

Pastoral Care: Teenage Drinking

A North Conway Institute Publication

By

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"...And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Matthew 6:13)

This booklet is about teenagers and alcohol. It's about prevention work, pastoral care of teenagers, and the role of religious communities. Here is information, things to look for and understand, and some practical ways of taking action.

Teenage Tests and Trials

The teenage years — adolescence into adulthood — challenge young persons with daily tests and trials. Reaching up for adulthood, seeking independence, breaking away are full of dangers and opportunities. Learning comes through experimentation, following others and finding out for yourself. Relationships are uncertain, exciting, scary, satisfying and require endless discussion. Moods shift from bravado to shyness, from isolated loneliness to security in "hanging out" together. Daring to risk by reaching out can be blocked by fear. Insisting on what's "right" covers secret doubts. Confidence alternates with uncertainty. Emotions turn through laughter, pain, joy and boredom. Some days are up, others down. Moving into the adult world is never easy.

This normal teenage life also challenges the folks around the young person. All are tested. What to say? What to do? How to relate? You try to do all the important things; guiding, admonishing, holding to standards, setting examples, trying to love and be fair. Issues come up around friends, romance, sex, health, driving, and school grades.

But when in the midst of all this "normal" growing up, a teenager begins to have drinking problems, troubles multiply. Worry, anxiety, anger and helplessness can plague the family and friends. In this situation, family members often turn to a religious leader for advice.

For Responsible Religious Leaders

"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23.4b)

This publication is for religious leaders, engaged in ongoing, day-to-day pastoral care in local congregations.

This booklet can be useful to administrators and executives within denominational organizations responsible for seeing that resources and information are available for the ministers at the local level. This information can help in establishing policy guidelines.

Religious Leaders Teach in Many Ways

"Thus you will know them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:20)

Religious leaders are role models (like it or not.) They live a "fish bowl" life. In the use or non-use of alcohol, your behavior is a public example, watched and talked about. Young people learn behavior primarily from role models. Who we are, and what we do, influences the young much more than what we say. The language of daily relationships is more influential than the language of words. A double-meaning, double-bind message is delivered when adults do not act the way they speak — when they "don't walk the talk."

Ministers have many formal educational opportunities such as sermons, lectures, planned courses and other program activities. Of equal importance is informal teaching which flows through guidance and counseling sessions with teenagers. Learning comes through daily encounters; on the street, in a store, at the doctor's office. Mutual learning is part of any conversation.

Why the High Priority for Early Intervention?

"And he entered into a house..." (Mark 7:24b)

Research, and common sense, tell us that early intervention — breaking into destructive behavior patterns before they become deep-seated — is most effective. Now it's more critical than ever as young people are experimenting with adult behaviors at earlier age levels than before.

Such evidence comes from the observations of college counselors from their interviews with entering students. It appears that over the last five to eight years, the amount of drinking experience which the young people are bringing to the campus has increased markedly. This indicates that, for some, use is beginning at an early age and therefore, the behavior is more deep-seated and of longer duration than in times past. Experimentation and use at earlier age levels is part of a general phenomena called the "loss of childhood." Thus early intervention is needed more than ever. Fortunately, religious leaders have special advantages in early, constructive intervention.

The Pastoral Calling Advantage

"And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.' (Matthew 25:39-40)

Teenage drinking problems, unlike some other problems, are not socially acceptable. Family members and friends cover up and refuse to acknowledge the truth — that the problem exists. Denial occurs. The knowledge can stay hidden. Somehow family members refuse to see or believe that their teenager is having difficulties.

A religious leader has the distinction of being one professional who can, without an appointment, appear at the door of a home, ring the bell and be invited in. It is accepted by members of religious groups that the ordained leaders have not only the right but the duty to make house

calls. Indeed, many church members get upset if clergy don't make regular home calls.

Other professionals do not have "cold call" rights — nor are house calls expected. A religious leader's ability to make a "cold call" is a powerful tool for early intervention. Entrance into the home can uncover problems and break the circle of secrecy. Such in-breaking can start remedial action and move the teenager and his family to seek help.

