

About AA

'Singleness of Purpose' Unites Over Two Million A.A. Members

The friends of A.A. are legion. Their immense good will and often their direct help has been indispensable to our progress. Mr. Bernard B. Smith, the New York attorney... has been notable for years because of the skilled devotion which he, as a Trustee and as a Chairman of A.A.'s General Service Board, has long given our world affairs. His is an example of the kind of friendship which has always caused A.A. to prosper and to grow.

A.A. Comes of Age, p. 273

Making Ourselves Clear

As it has for almost 60 years, A.A. cooperates fully, though it does not affiliate, with our friends in the professional community—doctors, lawyers, the clergy and others who have been instrumental in carrying the A.A. message to alcoholics who otherwise might never have recovered. Usually the lines of communication between A.A. and professionals fairly crackle with shared information and understanding, but it takes ceaseless effort to keep them that way. A case in point:

Last spring, an Illinois newspaper ran an article about the clergy of a local church who were holding a 10-week sermon series on A.A.'s Twelve Steps in order "to bring a distinctly Christian perspective to A.A.—and bring A.A. to Christians." One of the clergy, the article noted, said among other things that, "It's OK to come together and say, 'We're all insane.' In some sense we all have a problem, and the biggest problem is called sin..."

One person who read the article was the Southern Illinois delegate to A.A.'s General Service Conference, Bill B. "I knew that these people—the clergy, the writer—meant well," he says, "but it was apparent that they were not informed about A.A. and, because of that, they were passing on potentially harmful misinformation to others—perhaps some of them alcoholics in need of help. I felt it vital to clarify what A.A. is and isn't and help them understand that A.A. views alcoholism as an illness of the body, mind and spirit that has nothing whatsoever to do with 'sin.'"

So, Bill relates, "I immediately contacted the clergy, expressed my concerns and asked if I might have the opportunity to tell their congregation about Alcoholics Anonymous. They assented, though they were rather insistent about my confining the talk to five minutes—not easy."

For openers, he told the congregation, "My name is Bill and I am an alcoholic. I have not had a drink of booze since Jan. 3, 1985, and for me that is a miracle." The only requirement for membership, he continued, "is a desire to stop drinking. As our Preamble states, 'There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.' We do this by sharing our experience, strength and hope with each other." Noting that "our guidelines for personal recovery from alcoholism are contained in A.A.'s Twelve Steps, and for our collective survival and well-being in our Twelve Traditions," Bill then asked his listeners, "But are we a religious society? Absolutely not. A.A.s are of just about every faith and persuasion, from Christians and Jews to Buddhists and those of the Islamic faith, along with agnostics and atheists. Experience shows that the A.A. program will work for those who believe in a God of their understanding—and it will work for those who *don't* believe in God. I'm convinced it won't work, however, for those who think they *are* God! Now, another question: Is A.A. a temperance movement? Again, no. As a Fellowship, A.A. has no opinion at all on such outside issues as whether other people should or should not drink."

Bill told the congregation that "back in 1935 two drunks, Bill W. and Dr. Bob, found that by helping each other they could stay sober one day at a time, and thus the founding spark of A.A. was struck. Today A.A. has more than two million members meeting in 91,000 groups in 141 countries and is still growing." Bill emphasized the importance of anonymity, quoting A.A. co-founder Bill W., "The word 'anonymous' has for us an immense spiritual significance. Subtly but powerfully, it reminds us that we are always to place principles before personalities; that we have renounced personal glorification in public; that our movement not only preaches but actually practices a true humility."

Bill went on to explain some of the key values of anonymity: "Newcomers can attend meetings with the assurance that their names and what they say in meetings will stay there when they leave; and, by maintaining anonymity at the public level, we protect the Fellowship from exploitation and misrepresentation. As our Twelfth Tradition states, 'Anonymity is an all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes A.A. life everywhere.... Humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard A.A. can ever have.'"

Bill then stressed that "what A.A. does not do is almost as important as what it does," and he listed some of the 'don'ts': "We don't solicit members; don't engage in or sponsor research; don't provide drying-out or nursing services; engage in education about alcohol or offer religious services; don't provide housing, food, clothing, jobs, money, domestic or vocational counseling, letters of reference to court officials or employers, or any other welfare services; and, finally, we don't

accept money for our services, or any contributions from non-A.A. sources.”

Looking back, Bill hopes that both the clergy and their congregation emerged from his talk with a clearer understanding of A.A. “I am mindful,” he says, “that A.A.’s strength depends greatly upon reaching the sick alcoholic through our professional friends in the community. We are grateful when these friends recommend us, but at the same time we need to be sure they know who and what we are when they make referrals. As is written in so much of our literature, ‘When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that I am responsible.’ I like to think that every little bit of communication helps.”

Being Friendly With Our Friends

“I believe our friends are generally doing right. On the rare occasions they don’t, chances are that we in A.A. have failed to tell the program like it is, or else have become lazy and let them do our work for us—and that’s where the problems start.”

