

“The Cause of Temperance”

RSR’s Alcohol Policy

The story of the young Miss Agnes Weston’s bold initiatives to help the men of the Victorian Navy, and their families, is well-chronicled, not least her creation of the “pubs with no beer”. Alcohol abuse was widely recognised as a major social evil of the day, and her efforts received widespread support from within the establishment, especially from the flourishing evangelical wing of the church. Hence the Trust Deed of the RSR features prominently the object of the advancement of “the cause of temperance”, and also stipulates that any accommodation or recreational facilities operated by the society for the advancement of its work shall not involve the provision or consumption of alcohol.

Whilst serving members have testified that significant advances have been made in self-discipline with respect to alcohol in the sea-going Navy, the Board recognises that alcohol abuse remains a significant problem ashore. This is true within the Naval Service where it contributes to many disciplinary problems. In the wider civilian community also, there are alarming trends such as the increasing incidence of abuse amongst young women, especially professional women. Wishing to assess the most effective stand which RSR can make in this area in the twenty-first century, the Board has been conducting a strategic review of the issue of temperance and alcohol policy.

This began with a detailed presentation by a representative of the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS). The Institute adopts a science-based, factual and statistical approach in its efforts to influence public policy. However, their representative did acknowledge the importance of the changed context of moral values in which contemporary emphasis is on the right of the individual to do anything. The RSR Board saw a parallel here with Christian teaching on evangelism in the post-modern age. The experience of RSR in the mission field tallied with the conclusion of the IAS presenter that we have to start where people are. He went on to suggest that RSR’s aim should be to ameliorate conduct. He suggested two mechanisms for promoting moderation: situational abstinence, and the encouragement of ownership of responsibility leading on to increased self-control.

The second stage of the Board’s review was to examine the content of the RSR Trust Deed from a Biblical perspective and in the context of RSR’s heritage. This approach was summarised as follows: God’s word speaks of responsibility in community, and RSR has always aimed to encourage practical responsibility within the context of contemporary society. The Board reached the unanimous decision that they had freedom to interpret the object of the advancement of the cause of temperance as the promotion of moderation, self control and community responsibility, rather than total abstinence.

A summary of the Boards’ deliberations and conclusions was discussed at the 2002 Staff Conference. This produced invaluable insights. Whilst a number of staff considered that temperance (interpreted as total abstinence) was part of RSR’s rich heritage and should not be changed, the majority view was that a

broader interpretation was needed. There was felt to be a clear biblical basis for temperance (interpreted as moderation and self-control) but not for total abstinence. It was also felt that RSR's stance on temperance had been taken as much for social as for biblical reasons. The Trustees have been particularly struck by a statement of the staff that "The Bible is firmly opposed to drunkenness." In summary, staff believed that positive action would be more effective than taboo in leading people away from alcohol abuse e.g. leading by example, establishing a good rapport, offering attractive venues, and "being in the world but not of it".

The Board sought to draw the strands of work together at their meeting in June 2002, with the aim of setting in place a policy which forwards the work of the society and assists its current activities. Hence, the stand of the society has been viewed not purely in the context of properties and the provision of alcohol therein or otherwise, but of the operating circumstances of the Chaplaincy Support Workers and the whole mission staff. In the end, the Board found the decision with respect to properties and alcohol availability more straightforward. They were much struck by IAS evidence on **the value of "alcohol free zones" in a culture where the leisure industry is permeated with alcohol promotion.** The Board recognised the high profile of sponsorship by the alcohol industry in Service sport and recreation. **They decided therefore to reaffirm the prohibition in the Trust Deed of provision or consumption of alcohol in RSR properties and at appropriate RSR sponsored or supported events.**

The Board's debate on the interpretation of "the cause of temperance" was more prolonged. They recognised the potency of a courageous stand for total abstinence, noting the well-publicised impact of the witness of Via'aga Tuigamala to Jason Robinson resulting in the latter being brought to Christ. But the majority concluded that an equally effective stand could be made on the basis of self-control and situational abstinence. **They reaffirmed their wish to move forward the concept of "temperance" towards a proactive strategy to assist Service people to achieve a more responsible attitude to alcohol when ashore. They also wished to spell out the rationale in a way that resonates in 2002, whilst holding the clear line that Bible teaching is firmly opposed to drunkenness.** Their decisions have now been passed to the executive staff for them to develop in RSR's front-line service, which, the trustees are confident, remains true to Dame Agnes Weston's pragmatic and bible-based mission ministry.