

## **Reducing the harm: supporting the decriminalisation of the possession and personal use of illicit drugs – the foundations in our faith**

In response to Jesus' call to be a light to the world and salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16), the NSW-ACT Synod has determined that it:

1. Actively supports and advocates for greater investment in demand reduction and harm reduction strategies to address illicit drug use.
2. Actively supports and advocates for the expansion of decriminalisation for possession and personal use of small amounts of illicit drugs.

What understanding of the Christian faith leads the Church to that position? What faith claims, set of values and discipleship practices, and sense of who we are, are at stake in this conversation? How will this decision contribute to the Church's ability to serve "that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation." <sup>1</sup>

Before we can begin to answer those questions we need to be reminded of a few more details about the situation we are responding to.

### **Context of drug use**

Drug use is widespread in the Australian community. Most of us use chemicals to provide comfort, enjoyment or alter our mood in some way, e.g. "I'd kill for a coffee right now", cold remedies to help us "soldier on", a glass or two of wine to help us relax in the evening etc....

Much drug use isn't harmful and does not have dire consequences.

- i. When it is harmful, drug use is a reminder of the ambiguity and broken-ness of human life, and the multiple pressures and forces that shape our lives. Research shows that there is a strong connection between harmful use, current disadvantage, and childhood adversity (child abuse and family violence).
- ii. Drug use, and the criminal sanctions that occur, impact on people's employment and life opportunities, contributes to a breakdown in family and other relationships, and places people within the criminal justice system.
- iii. It is quite clear that the journey from addiction to recovery is a rocky one, and that rules, punishment and shame do not help that journey. Research shows that there is no correlation between tough drug laws and levels of use.
- iv. Drug policy works on three pillars: supply reduction, demand reduction, and harm reduction. However 70% of funds go into law enforcement (supply reduction), which is the least effective way to reduce harm. An emphasis on law enforcement has not been effective in reducing illicit drug use. Sometimes it has ended up causing other types of harm to individuals and their families.

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<sup>1</sup> *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3

## **Our faith and illicit drugs**

We take our perspective on the law from the example of Jesus who reminds his followers that the law is given to enrich life not to deplete it. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus is very clear that he did not come to abolish the law but rather to fulfil the heart of the law. We see examples of this in the way in which Jesus understood the Sabbath laws (Mark 2:27) and, more pertinent to this discussion, the way in which Jesus exercised compassion for those who were 'sinners', 'dis-eased', bound or excluded.

Law can be used as a deterrent, the argument being that the threat of punishment is the best way to deter someone from an illegal action, and the best way to protect the community. This is currently the way law is used as a response to drug use.

Law can also be used to promote life. The primary function of the law in the Old Testament was to show people, the shape of a community that lived in covenant relationship with God. The laws spoke about who they were as a community, how God intended life to be for all people and not simply what was demanded of individuals. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 describes how the law points us to life. This is also echoed in John's Gospel, where Jesus says that he has come that we might have life in all its fullness. (John 10:10)

The laws of the Old Testament, for example, were not given as the foundation for punishment and deterrence. Their primary function was to describe the shape of a community that lived in covenant relationship with God. The laws spoke about who they were as a community, and not simply what was demanded of individuals.

## **Law, grace and communal wellbeing**

As a church we often speak of people's inherent value as human beings because we are all made in the image of God. This is a really important claim, but there are times when this claim is too individualistic. It does not recognise the importance of community, and the fact that we care for and protect each person's life because the well-being of all is essential to the community. My well-being depends on your well-being.

When we criminalise behaviour, shame people and exclude them we harm our common life. When the focus of our response is to punish people, and when we make it difficult to hold work, or harm families, we undermine all that we claim about the value of relationships and the pursuit of common good.

## **Law and restoration**

The Christian vision of community is restorative and inclusive, because we know that all of us are broken and depend on grace at certain times of life. We are to be wary of quick judgements about others, and we hope that others will not judge us too harshly or quickly. We are called to love others in the exact same way that we want to be loved (Luke 10:27). Jesus constantly sought out those who were lost, and offered them life.

New life arises as people own their behaviour, make amends, and are surrounded by a community (and the Spirit) that helps them claim a new way of life. Given the situation of many people who take illicit drugs, it is hard to see how criminal penalties assist in the process of finding new life, rather than further marginalising them and harming community.

## **Who do we wish to be?**

While communities seek to make laws to protect the whole community, in reality they are applied unevenly, with much closer scrutiny and harsher penalties for some groups than for others. Poorer people are more likely to be arrested, convicted and receive a higher penalty than people with wealth and influence. The laws allowing or prohibiting use of different drugs also seem arbitrary. We have criminalised certain drugs, but have allowed other equally or more destructive drugs – alcohol and cigarettes – to remain legal and very socially acceptable. The laws relating to the use and possession of illicit drugs fall most heavily on the most vulnerable in our community – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the unemployed, those living in isolated communities, and those identified as gay or bisexual.

Is this the sort of community we wish to be? Are these the values that we want to shape our life practices? As we reflect on the ministry of Jesus who spent most of his time with the most marginalised and vulnerable, we are provided with a working example of how we, the followers of Jesus, might continue his ministry of healing, compassion and generous love.

All the while recalling the words of Jesus in (Matthew 25: 31-46), that in doing so we meet the Christ whom we serve. To fine and punish, to marginalise and imprison those who bear the presence of Christ for us is not only counterproductive to transformation, it is a degradation of Christ himself.

## **Space to heal**

The church, as the body of Christ in the world, is meant to be a sign of hope and the possibility of renewal and new life. It claims that all those things which shape and mis-shape our life, the present struggle to live and make sense of all that has happened to us, is not the last word. We offer grace and new beginnings. We claim to anticipate God's final, life-giving word of life in our community, worship and engagement with the world.

What we seek to support, then, in this conversation about illicit drugs, are ways to give people space to heal, to struggle with demons, to sustain the relationships that give them some love, and to discover some small glimpses of hope. We want a way of caring for those most marginalised in society, to help those who have lost their way to be restored to the community and not marginalised further. We want our laws to help shape the sort of community we are trying to become. We want to honour the image of God in individuals and our common life. We believe that pursuing the goals set out by the Synod best reflects these claims about our faith.

This resource was prepared by Rev Dr Chris Budden and Rev Dr Rhonda White on behalf of the Social Justice Forum of the Synod of NSW and the ACT.