studies have begun to assess the need and viability of Insite programs in both Toronto and Ottawa.

Decriminalization of illicit drugs, especially marijuana, is popular as prohibition is blamed for the increased organized crime activity. By decriminalizing possession in amounts for personal consumption, agencies can focus on a health-based rather than a criminal approach by removing the black-market demand.

Some experts point out the failure of this approach by looking at tobacco and alcohol. The Health Officers Council of British Columbia reported that, "Alcohol and

tobacco have enormous health impacts... Illegal drug use also causes significant negative health impacts, but the relative scale of these health impacts is dwarfed by those attributable to tobacco and alcohol."

What can the Church offer?

George Schuurman says, "the answer lies in both control and rehabilitation. There has to be a deterrent to drug use and if that deterrent is jail, there needs to be a rehabilitation component that's useful. The system can't offer God's hope; it can offer human strategies and makeshift solutions that last for a while, but not permanent life-changing hope."

Both Schuurman and Robb say Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have a place and reach those who want help but can't or won't enter a residential rehab program such as Teen Challenge. Robb says, "You can go to a NA meeting and you can say God, but if you say Jesus you will be reprimanded. It would not work if it was faith-based. It would scare addicts away. That's why 12 steps works. It's run by alcoholics, by addicts."

Schuurman adds that programs like NA and AA make a difference, "but ultimately freedom — victory can only be found in God and that's a component missing in 12

steps. The answer truly does lie with the Church and with the gospel and the hope that only God's people have."

Rev. Niles Thorne, a pastor for more than forty years now serving as the Chaplain at Teen Challenge GTA Women's Centre near King City, says he received no formal training in dealing with addictions and added that most pastors don't. When asked what churches can do to address the issue of addiction he said, "I believe churches should look for needs in the community and take the necessary action to address the situation. We need to give answers to questions being asked by those who are hurting. This means preparing ourselves to care for those in need."

Churches can open their doors to NA and AA programs. Robb says, "That's how I got saved. I was in the basement [of a church] at a NA meeting and two members of the church pulled me aside and said, 'You're still searching. Come one Sunday. Check it out.'" He did and hasn't looked back.

Harvest Bible Chapel has begun a ministry to those marginalized by addiction, and encourages other churches to take this step too. Schuurman coordinates the ministry at Harvest, "We see how God is bringing these people to our church. He's

going to use them to reach out to those with whom they've been associated with in 12 steps. God uses these people. We have a message of hope and God's calling us to do more in our own community, to look at those pockets of poverty."

Christian curriculum is available for churches interested in this ministry, notably: *Crossroads: A Guide Away From Addiction* by Ed Welch and *Celebrate Recovery*, published by Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California.

Robb recommends that churches financially able should hire a drug and alcohol counsellor. "Addicts need tough love. Pastors don't have the ability to deal with the issues that addicts really have, the majority haven't been there, haven't done that, they don't know how to relate. Most of them aren't equipped to deal with heroin addicts."

Teen Challenge is a faith-based residential alternative. In the year long program students receive Christian counselling to find the root problems that led to the addiction, and through various job training options learn respect, responsibility and regain hope. Jonathan, a current student, says of Teen Challenge: "It's a place where we grow. It's a place where we get to learn what it is to be a unified one body. We get to go through tough times together and good times together. It's absolutely essential for us to learn how to deal with things outside of this program." Teen Challenge grads have gone on to own their own businesses, begin post-secondary career learning and work in Church ministries.

Individuals can sponsor a student in one of Teen Challenge's men's programs or a woman in the new GTA centre. George Glover of Teen Challenge says, "This is a grass roots way for individuals and groups to rescue a life. For a dollar a day you provide shelter, food, Christian counselling and job skills. There's no better value than that. You can't hear about where these people come from, what they've survived, and not be troubled and convicted that we need to do more."

One mother, at her son's graduation from Teen Challenge, shared, "We knew we had him back when he went into Teen Challenge. We could see God start to work and mould and chip away at all the damaging things he had done to himself."

In a final word, Schuurman encourages churches to do what churches should do best. Pray. Discern what God would have you do as an individual, what a church body can do, to reach out to those suffering and trapped in addiction in your own communities.

Lisa Hall-Wilson is a staff writer with Teen Challenge Canada