

Alcohol In Our Lives

Submission to the Law Commission from visionnetwork – New Zealand Christian Network

29 October 2009

1. Organisation

visionnetwork is a non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering the unity and mission of the Christian Church in New Zealand. A non-denominational network, it seeks to gather people of common conviction, to build partnerships, and to speak to the Church, communities and the nation with a reasoned, carefully researched voice. **visionnetwork**'s Board of Reference is listed at the end of this submission.

visionnetwork is affiliated to the World Evangelical Alliance, and reflects the views of approximately 500,000 Biblically orthodox Christians in New Zealand. Networks include 20 task-force partners involved in such areas as education, sport, family, arts, and social justice.

2. Summary of position

visionnetwork commends the Law Commission for its report, *Alcohol In Our Lives*, leading to a national debate.

In general, we support submissions being made by such organisations as Alcohol Action NZ and Family First NZ and their desire to see greater controls over the sale of alcohol and its misuse. Because their submissions already address these issues, **visionnetwork** will not attempt to cover the same ground.

visionnetwork wishes to focus on a major element which is missing in both the report and the surrounding debate, i.e., the spiritual vacuum that lies behind much of the binge-drinking culture in our society and among young people in particular.

We believe that this neglect of a focus on spiritual life is a key factor driving misuse of alcohol.

While a number of the suggested control measures may be useful, we suggest changing the law will have limited success in achieving the desired outcomes unless the spiritual vacuum is addressed.

3. Research into alcohol and spirituality

The relationship between religious beliefs and alcohol and drug abuse was an infrequent subject for research up to the 1980s. However, it has become a more intense field of study since the 1990s, as psychologists and medical professionals have become more aware that there is a link.

The link was well known, of course, to those who founded the organisation Alcoholics Anonymous, and its internationally acknowledged 12-Step recovery programme has as Step 2: “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity”.

This link was not immediately recognised by the medical profession. However, a major US report overviewing research into spirituality, alcohol and drugs stated that one of the doctors working with AA in its early days, Harry Tibout, “noted with surprise that real character change in alcoholics successfully fighting addiction came about through a spiritual experience”. The paper also reported that the relationship between spirituality and alcohol is becoming an increasing area of research in the USA.¹

Longitudinal studies of community samples consistently find links between active spiritual/religious involvement and increased chances for living longer, pointing to the relevance of spirituality/religion as a potential positive health factor. “A once frequently misunderstood factor among many mental health professionals (American Psychiatric Association, 1990; Larson & Larson, 1994), spirituality/religion emerges in research as an often beneficial source of coping strength in helping in prevention, coping, and at times recovery from physical or emotional illness (Larson, Swyers & McCullough, 1997). **Studies also show persons with active spiritual/religious involvement are at substantially reduced risk for substance abuse, addictions, and suicide** (Benson, 1992; Koenig & Larson, 2001).² (*emphasis ours*)

In *The Handbook of Religion and Health*, Drs Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough and David Larson, state there is considerable data from numerous studies suggesting that religion may prevent or discourage alcohol abuse in children, adolescents and adults. In adolescents, studies on alcohol abuse and religion have shown that students who were religious were less likely to use alcohol than students who indicated they were not particularly religious.

Adolescents who said that religion is extremely important to them were at lower risk of abusing alcohol. Similarly, adolescents who are church members and frequently attend religious services have a significantly low rate of alcohol abuse. Investigators have noted that religious values and norms internalised by the students were the most powerful motivating factor for not abusing alcohol.

Students who are more religiously involved are less likely to associate themselves with peers who drink. The father’s belief in God proved to be the most influential factor why young girls choose not to drink alcohol.³

Other findings from research conducted in the past two decades have included the following:

Young people who are highly religious are less likely to use alcohol and other substances than those who are less religious.⁴

“Current findings indicate that spiritual/religious involvement may be an important protective factor against alcohol/drug abuse. Individuals currently

suffering from these problems are found to have a low level of religious involvement, and spiritual (re)engagement appears to be correlated with recovery... Comprehensive addictions research should include not only biomedical, psychological and socio-cultural factors but spiritual aspects of the individual as well.”⁵

“This study confirms an association between higher worship frequency and lower odds of depression and it expands that finding to other psychiatric disorders. The association between spiritual values and mood, anxiety, and addictive disorders is complex and may reflect the use of spirituality to reframe life difficulties, including mental disorders.”⁶

“A Columbia University research report states that people with religious faith are markedly less likely to abuse alcohol and illegal drugs than nonbelievers, the Associated Press reported. The report from the university’s National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found a greater tendency to shun drugs and alcohol both among people who attend worship regularly and among those who personally consider religious belief important – whether or not they are regular worshippers.”⁷

“Low levels of religiosity were most often associated with disorders related to undercontrol of impulses...”⁸

“Adolescents, psychiatric patients, and recovering addicts all show lower rates of alcohol abuse the more frequently they engage in religious activities. For adolescents, higher levels of religious practice by their mothers are related to significantly lower rates of alcohol abuse, even after controlling for religious denomination and the adolescents’ peer associations – two factors that also influence the level of drinking.”⁹

4. Conclusion

Dr George Vaillant, a Harvard psychiatrist, wrote: “...alcoholics and victims of other seemingly incurable habits feel defeated, bad and helpless. They invariably suffer from impaired morale. If they are to recover, powerful new sources of self-esteem and hope must be discovered. Religion is one such source. Religion provides impetus for both hope and enhances self care...”¹⁰

In other words, there is a strong relationship between religion and healthy attitudes to alcohol. Adolescents and adults who are religious (whether measured by frequent participation in church activities or by the intensity of their religious commitments) are less likely to use abuse or become dependent on alcohol.