The "Generational Factor" Advantage

"We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;" (Hymn; Traditional Netherlands Melody; arr. Edward Kremser)

A major advantage religious communities have, usually lacking in other organizations, is the "generational factor." Family members spanning three generations — children, parents, and grandparents — frequently attend the same church. Other relatives may also attend. Usually friends of the teenager are members of the congregation.

Religious leaders are the most likely professionals to have knowledge of both the immediate and the extended family members. Despite our nomadic society, religious celebrations are gathering places for the extended family. They come for worship, to weddings, baptisms, bar mitzvahs, holidays, memorial services and funerals.

Religious institutions, of all the contemporary "agencies," have the best opportunity to make contact with all the family members. This "generational factor" is a powerful resource for knowledge and strategic action in moving in on a "family" problem.

The "Hearing" Advantage

And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Mark 4:9)

Religious leaders have access to an information and communication network not readily available to other professionals. In the public domain the religious leader occupies a position of prominence. A leader who is community oriented (not bound by narrow parochialism) is in touch with many sources of information. This style of ministry is so useful in a time of weakened community bonds.

Religious leaders can hear of a teenager in trouble from many sources such as friends of the family, neighbors, other parents, the school committee members, after-school program leaders. School officials, coaches, police officers and store owners are also sources of information.

The three advantages; the house call, the generational factor, and the broad information network throughout the community provide the religious leader with opportunities for effective, early intervention to benefit a teenager in trouble. But it is possible to avoid pastoral responsibility.

Avoiding the Responsibility

"Now by chance a priest was going down the road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." (Luke 10:31)

One clear avoidance tactic is not learning about or not understanding the health system and the resources available in the local region. Another form of shirking duty is to dodge the issue with the attitude: "It's too difficult to deal with. After all, teenagers are trouble enough but when they are mixed up in alcohol problems, it's too much."

That attitude fosters the habit of ducking, taking the easy path, by abruptly referring the teenager and his family elsewhere before using the pastoral skills to understand the situation. While a competent assessment of a specialist is usually required, it is important for the pastor to know the entire picture and what sort of help is most appropriate. Shunning pastoral responsibility fails to bring the resources of the believing, supportive community into the situation.

Another dodge is to over-engage in public lament with rhetoric. Leaders make "view with alarm" statements, repeating well-known statistics and, in general, are content to bemoan the sad state of affairs. Such habitual pronouncements prove the truth of that old saying, "When all is said and done — more is said than done."

But most religious leaders are actively engaged in dealing with drinking problems and understand how important the function of religious tradition, ethnic rituals and social standards are within healthy family life.

Three Family Patterns

"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

The manner in which traditions, rituals and standards are explained, taught and actually lived out by adults influences the thinking, the attitudes and the behavior of the young alcohol use. Good communication and consistent adult behavior is required if the young people are going to internalize the standards and make the traditions their own way of life. Three family patterns around alcohol use can be described as follows:

- (1) Moderation and good communication
- (2) Abstinence and good communication
- (3) Ambiguity and uncertain communication.

I. Moderation and Good Communication

In this family pattern, the use of alcohol is a normal part of family life, especially on holidays and at special family celebrations. Children may be introduced to alcohol use in guided incremental stages; a detailed explanation of family standards and expectations of appropriate social behavior are carefully communicated and observed by the adults. These norms may stem from a religious

tradition (a sacrament), from an ethnic ritual (a toast during a celebration) or from a social standard (moderate social use of alcoholic beverages, accepted — excessive use, not tolerated). Here the acceptable use of alcoholic beverages is clearly defined and articulated. Improper use is not sanctioned.

II. Abstinence and Good Communication

Abstinence has become the cultural norm in several religious traditions. Family standards which dictate that alcohol consumption is unacceptable are learned and often reinforced by religious injunctions. These behavior patterns are discussed and lived by the entire family.

