

Can the Christian crusade against pornography bear fruit?

By Ashley Fantz, CNN

Atlanta (CNN) - He is a good Christian, Michael is telling his two therapists. He goes to church most Sundays. He's a devoted husband and father of two daughters.

"But when I would leave on business trips," he says, "I knew I was going to get to be someone else."

"Prostitutes, porn - I took anything I wanted."

Sitting on a comfortable, worn couch, Michael glances out the window and sees a reflection of himself set against the parking lot of this suburban Atlanta office building. He fidgets, runs his fingers over his closely cropped blond hair and straightens his green tennis polo. He clears his throat.

Above his head hangs a poster covered in words describing feelings - angry, anxious, sad. On it is a big yellow cross.

Therapists Richard Blankenship and Mark Richardson wear solemn but empathetic expressions. Certified counselors and Christian ministers, they tell him they know how to listen and nod for him to continue.

"I've had a record of purity since March when I confessed to my wife," says Michael, whose name has been changed by CNN.com to protect his privacy. "No porn, no masturbation."

"Awesome," Richardson says, leaning forward in his chair. "God knows you're trying."

This is Michael's second week at "Faithful and True - Atlanta" a 16-week counseling program that, like dozens of others like it around the country, combines traditional psychotherapy with the Bible in an attempt to treat addictive behavior.

Blankenship, a devout Christian who once struggled with sexual abuse, says his own ordeal has helped him to treat and "graduate" nearly 500 Christian men and women with similar addictions in the last five years.

He says he has helped people achieve what he calls "sobriety," which means resisting porn and lustful thoughts.

Though controversial in secular circles, much of the evangelical Christian world has been cheering this relatively new kind of therapy. Many believers, including many Christian leaders,

consider it a powerful tool for fighting what they say is one of the modern church's biggest problems: porn addiction.

A crusade is born

Not long ago, it was unheard of for a pastor to talk about sex from the pulpit.

Today, clergy are talking about porn.

Many evangelical pastors say they don't have a choice. The Internet has made porn unavoidable; it's everywhere. And porn, they say, leads to a lack of intimacy in marriage, threatening the biblical mandate to get and stay married.

In the past few years, Christian leaders have established online ministries to tackle the problem, hosting anti-porn podcast sermons and Web chats. The popular evangelical blog Crosswalk.com recently ran an article headlined "How many porn addicts are in your church?"

Christian publishers, meanwhile, have produced a wave of recent books on the subject, including popular titles like "Porn-Again Christian," "Secret Sexual Sins: Understanding a Christian's Desire for Pornography" and "Eyes of Integrity: The Porn Pandemic and How It Affects You."

Evangelical pastor Jeremy Gyorke recently came forward to talk about how porn has affected him. In July, the 32-year-old confessed his porn addiction in a sermon at Wyandotte Family Church, just outside Detroit.

"I'm part of a generation of Christians who grew up keeping your mouth shut about your personal life," he says. "Goodness no, we didn't talk about sex."

"But now that we have a little say in the attitude of the church, we're taking a different approach," Gyorke continues. "We're putting it all out there, saying you don't have to keep secrets. Come forward and admit that you've made a mistake, and you can be healed."

Gyorke said he confessed to his congregation after his wife caught him looking at porn and told him it made her feel inadequate. She wanted him to seek help and to be transparent as a man of God.

Gyorke ultimately decided that viewing any porn, even once or twice, is a problem for believers.

"It's like a gateway drug," he says. "You can't just have a little look. If you look at porn, you've already given your heart and spirit away to someone who isn't your wife."

As he wrote his sermon on the matter, Gyorke felt tremendous anxiety. "I thought it would make or break me to them as their pastor," he says.

But his flock reacted with empathy and support. Several congregants approached him afterward to say that they, too, felt that they'd acted against God by looking at porn.

Different interpretations

Though the words “porn” and “masturbation” don’t appear in the Bible, Gyorke believes the biblical verdict is clear. “Sexual immorality is mentioned a lot in the Bible, and that is what porn is,” he says.

He quotes the Gospel of Matthew: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

“Porn is lust, and lust is a sin,” the pastor said.

Many religious scholars say that such a view reflects just one of many interpretations.

“One school of biblical study says that desire is a problem and needs to be monitored as a serious threat to salvation,” says Boston University theology professor Jennifer Wright Knust.

