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Religious leaders call a strike on tobacco

by Adelle M. Banks by Religion News Service

Religious leaders are hoping to hit a home run in a campaign to get Major League Baseball players to ban tobacco use on fields and dugouts of the national pastime.

More than two dozen members of the coalition group Faith United Against Tobacco wrote May 30 to Michael Weiner, executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, focusing on the hazards of smokeless tobacco.

"What players do on their own time is their business, but what they do when they are in uniform and on camera is all of ours, especially considering what's at stake," wrote the leaders, citing increased use of smokeless tobacco by high school boys, and players who have been sickened or killed after dipping or chewing tobacco.

Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig has proposed that smokeless tobacco be banned just as it has been in the minor leagues; the proposed ban has already drawn support from politicians and medical groups.

Weiner has said the issue would be part of collective bargaining talks this year, but has called smokeless tobacco a legal substance that does not have the secondary health risks of cigarette smoke.

Leaders of Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations see baseball players' role-model status as the biggest risk for young people.

"When the cameras are rolling and they zoom in on a player, the last thing we want our kids to see is a big wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek or under his lip, as if he's an advertising spokesman for deadly tobacco," said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

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