

ALCOHOL IN SOCIETY

SERIES: TAKING A STAND

EXPLORING THE ARMY'S INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENTS

STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army encourages an alcohol-free lifestyle as a way of enhancing the well-being and health of all people. As a witness to this, Salvation Army soldiers choose to live an alcohol-free life. The Salvation Army recognises the harm alcohol causes in individuals, families and communities. It advocates for reducing the consumption of alcohol, and it offers its services to support and restore people negatively impacted by alcohol use.

Download the complete IPS at salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

THIS INTERNATIONAL Positional Statement (IPS) is intriguing because it addresses both individual health and community well-being. It draws a distinction between the *individual alcohol-free lifestyle* choice of Salvationists and the *reduction of alcohol consumption by society* at large.

It is a subtle, yet important contrast.

WHOLENESS

The Hebrew concept of *shalom* is applicable here. More than the absence of war or conflict, *shalom* joins salvation, health, healing, wholeness and wellness with physical, mental and spiritual fulfilment – both for the individual and the community.

The *individual* Salvationist commitment to *abstinence* from alcohol expresses a behavioural lifestyle that aims for maximised *personal* wholeness. Individuals are strengthened towards this wholeness with the mutual support of other Salvationists, holding each other accountable and encouraging each other.

The *community of faith* known as The Salvation Army commits to a *reduction* in alcohol consumption and an overall increase in *community* wholeness through modelling, education, advocacy and the provision of rehabilitation programmes and support groups.

Some people abstain from alcohol for health reasons.

PRINCIPLE

The negative global and societal impact of the alcohol industry leads some people to make a principled choice to abstain from alcohol consumption. This is one factor for the collective Salvation Army. The choice of abstinence is an expression of our Christian faith and values.

Any principled protest is likely to be in the minority, but can be, nevertheless, powerful in its impact. When communal momentum gathers, wholesale change can be effected. For example, note the relatively recent Western rejection of nicotine, where smoking has gone from being socially acceptable to legally prohibited in many public settings.

Some people abstain from alcohol out of principle.

VOW

One component of spiritual formation is the relationship between tangible human appetite and intangible spiritual values.

An individual, seeking to nurture and strengthen spirituality, will often willingly commit to sacred self-denial. This essentially makes a statement – to the individual, to the community and to God –

FOR REFLECTION

- * How does the teaching of Scripture on alcohol compare with The Salvation Army's positional statement and the Soldier's Covenant?
- * As a community of faith what impact does The Salvation Army have in reducing the overall communal consumption of alcohol?
- * When might individual principled abstinence from alcohol result in personal cost, misunderstanding or inconvenience?
- * Why don't you drink alcohol? How have you passed this understanding or belief on to a younger Salvationist?

“Any principled protest is likely to be in the minority, but can be, nevertheless, powerful in its impact. When communal momentum gathers, wholesale change can be effected ...”

that healthy spirituality is more important than bodily appetites. A public vow or commitment helps this.

There is some similarity with athletes and artists who make self-denying commitments for their sport or art form.

The Salvation Army offers a voluntary commitment to abstinence from alcohol for individuals through the signing of the Soldier's Covenant, a way to express the idea of a vow.

Some people abstain from alcohol as a spiritual commitment.

SUMMARY

While the consumption of alcohol is a normal part of society, the carnage wreaked is vast – from functional alcoholism to full-blown addiction, from cirrhosis of the liver to drunk-driving fatalities, from spousal and child abuse to binge drinking brawls, from work absenteeism to spiralling medical costs for entire nations.

This IPS affirms the alcohol-free healthy choice made by individual Salvationists, and upholds the combined advocacy and care offered by The Salvation Army to reduce the alcohol-induced human toll in the community. »

FACTS AND FIGURES

- The harmful use of alcohol results in 3.3 million deaths each year.
- On average every person in the world aged 15 years or older drinks 6.2 litres of pure alcohol per year.
- Less than half the population (38.3 per cent) actually drinks alcohol, this means that those who do drink consume on average 17 litres of pure alcohol annually.
- In general, the greater the economic wealth of a country, the more alcohol is consumed and the smaller the number of abstainers. High-income countries have the highest alcohol per capita consumption and the highest prevalence of heavy episodic drinking among drinkers.
- Delegations from all 193 member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) reached consensus at the World Health Assembly in 2010 on a WHO Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol.
- A significantly higher percentage of the reporting countries indicated having written national alcohol policies and imposing stricter blood alcohol concentration limits in 2012 than in 2008.

World Health Organization, who.int/substance_abuse/facts/alcohol/en/



**COLONEL
RICHARD MUNN**
Secretary for Theology and
Christian Ethics
USA Eastern Territory

» PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM COLONEL RICHARD MUNN

The invitation to imbibe any form of alcohol is rare for me these days. Long gone is the silly season of college peer pressure. Rather, my prosperous brother-in-law often quips how he likes taking Janet and me out for a meal because the bill is so much cheaper without the alcohol.

Pulled over in my vehicle for a random alcohol breath test recently, I confidently announced to the matter-of-fact policeman, 'I haven't had a drop for 40 years!'

And yet, even I occasionally find myself in situations where the polite decline for a generously offered drink makes me squirm inside. Our Italian *maitre d'hôtel* was flabbergasted as we demurred his offer of limoncello following pasta supreme.

Face-to-face with the popular mantra 'drink responsibly', yes, it would be socially agreeable to accept the kindness of host and hostess.

