

NEBRASKA BILL WOULD CURTAIL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Last week, Nebraska State Senator Lowen Kruse introduced a bill (LB 261) to the state's unicameral legislature that seeks to curb underage drinking by striking from current law provisions that allow minors to consume alcohol in their own homes or at places of worship during religious rites. In response to protests from religious leaders of various faiths, Kruse claims that it is unlikely authorities would enforce the ban on wine used in Communion services, saying that to do so would amount to "frivolous" prosecution. Furthermore, the senator said including religious services in the ban is mostly a defensive move: he has been criticized in the past for calling for tougher responses to underage drinking while allowing for the use of alcohol in religious ceremonies.

Catholic League president Bill Donohue spoke to the issue below:

"While Senator Kruse's underlying goal of tackling teen drinking may be admirable, the idea that kids are leaving religious ceremonies inebriated is absurd: Kruse himself has acknowledged that the amount of wine ingested during the course of a church service is negligible. And even under Prohibition, the Volstead Act allowed for religious exemptions for the use of wine. So why would a provision that defends religious liberty—and certainly doesn't lead to alcohol abuse by minors—need to be repealed?

"Senator Kruse, himself a Methodist minister, should be appalled by the idea of forcing churches to violate the law. Kruse may argue that prosecutors will look the other way in such cases, but there is no guarantee of this. Nor is there any guarantee that religious leaders would be comfortable with flouting the rules of the state.

“Though Kruse claims the inclusion of religious services in his bill is meant to head off criticism, he acknowledges that it strengthens his intended message, ‘Kids can’t consume alcohol. Period.’ Despite his denials, Kruse is trying to influence others’ religious practices.

“The Catholic League urges Nebraskans to contact their representatives
(visit <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/web/public/contact/senators>) and protest this outrageous attempt to stifle religious freedom.”