But Knust points to scriptural passages that appear to endorse sexual desire, including the Song of Solomon, a poem that some scholars say depicts two lovers graphically describing each other’s anatomy in an ode to unmarried sex.

“This is not new. It’s a cherry-picking of scripture used to address what’s happening right now in popular culture,” says Knust, author of the recent book “Unprotected Texts: The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions on Sex and Desire.” “The new thing is that it’s being used by so-called Christian therapists.”

Knust says the anti-porn trend in Christian therapy reflects new questions in broader society about what constitutes an appropriate relationship, about gender roles and rules, and about what marriage really means.

“People are concerned and confused, and want to know if God is speaking to us in our sexual roles,” she says. “Can we find answers in divine revelation? People have always hoped that there can be certainty in the Bible.

“There is no certainty,” she says. “It’s interpretation.”

XXX churches

A few weeks after delivering his confessional sermon, Gyorke organized a Sunday event at his church intended to help keep congregants away from pornography.

He gave out study guides with scriptural verses related to lust and showed a slick video from XXXChurch, the main Web-based group for the Christian anti-porn movement.

The video opens with a mock-pharmaceutical infomercial for a product called “Lustivin.” It raves about how wonderful the drug can make you feel in the short term but then lists some major side effects: premature relational difficulty, divorce, shallow relationships.

Craig Gross, a young pastor from California, co-founded XXXChurch.com in 2001. Its URL was meant to snag people who were surfing the Web for dirty pictures.

“Ten years ago, when I wanted to bring the church up to date, everyone was like, ‘This won’t work. People will be confused about what you’re doing,’ ” Gross says.

“It was controversial at the time, but the church is always behind the times,” he says. “We should have had a XXXChurch.com in the late 1990s if we really wanted to get ahead of this problem.”

The site was slow to catch on for its first few years, but now gets millions of clicks a day from IP addresses around the globe, Gross said.

This year, XXXChurch sponsored Porn Sunday, a national anti-porn event that included hundreds of churches across the country screening a video starring Matt Hasselbeck, who's now quarterback for the Tennessee Titans, and other Christian NFL stars.

Soundbites from the players speak to the struggle between porn and faith.

“Sex is an awesome thing that God designed,” Hasselbeck says in the video.

Jon Kitna, a Dallas Cowboys quarterback, talks about surfing the Web and getting deeper into porn sites. “[You] see this [link] and it leads you to a link to this ... ” he says. “And pretty soon, I’m into a world that I never really knew existed.”

For \$7 a month, XXXChurch offers porn-detection software that fires off automatic e-mail alerts to a subscriber and his or her chosen “faith buddy,” a kind of whistle-blowing system designed to keep Christians from going astray.

Achieving “sobriety”

But some Christians have gone much further in their attempts to tackle porn addictions, literally rearranging their lives.

When Jeff Colon, a self-described recovering porn addict in Kentucky, confessed his addiction to his wife, she told him to get help or find a divorce attorney.

It was the early 1990s. Christian sex addiction counseling was unheard of. But Colon’s pastor - to whom he’d also confided - called other church leaders and learned of a Christian counseling retreat called Pure Life Ministries, a kind of Christian compound that includes a chapel and all-male dormitory on 44 acres in western Kentucky.

Today, Colon is the president of Pure Life, which he credits with saving his marriage.

He says the program has cured thousands of men of their porn addictions through a six- to 12-month program of one-on-one or group therapy sessions.

The live-in program costs \$175 a week. Men must move to the campus and live alone, with wives having the option of talking to Pure Life counselors by phone. Most insurance plans don't cover Pure Life - a moot concern, really, because most program participants quit their jobs to relocate.

That's what Colon, who was working as an elevator repairman, did. "I don't regret it for a second," he says. "It was a hard time not because I lost my job or had to move from my family. It was a tough time because I had nearly lost my connection with God. That is what's most important in life."

Pure Life's curriculum relies heavily on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which stresses that if one lives "by the Spirit," he will not "gratify the desires of the flesh."

The scripture goes on to say that those who gratify the flesh "will not inherit the kingdom of God." Women are not allowed on campus during the initial phase of treatment.

"People who don't follow Christ aren't going to get what I'm saying, but it was like intense Bible study that helped me understand how selfish I am as a sinner," Colon says. "Basically, you have time to talk to God, and for him to show you the way to sobriety. And I've been sober for 17 years."