Of this we can be certain, the consumption of alcohol is a normal part of life in Scripture, and in our world. The repeated biblical admonition are warnings against drunkenness.

It was with some genuine befuddlement then, while serving

at International Headquarters in an ecumenical role for a season, that I found myself in more alcohol-fuelled settings than any time in the previous decades. Following a day of ecumenism, what better way to conclude than 'breaking bread together'? I exaggerate not, on several occasions at the end of the evening I was the alert and sober one amidst the slurred speech and raucous laughter around the table, attempting to discuss the subtleties of bi-lateral theological dialogue with a merry counterpart – a somewhat unique experience!

It gave me a renewed appreciation for the Soldier's Covenant.

This sentiment was only reinforced when I read the 2016 UK Department of Health Alcohol Guidelines conclusion: 'There is no "safe" level of alcohol consumption' and 'any amount of alcohol consumption carries some risk.'

Certainly, in my association with the beneficiaries of Salvation Army rehabilitation centres a frequent lament is, 'I wish I had never taken my first drink.'

'Do not get drunk on wine...' writes Paul, 'Instead, be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18).

To this I say, 'cheers!'



**MAJOR
AIDA CÁCERES DE ALÍ**
Programme Assistant and
Territorial Secretary for Corps
Ministries
South America West Territory

PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM MAJOR AIDA CÁCERES DE ALÍ

The consumption of alcohol is more than just addiction. It has dramatic consequences in the lives of the people, families and communities involved (see for instance Proverbs 23:29-35).

It is concerning to see the various ways in which alcohol becomes part of people's lives in societies around the world, such as drinking for social acceptance, alcohol as a main element in festivals, the initiation of adolescents to drink alcohol, drinking with colleagues after work or simply as a daily habit.

I just want to highlight the negative effect on the most vulnerable – children. I grew up in a society where alcohol is deeply rooted in the community. In Bolivia, popular festivals mixing indigenous pagan and Christian traditions, and family gatherings such as baptisms, weddings, birthdays and even funerals are the excuse for excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages. People from the middle and lower classes work all year to pay the cost of participation in one or more of these festivals. I often question the fact that they are condoned by the Catholic Church, thinking of the negative consequences, one of which is alcoholism, incompatible with the Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus Christ. It's where



CASEY O'BRIEN MACHADO
Territorial Social Justice
Coordinator
Australia Eastern Territory

children's shoes, books and pencils turn into beer. Their nutrition, health, education and recreational activities are not a priority.

The dangers to which children living in this context are exposed are many: negligence, abandonment, abuse, witnessing violence and immoral acts, and so on. Unfortunately, this becomes a vicious circle as children who suffered from these consequences become adults who repeat the same pattern because they have inherited these customs and cultural practices. I thank God that, unlike many other children, I never experienced anything in my childhood that I now have to regret.

Few children and young people are able to change their way of life, and even fewer find the support and means to do so. I, however, came to know Jesus as my Saviour in The Salvation Army. If this had not been possible, I do not want to imagine what my life would be like today, but I became an officer and now have an alcohol-free lifestyle, and my three children and a daughter-in-law also serve the Lord as soldiers.

During my ministry, I have advised many young people to change their lives, and I have witnessed the transforming power of Jesus, who makes this possible.

PERSONAL REFLECTION FROM CASEY O'BRIEN MACHADO

I recently sat in a workshop with various other Salvationists – some officers, some soldiers – where we were asked to write down our answer to the question, 'Why don't you drink alcohol?' The variation within the group's answers was fascinating. Answers ranged from, 'Because The Salvation Army is involved with rehabilitation services and that would be hypocritical', to 'Because it's bad for me', to 'I had to agree to that to become a soldier'.

It appears to me that many Salvationists are not clear about their reasons for abstaining from alcohol. They understand that it is a promise they make in their Soldier's Covenant, but they are often not sure exactly why it is in there. Should it surprise us, then, that many young people choose not to become soldiers because the 'abstinence from drinking' promise seems obsolete to them? Many of the usual reasons cited are not relevant to them – they are often not personally involved with rehabilitation services, they hear in the media that 'one glass of wine a day' has positive health benefits, and they find drinking a way to bond with their friends.

One of the issues is that we, The Salvation Army, have not always done a good job of teaching why we do what we do (or what we don't

do!). This is the case with so many of the Army's nuances.

This is what this IPS is about. We abstain from alcohol to 'enhance our well-being' – spiritual, emotional and physical. This includes the fact that abstinence is a help to us in our spiritual walk. It's to do with our holiness. It's not that abstaining makes me more holy – it's that I am a broken person who continually needs to rely on God's grace to make me whole. As we see in 1 Corinthians 10:23 *ISV*, 'Everything is permissible, but not everything is helpful. Everything is permissible, but not everything builds up.'

I want to be who God created me to be and, as a result, I need to eliminate from my life anything that could cause me to stumble or to be some lesser version of that person. I have watched too many friends make bad choices, in part due to alcohol, and in doing so become less than who God intended them to be. It simply makes sense to me to eliminate that risk from my life.

As Salvationists, we must be sure of what we stand *for*, not simply what we stand *against*. We abstain from alcohol because of what we want to be, not because of what we *don't* want to be. We want to be holy people, effective in bringing God's Kingdom to earth, and our abstinence from alcohol can assist us in working towards that goal.