

No retirement for him; local man directs Christian recovery program

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Ross Gilchrist thought he might enjoy retiring in Costa Rica.

Instead, the former Californian, recovering alcoholic and active Christian is busier than ever putting together a program to help others like himself—people caught in the trap of addictions who are seeking a way out.

“Our group isn’t just for alcoholics and drug addicts,” Gilchrist explains. “As our slogan says, it ‘helps people to overcome life’s hurts, habits and hang-ups.’”

“We help people with their codependency,” he says. “From overeating to alcoholism to gambling to anger, we help people who have any major addiction.”

Gilchrist, who lives in Escazú, and other volunteers host a “Celebrate Recovery” meeting every Monday evening at 7 p.m. at the International Baptist Church in Guachipelín de Escazú. “We meet for praise and worship and then break into small groups depending on the person’s problem,” Gilchrist says. “Men and women meet in separate groups.”

Participants in the small groups share their problems with each other and explore what they are able to overcome. “God’s healing takes place through sharing with others,” Gilchrist says.

“Celebrate Recovery is a safe place to take what’s in your life or heart,” says Peggy Chandler of Santa Ana who leads the women’s discussion group at the Monday evening meetings. “I have found people there who have become life-long friends, who I can pick up the phone and call if I’m having a bad day and I know that they will be praying for me and supporting me.”

Chandler says that there is a strong element of trust among the group’s participants. “They know that whatever they say will not be shared outside of the group with friends or even husbands.”

Meeting in men’s and women’s groups helps the discussion to flow more freely, Chandler says. Also, there are issues dealing with moral issues and intimate problems which should only be discussed in same-sex groups, she adds.

Among those who attend are those who are struggling with problems other than drug or alcohol dependencies, Chandler says. “They have other issues such as codependency, overeating or divorce problems. Some come just out of curiosity and find that there were problems in their past that they haven’t dealt with that God brings to mind. The meetings help them to connect with others and with their problems.”

Some of those who attend the Celebrate Recovery meetings are not considered addicts themselves but often are people who are married to alcoholics or who deal with parents

or children who have an addiction. These participants often attend for support or insights about addictions.

Still others participate because they are looking for a place of service and find it in helping others through the program.

Celebrate Recovery is a Christian recovery program whose roots are in the twelve-step programs of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. "It began at the Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California but now has spread around the world," Gilchrist said. The Saddleback church is a Southern Baptist church pastored by Rev. Rick Warren, author of the best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Gilchrist says that while Celebrate Recovery comes from Christian foundations it is not an outreach of the church to obtain members nor is there any pressure for participants to convert or become a part of the church.

Explaining that there are around 350 different twelve-step recovery groups for all different kinds of additions, Gilchrist says that Celebrate Recovery has a higher success rate. "The key is that participants turn their will and life over to the will of God. At some point God works on us," he says.

Gilchrist says that he spent many years in California and Hawaii seeking relief from alcohol, drugs and other addictions. While finding help in groups such as AA, he says that it was the spiritual dimension of Celebrate Recovery that attracted his interest and had the greatest influence in his life. "AA saved my life but Celebrate Recovery game me my life back again," he affirms.

In 2003, Gilchrist had completed a job in California and was wondering what to do next. It was at that point that he came across the Celebrate Recovery program at the Saddleback church and was offered the opportunity to bring the program to Costa Rica.

The weekly meetings are open to people of any religious persuasion. There is no cost for the meetings but printed material is available for purchase. For now, the meetings are in English, but Gilchrist and others are working to establish similar groups in other parts of the country including Desamparados, Heredia and Palmares.

For more information, call Gilchrist at 354-2639.

No retirement for him; local man directs Christian recovery program, *Tico Times*, July 18, 2005