For Colon, sobriety means abstaining from looking at porn, masturbating and performing any other sex act not involving his spouse.

"You learn that lust is just a state of mind," he says. "If you lust for someone other than your wife, what you do is replace that lust with prayer. And you have a heart change."

Indeed, Colon says that God was central to his recovery.

"I know secular people don't get it," he says. "But if I had a sponsor who was just another person, a person who is fallible, telling me to stay clean, it's just not as powerful as God telling me that."

"Women ... drowning in this addiction"

Men aren't the only ones who have started thinking that way about porn.

According to the creator of accountability2you, a Web-based service that dumps all the pornographic material someone surfs into his or her spouse's e-mail inbox, roughly half of his 10,000 monthly subscribers are women.

"The Christian Church has started to realize that we're sexual, too, and we are just as visually stimulated as men and we look at porn," said Crystal Renaud, author of the recent book "Dirty Girls Come Clean," a memoir about her own addiction to porn.

For the past year, the 26-year-old with punky-streaked hair has led Christian women's porn addiction counseling sessions. Her Dirty Girls Ministries website has 450 members.

"I've met women who will lock themselves in a room and look at porn all day, ignoring their kids or their jobs," she says. "I feel like I can relate because that's all I cared about, getting my high. There are so many more women out there drowning in this addiction, you have no idea."

Though there are few statistics to support Renaud's claims about the extent of the problem, Christian media outlets like Today's Christian Woman have recently run stories about women consuming porn, often theorizing that the habit starts with explicit romance novels.

Renaud, who has no formal training in psychology, promotes a five-step program she's devised called SCARS - Surrender, Confessional, Accountability, Responsibility, Sharing - which encourages women to confess to each other about their desire to look at porn as a means of saying no to it.

In her memoir, Renaud writes about becoming a chronic masturbator and porn addict at age 10, after stumbling upon a dirty magazine in her brother's room. It was a confusing, scary experience, she writes.

"My mother made it very clear what the parameters were when it came to sex, and there wasn't a discussion beyond that," Renaud said. She describes her relationship with her father as rocky, but wouldn't elaborate.

In high school, Renaud was a leader in her Christian youth group, but she was also interested in porn. "I felt so bad and I wanted to stop looking at porn because that wasn't what the Bible instructed," she says, "and I knew God didn't want me doing that."

When she was 18, Renaud arranged to have sex for the first time at a hotel with a person she met in a Christian chat room. She says she went to the hotel but broke down in tears in her room and left before meeting the man.

"That was my rock bottom," she says. "I remember being there and sobbing, thinking, 'What am I doing risking my life to meet someone at a hotel I don't even know?'"

Renaud said that she depends on God to keep her clean and that God is a kind of sponsor or monitor. When she wants to look at porn or masturbate, she and God have a kind of conversation, and the desire passes.

A crusade's critics

The father of Christian-based porn and sex addiction therapy has a word for this "pray-away" method of sobriety.

"Hooy."

Dr. Mark Laaser pioneered the Christian response to porn and sex addiction in the 1980s and chides counseling centers like Pure Life for what he says is their near-total reliance on prayer.

“Alcoholics don’t wish really hard to not be addicted to alcohol,” he says in a phone interview from his busy therapeutic practice in suburban Minneapolis. “The field of addiction is much deeper than opening your Bible.”

He’s pleased that more Christians are openly talking about pornography and sex addiction, but Laaser says he’s concerned that some Christian leaders and therapists are confusing sexual sin with sex addiction.

“Men come dragging into my office because their wives have caught them masturbating and labeled them addicts, or they’ve had one affair and they are now looking to have their affair excused by addiction,” he says.

“One affair doesn’t mean you’re a porn addict,” Laaser says. “Looking at porn occasionally doesn’t make you a porn addict. Those may be poor decisions, but they are not necessarily caused by clinical addiction.”

Porn is estimated to be a multibillion-dollar industry in America alone, banking at least 10 times what it did in 1970, the first time the U.S. government evaluated the retail value of the nation’s then-fledgling hardcore film, television and retail market.

During that same decade, Laaser had become the porn industry’s ideal customer. He was constantly on the hunt for it.

As a devout Christian, he spent a lot of energy trying to keep his porn a secret, especially from his wife, Debbie. His guilt distanced him from her emotionally, he says, and began eroding their relationship.

