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Colts coach urges churches to help comfort the depressed

By Christy Karras
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A few weeks ago, the Rev. Greg Johnson of Standing Together Ministries helped host evangelical Christian football stars, including Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy, at a multi-denominational gathering in Salt Lake City. As it does everywhere Dungy goes, talk of suicide was inevitable: Dungy's 18-year-old son James last year.

Traditionally, Johnson says, evangelical Christians saw suicide as a sin, not only because it broke one of the Ten Commandments ("Thou Shall Not Kill" includes killing yourself) but because it left grieving family members behind.

"There was kind of an attitude or perspective that suicide was the ultimate kind of sin . . . You lost your eternity, your eternal soul," he said. "It made us afraid to talk about the issue of suicide."

But new ideas are emerging, and increasing numbers of evangelicals believe, as Dungy does, that the issue is too complicated to easily judge.

"We're coming to a point where the attitude is changing, and we're seeing depression and mental illness - so maybe God looks at that differently. I believe God does forgive those who commit suicide," Johnson said.

Dungy, who often speaks publicly about his beliefs, said they helped him and his family deal with the loss. "If you have faith in God and you're professing to be a Christian, then you believe God is with you in the good times and the times of adversity, and what we've found is that he's actually closer during the hard times," he said in an interview.

Luther Ellis, who played at the University of Utah before a professional career with the Detroit Lions, counts himself among the coach's admirers and says their positions in the National Football League allow them to talk about their Christianity

with people who might otherwise not listen. "When he speaks about his son, it's a very powerful message, very powerful and very moving. It's one of those times when you say, OK, God, you have greater plans than I have for myself," Ellis said.

Despite belonging to a religious tradition that has frowned on suicide, Dungy says God is forgiving; he believes he will see his son again. "I do, I absolutely do, and that's the thing that allows me to get through."

Johnson said with the new acknowledgment of suicide's causes, many churches are seeking ways to prevent it. He points out that churches often serve troubled populations, the same people most likely to consider suicide. "In the faith community, you may not have the most healthy people all the time," he said.

He says to stem what he considers the "epidemic" problem of depression, churches must step in and help, which means encouraging parishioners to let others know when they're facing emotional problems or mental illness. He advises depressed church members to pray and seek God's help, but he also tells them to get counseling from mental health professionals who understand their faith.

"As important as Bible study is and prayer is and listening to God is, it's foolish for us to say that's all you need to do," he said. God "loves us just the way we are, and he accepts us that way, but he wants us to be restored if we're broken."

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