



Alexander Sharp: Clergy for Recreational Marijuana

By Alexander Sharp

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We write as clergy to support legislation -- H-5777 and S-0510 -- that would mandate that Rhode Island tax and regulate marijuana. We do so only after prayerful consideration, and with deepest respect for the complexities of the question.

Our view might be construed as endorsing or condoning drug use. That is not our intent. We seek the safety and flourishing of all Rhode Island residents.

Caring and compassion should guide our laws. We should ask how we can best serve all our residents: through prohibition, which bans production and selling of marijuana for recreational uses; or regulation, which permits these activities, but only under strict rules and limits.

The purpose of prohibition is to decrease use. Whether it has this effect is difficult to determine. But the costs are clear. Crime rises as those seeking illegal, very large profits, fight, and sometimes kill, over turf. A regulated market reduces crime.

Regulation also protects buyers. Right now, consumers often have no way of knowing when they are offered impure, even toxic marijuana; and they are exposed to those selling hard drugs. We should put these predators out of business.

Some claim marijuana is a "gateway drug," even though research is inconclusive. The real gateway for addictive drug use is emotional pain -- the felt need to "self-medicate." As human beings, we all do this in some fashion. We should guide and assist those of us who need our help toward more meaningful and satisfying lives. This should include jobs, health care, housing and other basic human needs, not punishment and stigma.

As pastors, we are called to encourage lives of joy and fulfillment. It is our experience that sanctions and mixed messages seldom help. Jesus rarely punished. He engaged people openly and honestly. He forgave, he did not condemn. He condemned hypocrisy, something that those of us who drink alcohol, another recreational drug, should consider as we think about reforming our marijuana laws.

Through taxation and regulation, along with good education programs -- not "Just Say No" - - we can influence behavior and the perception that society sanctions marijuana use. But it is impossible to create and implement these programs at the level they are needed in the twilight zone of decriminalization.

Neutral packaging with the proper warnings and limits on advertising will be critically important. Cigarette smoking, also far more injurious than marijuana, has been cut significantly over the past 20 years. So has drunken driving. The same thing can happen with marijuana.

The proposed legislation would generate significant revenue -- some say about \$50 million -- with 40 percent earmarked for drug treatment programs. Given the epidemic of opioid overdoses we are facing, this money will save lives.

It has been written that God's laws are just another name for God's love. This is what we should try to accomplish, according to our best lights, with our secular laws as well. What we are doing now is not working. We must have the courage to try a new and better way.

The Rev. Alexander Sharp is the executive director of Clergy for a New Drug Policy, a national advocacy group. This piece was also signed by: the Rev. F. Jay Deacon, minister, Channing Memorial Church in Newport; the Rev. Eugene Dyszlewski, pastor, Lime Rock Baptist Church in Lincoln; and the Rev. B. Santiago Rodriguez, pastor, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Providence.

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