At the time, there was virtually no established psychological research, or mainstream therapy, for sex addiction. So Laaser reached out to secular 12-step programs, using Alcoholics Anonymous’ framework as a guide to reaching what he called sexual “sobriety,” abstaining from sex outside of marriage and avoiding masturbation.

“I remember thinking I wish my problem were drinking because I could get help easier,” Laaser said.

By the late ’80s, Laaser says, he was on the road to sobriety, combining therapeutic methods he’d learned while pursuing a doctorate in psychology from the University of Iowa and a divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary.

“It began to seem very evident to me that secular therapy does not work as effectively for Christians,” he said. “And that’s because the secular world ... to us as Christians, seems less moral. Sex is everywhere in secular society - television, film, billboards. It’s just so much a part of life that it is excused.

“Christians just aren’t going to seek out a secular therapist - they won’t seek therapy at all if they don’t have some aspect of Christianity woven into their treatment.”

In 1992, Laaser authored the first book on Christian sexual addiction, titled “The Secret Sin.”

“The Christian church, both Protestant and Catholic, is experiencing tremendous turmoil in the area of sexuality,” it began. “The problem seems epidemic.”

It sold barely enough copies to stay in print.

In 2005, the publisher changed the title to “Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction,” and Laaser added chapters on Internet porn. It has sold 75,000 copies.

In Laaser’s care, a patient will undergo psychiatric evaluation, just as he would in the secular world. Laaser wants to know if the patient has any symptoms of depression, ADHD or anxiety. He says many sex addicts suffer from other mental health issues.

“You may need to go to a meeting every day, or connect with a sponsor; you may need to check in with this office once a day,” he said. “Every client is different, but we’re essentially helping them establish boundaries and restrictions.”

Some secular therapists have warmed to this kind of approach.

“The deeply religious were a group that were hard to reach years ago because they had extreme shame connected with their addiction,” says Tim Lee, a licensed social worker in New York with a specialty in sex and porn addiction treatment.

But Lee and Pennsylvania sex therapist Dr. John Giugliano, both members of the Society for Sexual Advancement - a national nonprofit think tank of licensed sex therapists - worry that therapy can become overly focused on dogma and ignore the patient’s real-life issues.

“If you spend your time in session talking about what God thinks and what the Bible says, you don’t get to understand what the patient thinks and what happened in their life up to that point that explains why,” Giugliano says.

Even within the world of Christian therapy, some counselors criticize the methods of other religious counselors.

Richard Blankenship, the Atlanta-based Christian therapist, studied under Laaser in the early 2000s. When Blankenship set up his practice in Atlanta to treat sex addicts, he used the same name as Laaser’s ministry, “Faithful and True,” adding only the word “Atlanta.”

But Laaser wants to make it clear that he has no association with Blankenship’s practice and doesn’t agree with some aspects of Blankenship’s program.

Blankenship doesn't rely enough on psychological expertise, Laaser says. Laaser objects to a therapist telling a patient that an addiction may be patterns repeated through generations, as Blankenship does. And Laaser disagrees with Blankenship's habit of connecting a patient's addiction to a biblical character's family tree.

Abraham's family tree

For the rest of his therapy session at Faithful and True, Michael circles emotions from a list that Richardson and Blankenship have provided. He circles "anxious" and then describes a fight he had with his wife about his infidelity.

Blankenship responds to Michael's description of the fight by saying that addiction is generational, mentioning the Kennedys and the Fondas.

Then Blankenship queues up a PowerPoint presentation on a laptop, showing Michael a family tree he has designed around the biblical story of Abraham.

It has a lot of boxes. There are several pages.

Abraham, Blankenship says, was a guy who committed some sexual transgressions, like fathering a child with Hagar while his wife was barren. Ultimately, God forgave him.

Michael starts talking about his own family. He describes a difficult upbringing with a father whom he said was philandering and verbally abusive. He says sex wasn't talked about at his house when he was growing up.

Before the session ends, Michael is assured that there's no reason to think that he won't kick his addiction. He'll be on a new path, Blankenship says, toward "sexual integrity."

The 90-minute session comes to a close with a prayer.

Blankenship and his co-counselor Mark Richardson lower their heads.

Richardson asks that God look after Michael. He asks God to bless this therapy process. Michael is heading out into the world, he says, heading back into a culture of temptation and lust and ungodly ways.

Look after him, the therapist says, keep him on the right path.