In introducing the North Conway Institute publication, *Personal Responsible Abstinence*, President David Works writes:

"In publishing a study document on abstinence, the Institute honors the work of a committed group of persons who have labored to make this view of responsible decision making available. The non-use of alcohol is a valid position on beverage alcohol. It is a symbolic action which could become a most effective alternative to irresponsible drinking."

Author Reverend Dr. John A. Wood states:

"A person who denies himself/herself of alcohol is not making a sacrifice that robs the individual of any self-fulfilling potential. The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that a life of self-actualization is not achieved through the use of any substance, but through inner peace, a sense of purpose in life, and by serving others."

Abstinence remains part of a total way of life for a large number of families in our society.

III. Ambiguity and Uncertain Communication

Many families are uncertain and ambiguous about the use of alcohol by adults, and even more so about its use by young people. Often this uncertainty and ambiguity takes the form of a double standard whereby it's all right for adults to drink but it is positively forbidden for teenagers to drink under any circumstances. Often there is no clear guidance from a religious tradition presented by the adults to the children. Uncertain norms and standards can be a part of a general failure of communication between the generations. In families which provide no clear or understandable steps for attaining adulthood, uncertainty and confusion result, and teenagers are left under the power of peer group pressures. Here alcohol abuse may merge with other types of troubled behavior.

No particular family fits exactly into one of these model patterns. And while well articulated religious traditions, ethnic practices or social standards help in providing behavior guidelines, every family these days labors under disruptive influences active in the surrounding community. This disruption means that many teenagers live in homes with hidden turmoil or in homes already broken.

In your regular work in the congregation and in the community, pay careful attention to the types of family stress and disruption which create undue emotional and spiritual pressures on teenagers. Be sensitive to the short-term and long-term conditions which lead to deviant behavior. The following questions illustrate the wide range of factors which can alert you to the possibility of a teenager in difficulty.

Be Aware of Specific Family Troubles

Get a clear idea of who the family members are and who is living in the household, and of the basic family relations of the teenager. Is it just the immediate, nuclear family? How about grandparents, aunts, uncles, outsiders? Are there "non-traditional" relationships in the household? Is it a broken home through divorce, death, economic necessity? Are step-parents in the picture? In general, how do the family members relate to each other? Has there been a history of conflict between family members? How do the members interact with people outside the family? What are the perceptions of the family in the community? Are they talked about? Are the children considered to be troublemakers?

Are there signs of marital conflict between the father and the mother? Is there any public talk of family trouble, hints of divorce, previous separations? What's been the character of that conflict? Is it religious, ethnic, economic, or personal alienation?

Check and see about any of the deceased members who used to live in the household, and have there been any recent deaths? How about illnesses in the family? Are there any serious illnesses, any chronic illnesses; is illness a significant factor in the family pattern? Are there any major losses? These could be in terms of economic losses, personal losses, tragedies — anything which might produce trauma or severe changes. From your information, can you tell how the family members interact with each other?

Concerning alcohol use, how do the family members use alcohol; are some abstainers, some moderate drinkers? Has anyone had trouble with it, before the courts or in treatment?

In general, be aware of long term disturbances or recent traumatic events which create family stress. You're looking at all these matters to see how they might impact on the adolescent.

Concerning the Teenager

The following are some of the many factors to look out for in the behavior of a teenager if you suspect there is difficulty.

How is school going for the youngster? Are there any academic problems? Has there been a recent drop in school grades? How does the performance compare to that of the siblings? Is there any hint of learning disabilities; has the student been in remedial classes? How is the behavior concerning school such as lateness or absenteeism, truancy, cutting classes, suspension or expulsion? Are there conflicts with teachers, authorities or other students? What are the parents' expectations for their child? Is education in school important to the parents?

Be alert to reports of anti-social behavior which might include extreme aggressiveness or passivity, emotional unevenness or flare-ups, rebelliousness, unexplained absences or staying out all night or running away, shop lifting, auto theft, vandalism, and especially to any recent change in personality.

