



'Depressed men' gather to share faith, fellowship

By Brent Stewart, *The Southern*

Every Thursday night at Big Boys Q'n in Carbondale, you'll see two or three tables set up together in anticipation of a large group. In fact, around 8:30, you may see two or three guys already sitting at the table, talking, with a Coke or beer in hand, possibly munching on peanuts.

Around 9:15, more men will walk through the door, sit down at the table and begin to order pitchers and food, light a cigar and join the various conversations already in progress.

Though you wouldn't immediately notice upon looking at the gathering, there are many different ages, backgrounds, and interests represented here.

There are business owners, professors, writers, pastors, students, painters, physical therapists and musicians sitting at the table.

There are men who are single or married, with kids and without.

Despite some differences, they all have one thing in common: their love of God and the friendship and bond that has created between them.

This group meets every Thursday night, and they jokingly refer to themselves as "The Depressed Men."

Well, half-jokingly.

It's a tradition that began a few years ago among a group of old friends.

"I've known some of the guys since we were long haired ex-druggies, over 30 years ago, attending a 'Jesus freak' church," said Dean Davis.

They had gone their separate ways until one of them moved back to the area and contacted the rest with the idea of starting a men's book study.

And they're still meeting, five years and 27 books later, expanding their ranks as they go.

"Small groups tend to be cliques that freeze people out," said Tom Hobson, a former regular attendee who now resides in Belleville.

"Here, the guys bring friends, and it works. In churches, they often have to keep breaking up the groups and making new ones in order to make room for new people."

Before they adjourn to BBQ'n, the men meet in one of their offices for the book club part of the evening. They begin with a time of prayer, going around the room and listing each one's concerns, joys, or struggles.

"Our experience has been that many men do not meet and discuss personal matters, but often resort to superficial banter," explained Paul D'Angelo.

This time of the evening is one of the most important parts to another member of the group, Martin Key.

"We truly enjoy Fellowship that builds a community of safety and genuine interests in each other's lives," he said.

"I am free in that atmosphere to be as candid and personal as I've ever been, knowing that issues I struggle with will never leave those four walls."

For the next hour, the men will turn to the selected reading and discuss, debate or try to make sense of what is being said.

"We began our group with the absolutely worst book imaginable, Frederick Jameson's 'Postmodernism,'" said Terry Clark.

"If there was ever a book written to discourage a reading group from continuing, it was Jameson's. Yet, we read the whole thing, had many amazing discussions and miraculously kept going."

"Although, it does have to be said, one of the depressed men burnt his copy of Jameson upon completion."

The list of books read includes work as wide ranging as "Orthodoxy" by G. K. Chesterton, "Trouble with Islam" by Islamic author Irshad Manji, "The

"Ragamuffin Gospel" by Brennan Manning, "Darwin's Black Box" by biochemist Michael Behe, "The Meaning of Love" by Vladimir Soloviev and "Spiritual Depression," by Martin Lloyd-Jones.

The last book in the list is actually where the group got its name, after one of the wives saw it on a table and said "so, what are you guys now, the Depressed Men?"

After the topic for the evening has been exhausted, the men retire to the bar for conversation, drinks and maybe even a cigar.

Todd Williams is a newcomer to the group and feels this kind of fellowship is something that is very unique.

"There are men that get together regularly to play golf, or hunt or fish," he said. "I believe that the activity is the excuse to get together. What lies beneath is the need to be around other men to have friends to share your life with."

"It is something I look forward to every week ... It is no longer something I just enjoy; it is something I require." (And it) helps make me a more complete person. A better father and husband, more content at home."

These bonds have been most helpful in times of unthinkable tragedy.

On February 5, 2004, several of the men and their children waited on a snowy, cold Thursday night until two in the morning to meet the train that transported the body of the daughter of one of the group members from Chicago to Carbondale.

This may not seem like a conventional men's group that you would encounter through your local church, if you would encounter one at all. In fact, you'll find several different denominations represented at their meetings.

There is a level of honesty here that is not found in many church sponsored activities, including meeting at a bar, indulging in cigars and drinking beer.

They will be the first to point out their imperfections, but they will also be the first to admit that it is their faith that sustains them.

"The unique thing is that though most of the members are believers, they do not wear their Christianity like a mask that they can put on and take off," said Williams. "It is who they are. But they are also men. Men who enjoy music, or cigars, or beer, or food, or jokes; even slightly off-color ones."

"They are not afraid to show both sides (of themselves), not in a way that mocks their belief in Christ, but in a way that recognizes His grace is sufficient, even for us."

"We attempt to practice lifestyle evangelism," agreed D'Angelo. "Our goal is not to fix someone to be like us. Sometimes we fail, sometimes we see no fruit, and sometimes we plant a seed watered by another."

Their activity is not limited to one night a week or just reading a book.

They've done work fixing the roof of one of the attendee's house, they yearly go caroling at a local nursing home, and spent time counseling believers and non believers. They will gladly admit that it is not a testament to their goodness, but to the God that they brokenly strive to serve.

"Mother Theresa once said that there are millions of small charitable acts that Christians do all over the world that only God sees," said D'Angelo.

"We hope that in our stumbling service for the Master, there are some of these acts."

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