Over recent decades Christianity has become increasingly privatised, and in some instances in the public domain it is almost a taboo subject, particularly in schools. This is leaving our children ignorant of the founding basis of our democracy, culture and history and, more important, without a foundation for values.

visionnetwork submits that wherever alcohol misuse is discussed, the relevance of faith values and the evidence cited above, needs also to be mentioned. It is difficult for people to make informed choices when significant elements of the discussion are deliberately excluded.

We recognise that it is not within the scope of the report, nor possible within the ambit of possible legislative changes, to mandate faith directives. However, it is possible for the Law Commission to point out the relevance of religious observance to this discussion, and for the public to recognise that sidelining faith has unintended consequences for which society pays a high cost.

It should also be possible for any new bill to include a reference to the significant amount of research which shows a connection between religious faith and healthy attitudes to alcohol.

APPENDIX

visionnetwork's Board of Reference

– as at 31 July 2009

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| The Rev Neville Bartle | National Leader, Church of the Nazarene |
| Commissioner Donald Bell | Territorial Commander, The Salvation Army in New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga |
| Luke Brough | National Leader, Elim Church of New Zealand |
| The Rev David Bush | General Secretary, Methodist Church of New Zealand |
| The Most Revd Peter Cullinane | Bishop of Palmerston North, Catholic Church of New Zealand |
| Peter Eccles | Chairman, Congregational Union of New Zealand |
| The Right Revd Richard Ellena | Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Nelson |
| Robert Erickson | President, Lutheran Church of New Zealand |
| John Fabrin | CEO, Rhema Broadcasting Group |
| The Rev John Gummer | Director, Christian and Missionary Alliance of New Zealand |
| Ken Harrison | General Superintendent, New Zealand Assemblies of God |
| Brian Hughes | Senior Pastor, Calvary Chapel |
| Brent Liebezeit | President, Christian Churches New Zealand |
| The Rev Rodney Macann | National Leader, Baptist Churches of New Zealand |
| Rex Morgan | Secretary Treasurer, Worldwide Church of God New Zealand |
| Tony Plews | Executive Director, Leadership Development International |
| Lloyd Rankin | National Leader, Vineyard Churches of New Zealand |

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| The Right Revd Dr Graham Redding | Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand; Principal, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership |
| The Rev Murray Robertson | Pastor Emeritus, Spreydon Baptist Church; Director, Leadership Development Network |
| Hal Short | President, United Christian Broadcasters International |
| Les Stephenson | Acting CEO, World Vision New Zealand |
| Dr Mark Strom | Principal, Laidlaw College |
| Steven Tollestrup | Executive Director, TEAR Fund |
| Professor Paul Trebilco | Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Otago |
| The Rev Richard Waugh | National Superintendent, Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand |

Endnotes

¹ Oliver J. Morgan, PhD NCC, “Spirituality, Alcohol and Other Drug Problems; Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?”, in Thomas F. McGovern, William L. White (editors), *Alcohol Problems in the United States: Twenty Years of Treatment Perspective*, The Haworth Press, 2002.

² David B. Larson, Susan B. Larson, “Spirituality’s Potential Relevance to Physical and Emotional Health: A Brief Review of Quantitative Research,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 31, 2003.

³ Drs Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough, and David Larson, *The Handbook of Religion and Health*, Oxford University Press, 2001, quoted in “Religion and alcohol abuse”, *Sun-Star Davao*, October 31, 2006. <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/dav/2006/10/31/feat/religion.and.alcohol.abuse.html>

⁴ Gorsuch, R., “Religious aspects of substance abuse and recovery”, *Journal of Social Issues*, 51(2), 65–83, 1995.

⁵ Miller W.R., “Researching the spiritual dimensions of alcohol and other drug problems”, *Addiction*, Vol. 93, Number 7, 1 July 1998, pp. 979–990. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/carfax/cadd/1998/00000093/00000007/art00003> (accessed 20.10.09)

⁶ Marilyn Baetz, MD, FRCPC, Rudy Bowen, MDCM, FRCPC, Glenn Jones, MD, FRCPC, MSc, Tulay Koru-Sengul, MHS, MA, PhD, “How Spiritual Values and Worship Attendance Relate to Psychiatric Disorders in the Canadian Population”, *CanJ Psychiatry* 2006; 51: 654–661. <http://www1.cpa-apc.org:8080/publications/archives/cjp/2006/september/cjp-sept-06-baetz-OR.pdf> (accessed 20.10.09)

⁷ “People with Faith Are Less Likely to Abuse Alcohol and Illegal Drugs”, Zenit News, 18/11/2001. <http://www.zenit.org/article-2960?l=english>

⁸ John Gartner, David B. Larson, and George Allen, “Religious Commitment and Mental Health: A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 19, Issue 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 6–25.

⁹ Vangie A. Foshee and Bryan R. Hollinger, “Maternal Religiosity, Adolescent Social Bonding, and Adolescent Alcohol Use,” *Journal of Early Adolescence*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (November 1996), pp. 451–468, quoted in Patrick F. Fagan, PhD, *Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability*, Heritage Foundation, December 18, 2006. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/bg1992.cfm>

¹⁰ Vaillant, G.E., “Paths into abstinence”, in G.E. Vaillant (ed.), *The Natural History of Alcoholism: Causes, Patterns and Paths to Recovery*, Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 193–194.