

Could you go alcohol-free for Lent?



A UMNS Report

By Kathy L. Gilbert*

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A glass of wine with dinner, a beer while watching the big game, a sip of bourbon before going to bed — all pretty harmless activities if you watch television, go to movies, browse the Internet or talk to most folks.

You might be shocked to know that the world's worst killer — more than AIDS, malaria or tuberculosis — is alcohol, according to [LiveScience.com](http://www.livescience.com).

Here is another sobering fact: Alcohol is the top health risk factor for middle-income people. Riskier than obesity, inactivity and even tobacco.

So during Lent this year, from Ash Wednesday on February 13, 2013 to Easter Sunday March 31, 2013, the United Methodist Board of Church and Society is asking all United Methodists to give up alcohol, donate the funds they would have used to buy alcohol and start an international conversation about the harm done by this common vice.

“The world has changed drastically around us as it relates to alcohol use,” writes [Jim Winkler, top executive for the denomination's social action agency](#). “A lack of awareness to the implications and consequences of normalizing alcohol use is an ongoing concern and threat to public health that begs the question: ‘If a society integrates alcohol use into its regular activities without awareness to its impact on the health and well-being of individuals and communities, what are the consequences?’”

[The Rev. Cynthia Abrams](#), director of the agency's work on alcohol, other addictions and health care, knows this is not an easy task.

“Everyone must grapple daily with the influence of alcohol on our lives, whether we drink or not. Frank conversation is unlikely to happen, however, without bold action such as this initiative that calls us to take a dramatic step, to make a personal or corporate statement about alcohol and its impact,” she said.

A few years ago, the [Rev. James Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church](#) in Charlotte, N.C., conceived the idea for a “Spirit Fund,” the amount of money that would have gone toward buying alcohol.

Myers Park members accepted the challenge, exceeding expectations also by raising \$25,901 for a local recovery project.

The United Methodist Church has a strong commitment to alcohol avoidance in its law book, The Book of Discipline.

“We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons Since the use of illegal drugs, as well as illegal and problematic use of alcohol, is a major factor in crime, disease, death and family dysfunction, we support educational programs as well as other prevention strategies encouraging abstinence from illegal drug use and, with regard to those who choose to consume alcoholic beverages, judicious use with deliberate and intentional restraint, with Scripture as a guide” ([¶162L, United Methodist Book of Discipline](#)).

In 2011, the agency issued the challenge, and 50 churches in 22 states, the District of Columbia and nations overseas accepted, Abrams said. This year the challenge is being expanded to include churches, small groups and individuals.

“Don’t worry; this is not an attempt by United Methodists to renew the fight for Prohibition. This is a means to glorify God and prepare ourselves for the coming celebration of the Risen Christ,” Winkler said.

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