For teenagers personal appearance is a key factor. For many adults, teenage dress patterns are at odds with adult standards, but the clothing style needs to be seen in relation to the prevailing local peer customs. But disinterest, lack of care about dress and general hygiene should be taken seriously. Studies have shown that disinterest in appearance by a teenager can be a significant indicator of alcohol trouble, chemical dependency or mental health problems.

Of course it is always important to have a general knowledge of the basic health of the teenager. Is there a history of significant illnesses? Have there been any hospitalizations? What is the current state of health? Of special interest is the evidence of any change in sleep patterns; especially being hard to wake up, falling asleep inappropriately or not being able to sleep. Changes in sleeping patterns can be an indicator of active alcohol abuse and/or depression.

When gaining knowledge of these matters relating to the teenager's behavior, it is important to keep your mind open and not jump to the conclusion that it must be alcohol abuse. There may be another cause or several contributing causes; physical, mental or social. It is imperative to have competent professional guidance as to the most appropriate type of intervention or therapy. In some instances young people are rushed into treatment for alcohol abuse when other treatments are the needed therapy.

Putting It All Together — In Action

"...pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:38)

With the knowledge gained from the congregation and community information network, you are ready to go into action. Use all the advantages of the ministry. The pastoral calling advantage gives you a head start. At the first hint of trouble don't hesitate to talk to the teenager directly. Do it in a private, one to one, conversation. Lay out what you have heard — not with accusations, but with genuine interest. Show concern. You really want to help if difficulties are causing trouble. Be open. Let the young person know, that you know, how tough things can be, when you are facing them alone. Maybe there will be an opening and things can be shared.

How far this will go depends on your existing relation with the young person. But don't hold back. Reach out. If trouble is bubbling up it is better to go after it head on. Sure, you may be rejected, but you can take it. To provide help in times of trouble is our job.

If things don't move with the teenager, see the family members. Use the Pastoral Calling Advantage. They may be covering up — playing the game of "hiding the truth." Maybe they can't admit what they already suspect. You may be rebuffed, but the visit will be remembered later, when they are able to reach out for help.

But quite often people are grateful and relieved to be able to talk about it. Your visit will be appreciated. With your knowledge of the helping network, steps toward help can start.

As important as pastoral care is, for troubled youth, prevention of trouble is our greatest task. Prevention means, "to go before." Our basic work is getting out in front — to block trouble before it hits the young. Here are some things we can do.

Encouraging Youth Participation

"Let the children come unto me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God."
(Mark 10:14b)

Providing a rounded religious ministry to and for teenagers is the best form of prevention. Despite the differences in the size, geographical location and resources, congregations can offer a ministry that includes learning, service, fun, social action and worship. As one adult youth leader put it, "Our top priority is to provide a spiritual place where youth feel accepted and loved, where they feel safe and can share, where they can begin to explore the blessings and responsibilities of being Children of God."

A teenage boy who is a member of that church said, "This is a place where teens are really valued. People here pay attention to what you feel and think."

A formulated and stated policy by the congregational leadership can help create a constructive youth ministry. All the adult members can share in building good relationships between the generations. When young people break out from childhood patterns, they need the support and interest of other adults beyond their family ties. The "Generational Factor Advantage" comes into play. Pastors, family and adult youth leaders who know the young people can encourage the development of adult-youth relationships. This reaching out across the generations makes a strong pastoral network.

Young people can be included in the activities and events of the whole congregation. They need to be asked and invited. Once a new pastor was disturbed because none of the teenage boys would have anything to do with the church. Then he remembered that the first-string fullback of the local high school was a member of the parish family. So late one fall afternoon, he went down to the football field. As Bruce, the fullback, was on his way to the locker room after practice, the minister stopped him. "Bruce, you carry the ball mighty well out here on Saturday afternoons but I'm in trouble and I need your help. I need you to carry the cross for me on Sunday morning in the church service. Will you do it?" Bruce was taken back and hesitated. After a long pause he said, "Well, I guess so. Ya, sure, I'll do it." And after thanking him the pastor turned away and added, "And Bruce, bring along a couple of your buddies to help you out." Next Sunday three strong, young men marched in the church procession. From that simple beginning, Bruce and his two friends became the nucleus for an active, young men's service fellowship of high school students which has continued through the years.

