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One Practical Step

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If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. -Romans 14:15

One of the hallmarks of our rich Congregational heritage is that we are genuinely self-governing. We make our own decisions about our life together and about our shared vision for the future of this, our own congregation. We make our decisions prayerfully and we make our decisions with a profound respect for the views and values of all members of our congregation.

Recently, after prayerful consideration and open discussion, the leadership team representing the membership of this congregation established a policy banning alcohol at any church-sponsored event. The policy has — in the true Congregational tradition — led to active discussion with some members affirming the decision, other members opposing it, and several members wanting to understand better and more fully why this church has adopted this policy. Good and valid questions have been raised about the social, moral, spiritual, traditional, and symbolic considerations behind this decision.

Ours is not a denomination like the Baptists and Mormons that condemn all consumption of alcohol as sin. Our policy has nothing whatsoever to do with sin and our decision is in no way intended to pass a value judgment on drinking.

In the same way we have not chosen to follow the path of some faiths (Islam and Baha'i for example) who expect their members to avoid alcohol as a public demonstration of self-denial directly analogous to the way a Christian might give up chocolate for Lent.

Also, we are neither a denomination nor a congregation that dictates behavior to other groups. Should an individual or organization rent space in our building for a wedding or other event, they are free to make their own decision. The policy addresses only events that are sponsored by this congregation.

Why, then, did the leadership team vote to ban alcohol at church-sponsored events? It was proposed, discussed, and approved as a tangible affirmation of our solidarity with and compassion for individuals who are struggling with alcoholism. For many years, it has been a ministry of this church, to open up our building for self-help programs for men and women who face the reality that they are alcoholics. The individuals who gather under our roof have found the deep courage to admit their problem and they turn to each other and turn to God for the strength, understanding, and encouragement to cope with this problem.

It is all but impossible to cope with this addiction entirely on one's own, and the support of others is essential in living with this problem. It is important for us all to know that nobody ever overcomes it completely. One is always a "recovering alcoholic," and not a "former alcoholic." It is a lifelong challenge to live with this affliction. With every day, every meal, every party, every picnic, every Italian Dinner Fund Raiser, every going-away party with Champagne, every (you fill in the blank) presents a challenge to remain on the path of recovery or to slide

backwards. Alcoholism is not a sin and it is not a character flaw. It is an affliction, no more a question of character or sin than high blood pressure or heart disease.

We stand with the individuals who walk through the doors of this church to gain the mutual support they need in their life-long struggle. We open our doors. We give them space. In our time of Sunday joys and concerns we frequently pray for those “struggling with addictions of substances and behaviors.” And we have decided that we do not want to do anything to make things more difficult for them.

Jesus, of course, never in any way condemned the use of alcohol. We know he drank wine, we know he shared it at the famous wedding in Cana, and we know he explicitly tells us to “take the cup in remembrance of me.” However, if alcohol is not a sin, what is clearly and undeniably a sin, is to do anything that causes another individual to stumble. By rejecting the serving of alcohol at any church-sponsored event, we are declaring this congregation is taking loving responsibility for not putting stumbling blocks in the way of others.

And that is why we have this policy. This congregation is saying symbolically as well as practically, that any recovering alcoholic — whether a member of the groups that meet here or not — will not be tempted in this building because of our actions. We simply care too much for them and their lifelong struggle. Where we have had to make a clear choice between hospitality and compassion, we have chosen compassion as the higher virtue for precisely the same reason that our denomination, when choosing between historical accuracy and compassion, uses grape juice when we celebrate the Lord’s Table.

Let me close with a passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans (14:13-15):

Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.