Speaking at the General Service Conference, David, a past A.A. delegate from the southeastern U.S., explained, “When I speak of our ‘friends,’ I am referring to the professional community: treatment centers, court officials, health-care workers and the media.” Significantly, he noted, many alcoholics entering A.A. today are coming directly and indirectly as a result of professional help. According to the latest (1992) triennial A.A. Membership Survey, 34% of newcomers were Twelfth-Stepped by an A.A. member; 29% knew about A.A. and came on their own; 27% cited guidance from treatment facilities (down from 30% in the previous [1989] survey); and 21% were guided by one or more family members. Still others were influenced by the courts (8%), by a doctor (7%), and by an employer or fellow worker (6%). After coming to A.A., 56% of the respondents received some type of treatment or counseling, or medical, psychological and/or spiritual help. Additionally, 87% of those members who had received such treatment or counseling said that it played an important part in their continuing recovery from alcoholism.

“This is all well and good,” David said, “since we are grateful for every agency or method that helps the suffering alcoholic. But sometimes there is the danger that our policy of cooperation will spill over into the appearance of affiliation, violating the spirit of our Traditions and so threatening our unity, our very survival. This occurs, for example, when well-meaning but misguided treatment facilities set up programs in the A.A. name (a few have publicized them as such in promotional material); or when a court treats A.A. as an arm of their correctional systems; or when big companies initiate alcoholism education programs citing A.A. as if we were joined at the hip. When such things happen, we need to get off our duffs and shout loud and clear that while we gladly share what we have—our experience, strength and hope in recovery from alcoholism—we do not lend the A.A. name to any cause but our own. Paradoxically, removing ourselves from the arena of politics, prestige and business enables us to cooperate far more effectively with our friends.”

The Power of Our Common Bond

In the early 1980s, the courts began mandating “chemically dependent” offenders to A.A.—be they alcoholics, drug addicts or a combination of both. The influx of these newcomers immediately created a Pandora’s Box of problems at A.A. meetings, from hostility and noisy disruptions to anonymity breaks. But after initial confusion, A.A. areas and their groups held long discussions and, arriving at a “group conscience,” or consensus, began to take positive and exciting action. A progress report:

In Texas, Colorado, Illinois, Arizona, Arkansas and many other states, A.A. service areas are holding informational programs, commonly called “court classes,” to let referrals know that help is available in A.A. if they have a problem with drinking. And these areas are sharing their successes and setbacks with each other. Whenever possible, members of Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous or some other Twelve-Step program are on hand to share the nuts and bolts of their organization with those whose primary problem is drugs, not alcohol. This is very important, because as A.A. co-founder Bill W. says in the pamphlet “Problems Other than Alcohol,” a drug addict with “a genuine alcoholic history” is eligible for A.A. membership, but “there is no possible way to make nonalcoholics into A.A. members. We have to confine our A.A. groups to a single purpose. If we don’t stick to these principles, we shall almost certainly collapse. And if we collapse, we cannot help anyone.”

The key word here is “identification.” As A.A.’s Fifth Tradition states: (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 150-51): “The unique ability of each A.A. to identify himself with, and bring recovery to, the newcomer in no way depends upon his learning, his eloquence, or any special individual skills. The only thing that matters is that he is an alcoholic who has found a key to sobriety.”

In Colorado the A.A. service committees for Cooperation With the Professional Community (C.P.C.) and for Correctional Facilities (C.F.) together developed their court-class program, using Guidelines published by the A.A. General Service Office in New York and the sharing of other areas bent on a similar mission. Several important points: “The court class belongs to the judicial system, *NOT* A.A., and is held in the judicial building. All A.A. volunteers are there at the invitation of the court. We cooperate with the judicial system but do not affiliate... The judicial system determines who will attend class and appoints a deputy from the sheriff’s office to monitor it. A.A. volunteers provide the coffee pot and supplies, and all literature. We pass the basket to help defray the costs; if we run short of being self-supporting, the C.P.C. and C.F. committees make up the difference. The courts do *NOT* contribute... Members of the judicial system are invited to attend and are given time at the beginning of class to say a few words before turning the meeting over to an A.A. member. This generally has a profound effect on the court-ordered ‘students.’”

Reports from numerous areas show that the court classes have helped ease the way of alcoholic court referrals into mainstream A.A. meetings. Mary B., director of the Dallas Intergroup Association, reports that many probationers and parolees remanded to A.A. by the courts “just assume we’re a punitive arm of the law. Once they understand we’re not, that the one thing we do is share our experience, strength and hope in recovery from alcoholism, they frequently relax visibly, listen, and become willing to be helped.”

No comprehensive statistics exist on how many alcoholic court referrals have corked the bottle and found a new, sober life in A.A.—not to mention the nonalcoholics who found appropriate help through an A.A. court class—but the numbers are high and still climbing. Says Mary: “The more A.A.s and professionals communicate and work with each other, the better are our chances of carrying the message to a group of alcoholics long considered ‘unreachable’—something A.A. experience clearly shows they’re not.”

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