

Churches loosening up toward alcohol

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Research by Dr Geoff Troughton, a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, shows that anti-alcohol campaigning by the Presbyterian Church has declined radically, with churchgoers, and consequently churches, becoming more accommodating since the 1990s.

"Many churches are keen to make Christianity seem less unusual and more hospitable to outsiders. They want to reduce the barriers between the churches and society, so in this area they are increasingly reflecting mainstream social values," he says.

"It's less uncommon nowadays to find alcohol served at church events, including those that aim to attract new members.

"Furthermore, in surveying Presbyterian churches in the Wellington region this year, I found that more than half allowed consumption of alcohol on church premises—under various conditions. That is a significant change. It has partly occurred for financial reasons, as it means that facilities can be hired out to a wider range of people, but it also reflects changing attitudes towards alcohol within the Church."

According to Dr Troughton, the change in attitude hasn't come about from a deliberate campaign, but reflects incremental changes in New Zealand culture and society, as well as changes within the Church. A range of factors, including greater availability of alcohol since the 1989 Sale of Liquor Act and the growth of New Zealand's [wine industry](#), have helped make alcohol seem more acceptable in New Zealand society. The Church still expresses concern about drinking-related harm, but it is no longer treated as a core issue and no longer frames policy the way it used to.

Dr Troughton believes changing personal practice is a key driver, with few Church members being strictly teetotal. The change in attitude also reflects declining membership—active Presbyterian Church membership in New Zealand is a third of what it

was at its height of around 85,000 in 1960, and the Church's demographic profile is older than that of the national population.

"Some churches are now experimenting with using alcohol as an evangelisation tool. Rather than seeing alcohol consumption as a marker of secular culture in need of change, it has become part of efforts to promote Christianity. 'Wine and theology' evenings and 'beer and barbeque' [church](#) services are among the methods being explored."

Dr Troughton's research charts changing religious attitudes to [alcohol](#) from the temperance and prohibition movement of the nineteenth century to the present.

Provided by Victoria University

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