Young people respond to the challenge of worthwhile activities, teaching and planning courses

for the younger children, singing and playing an instrument in the music program, helping on work task forces, assisting at suppers and other events. Like others, young people should be recognized for their accomplishments and activities by acknowledgements during the service and in the newsletter. Young people need opportunities to relate their experiences, their points of view and the meaning of their faith at forums, church meetings, and from the pulpit.

Service in the Outside World

"Go into all the World..." (Mark 16:15b)

The scripture urges us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. For teenagers, simply getting out of the normal routine of the everyday scene can open up new understandings of life.

One youth group went on a weekend work project in the next state. They painted walls, built book shelves and did landscaping chores at a school for disadvantaged children. One teenage girl describing the trip said, "It was really rewarding. I had a chance to make a difference in those kids' lives. They were so thankful. But I was given more than I gave."

Religious organizations can set up experiences which cross social boundaries, such as visits to nursing homes or prisons. Volunteer work can be conducted in hospitals, schools, and shelters for the homeless. Exchange visits between churches in areas can carry the young across cultural, economic and ethnic boundaries. Because of the religious community's network of service opportunities, projects can be developed locally, regionally and internationally.

The faith communities are free from a lot of bureaucratic regulations. They can try new and creative programs to provide experiences which expand the vision of teenagers, which reveal how others live and think, which open up the cultural richness of the different kinds of people in this world.

In all of this, minds and skills are tested. Constructive experimentation takes place. In a new situation a young person can discover new strengths. One shy teenage boy was selected to be the supervisor of the carpentry team on a weeklong project. Abilities and skills came out that he didn't know he had. As he looked back he reported, "I got a whole new sense of myself. I realized that I could do things that I didn't know I could do. I learned to take risks — to go for it. That work project turned my life around."

Conclusion

Helping to turn lives around, opening up new experiences, providing sound values for responsible decisions and presenting an understanding of life based on religious faith, is what we owe to the young.

When difficulties emerge around alcohol use and around any of the many other problems which afflict youth, we need to employ all our pastoral skills, the "Advantages" of the congregation and the resources of the community to bring healing to all afflicted.

Our first task is to continue building strong, worshipping congregations in which hope is stirred up and a vision of God's intention for our lives, proclaimed. In an energetic faith community which understands the journey into adulthood, we can provide relationships of support and challenge for our teenagers to strengthen their spirit for their new adult life. This needs to be a congregational priority carried out with constant commitment and creative program planning.

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A lively approach to providing help to those in trouble.

The North Conway Institute (NCI) is an interfaith, ecumenical, interdisciplinary nonprofit organization that works with religious and secular groups in addressing problems of alcohol and drug abuse. An outgrowth of the Yale University School of Alcohol Studies, NCI was founded in 1951 in North Conway, NH, by the Rev. David A. Works and a group of concerned clergy and lay persons.

Its major goals are to promote education for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse; to improve care and rehabilitation of alcoholics; to further personal, responsible decision making about the use/non-use of alcohol beverages; and to develop a better climate for discussion, research, and action on all aspects of alcohol problems.

The Rev. John Soleau is a consultant to The North Conway Institute and to other religious and human service institutions in the areas of policy direction, program development and community organization. As a pastoral theologian, he is an author and lecturer in the field of addictions and a designer of recovery programs and educational workshops. Formally he was the Chairman of the Department of Pastoral Theology at Virginia Theological Seminary and presently serves as the President of the Central Middlesex Mental Health Association in Massachusetts and on the staff of Grace Episcopal Church, Lawrence.

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