

Methodists: Drinking still a touchy topic

by [Clayton McCleskey](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

Pastor James Howell knew he had a problem on his hands when several teenagers arrived at a church dance drunk and had to be taken from the church by ambulance to be treated for alcohol poisoning. Starting in 2009, he urged his flock at Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, to give up drinking for Lent and donate the money they would have spent on booze to a "spirit fund."

To date, Myers Park has raised more than \$34,000 for local substance abuse programs, and seven parishioners have sought treatment for alcoholism.

"It isn't that alcohol in and of itself is bad; Jesus drank wine," Howell said. "We emphasize the role it plays in our lives." Part of that discussion, Howell and others have found, involves acknowledging a fact that some Methodists prefer not to talk about: some Methodists drink—even if many don't like to admit it.

From teetotaling Baptists to Episcopalians who uncork champagne in the parish hall, alcohol use can be tricky for religious groups to deal with—especially during holy periods or holidays.

There are no rules on alcohol for Catholics during Lent, although Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are mandatory days of penance and abstinence. Muslims—those who drink alcohol at all—are called to abstain from it during Ramadan. But to celebrate Purim, Jews are encouraged to drink—and for many Christians Christmas Eve includes spiked eggnog.

Unlike prohibition-minded Mormons or Catholics who belly up to the bar on St. Patrick's Day, Methodists—the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination—took a more ambiguous stance. Now the denomination's General Board of Church and Society is following Howell's lead and is pushing a churchwide Alcohol Free Lent campaign.

The 7.8-million-member UMC has long had a love/hate relationship with alcohol. For decades the denomination—at least officially—strongly supported temperance. The father and son who founded the Welch's grape juice company were not only good Methodists but also savvy businessmen who saw a huge market in pushing juice for communion to temperance-minded churches.

In the years since, Methodists have trended toward a more liberal stance. While the UMC still encourages abstinence, in 2008 the church's Social Principles were revised to allow for "judicious use with deliberate and intentional restraint, with scripture as a guide."

The result has been a somewhat uneasy relationship between Methodists and the bottle.

"We are very uncomfortable acknowledging that Methodists drink," said Cynthia Abrams, a minister who works on alcohol, addictions and health-care issues for the Washington-based social policy agency. "This is a campaign that opens the doors to conversation, a way to talk about alcohol, about drinking, its impact on young people, on our own perspectives and to dialogue about what that means for us as a church today."

Founded in 18th-century England by John Wesley, Methodism grew rapidly among working-class miners and factory workers who often drank heavily. In response, Methodism staked out a position of temperance early in its history, explained historian Ted Campbell of Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology.

"The General Rules of 1743 ruled out buying or drinking 'spirituous liquors' except in cases of extreme necessity, meaning medicinal use," Campbell said. "It was not total abstinence, but abstinence from the hard stuff, whiskey and gin in particular."

After the Civil War, as Methodism expanded in the United States, Methodists—women especially—began to steer the denomination toward a harder line as the temperance movement gained steam. And by the early 20th century, the church endorsed Prohibition and required Methodist ministers to pledge abstinence from alcohol. It wasn't until the 1950s and '60s that the church began to soften that stance.

For some conservatives, the churchwide Alcohol Free Lent campaign is a welcome reminder of the Methodists' temperance heritage—"a brief flicker of remembrance of those origins," said Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy. "For several decades the board has mostly neglected its call, so it's positive that at least during Lent they are upholding that," said Tooley, whose Washington-based institute is a frequent critic of the UMC General Board of Church and Society.

The issue is still a rallying cry for conservatives, who recently lost a legal fight to make the Church and Society agency adhere to its charter and focus exclusively on alcohol and temperance issues.

More than a simple say-no-to-booze campaign, Alcohol Free Lent is about reflection, said Abrams. "Somehow there is this perspective that because the church mentions abstinence we are saying people cannot drink," she explained.

That's not the case. Instead, the campaign seeks to encourage an open dialogue on a touchy subject. And that, Abrams said, "is a very Methodist approach." —RNS