

# About AA

## A.A. and the Clergy: Faces of a Lasting Friendship

Donan (Don) McG. of Massachusetts is a priest. He also is a recovering alcoholic with 19½ years' sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous. "Alcoholism's definitely an equal opportunity illness that knows no boundaries," he says. "I am personally acquainted with a number of ministers and rabbis, not to mention my fellow priests, who have found lasting sobriety in the Fellowship."

Fr. Don didn't stop drinking without a struggle. "For most of the 1960s," he recalls, "I worked in Bolivia—a perfect excuse later on to pass off hangovers and serious alcoholic problems, including dehydration and liver damage, as 'tropical fever.' For a time, the charade worked. But in 1972, while hospitalized for an esophageal dilation, I went into alcoholic convulsion. The next morning, my doctor eyed all 89 pounds of this classic closet drinker and growled, 'You know what happened to you last night? You had the DTs. You told us you "only have a drink now and then," but you're an alcoholic. What are you going to do about it?' He then spoke words I shall never forget, words that set me on the path to recovery: 'Alcoholism is a primary illness. It can be fatal, it is incurable, but it *can* be arrested.'"

It would be gratifying to report that Fr. Don promptly "saw the light" and never drank again. But he did. "Thanks to the efforts of the good doctor," he says, "a priest sober in A.A. visited me in the hospital and later escorted me to my first A.A. meeting. At the door a bright-eyed fellow extended his hand and said with a big smile, 'My name is Jimmy K.—Welcome!' Staring anywhere but at him, I muttered that I did not want to be there and proceeded to show that I meant it. I dragged myself to meetings Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and drank Tuesdays and Thursdays. Luckily, the truths I heard at those meetings must have osmosed, because after months of playing roulette with my life, I finally called an A.A. friend and asked for help. I had what I hope was my last drink in January 1973—that was a vintage year!"

Like many members of the clergy, Fr. Don is often the first person alcoholic parishioners turn to for help. "I let them know that I understand where they're coming from, and how much they must hurt," he explains. "If the addiction is to alcohol, or alcohol and another substance, I'll suggest A.A.; if the problem is basically with drugs, I'll steer them to Narcotics Anonymous."

Does he talk about his own recovery in A.A.? "I do so only if I think it will help. Over time I've learned that such an approach can be a turn-off. For me, there is a fine line between being an A.A. and a clergyman who counsels or otherwise works with alcoholics, and I find I walk it best by staying active in A.A. I leave my credentials at the meeting-room door,

along with theories about alcoholism. If allowed entry, they could lead me to judgmental attitudes, grandiosity and, ultimately, that first drink that gets us alcoholics drunk. Basically, the problems I encounter are central to my own humanness and vulnerability and can usually be resolved through honest and constant sharing in A.A. If I've learned one thing, it's that we don't live life alone."

### A.A.'s Long-time Friendship with the Clergy

In his voluminous writings, A.A. co-founder Bill W. time and time again acknowledged the role of "our friends in the clergy" in shaping the spiritual tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous. "It is with the deepest feeling that I cast up A.A.'s debt to the clergy," he wrote in the September 1967 A.A. Grapevine (A.A.'s international magazine). "Without their works for us, A.A. could never have been born; nearly every principle that we use came from them. Their example, their faith, and their beliefs in some part, we have appropriated and made our own. Almost literally, we A.A.s owe them our lives, our fortunes, and such salvation as each of us has found."

Early friends in the clergy included Father Edward Dowling, a Jesuit priest who was influential in carrying the A.A. message through his personal example and writings; the popular Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of New York City's nondenominational Riverside Church, who in 1939 gave the just-published book *Alcoholics Anonymous* his wholehearted endorsement; and Sister Ignatia, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, who worked with A.A. co-founder Dr. Bob to sober up many a drunk at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio. Though frail and in physical pain much of the time, her humor never failed. On one occasion, a fellow was flown in for the alcoholism "cure" by private plane. "Please pray for me," he begged Sister Ignatia. "I will indeed," she replied. "But pray for yourself as well. There's nothing God likes to hear more than a strange voice." (*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*)

### ... And a Clergyman Looks Back

One of A.A.'s earliest and best friends in the clergy was the dynamic Episcopal minister Sam Shoemaker, who, according to Bill W., "was a man quite as willing to talk about *his* sins as about anybody else's." A leader of A.A.'s forerunner, the Oxford Group, "Dr. Sam" would become one of the Fellowship's most articulate friends. His belief that religion could learn and benefit from the A.A. way of life was expressed in a talk he gave during A.A.'s 20th anniversary International

## New Trustee Shares Expertise



Convention at St. Louis, Missouri, in 1955. Some excerpts:

- Religion might learn from A.A. "that nobody gets anywhere till he recognizes a clearly defined need. These people do not come to A.A. to get made a little better or because the best people are doing it. They come because they are desperate. Without what A.A. gives, death stares them in the face; with what A.A. gives them, there is life and hope.

- "A.A. is a life-changing fellowship. It does not expect to let anybody who comes in stay as he is. Members know the newcomer is in need and must have help. They live for nothing else but to extend and keep extending that help. Like organized religions, A.A. did not begin in glorious Gothic structures but in houses or caves in the earth—wherever members could get a foothold, meet people and gather. It never occurs to an A.A. that it is enough to sit down and polish his spiritual nails or dust off his soul all by himself. His soul gets kept in order by trying to help other people get their souls in order, with the help of a Higher Power.

"A new person takes his place at once in this life-changing Fellowship. He may be changed today and out working tomorrow—no long, senseless delays about giving away the strength he has got. He's ready to give the little he has the moment he and others like him get in and keep that Fellowship moving and growing by reaching out to other alcoholics.

- "The A.A. experience shows the necessity for a real change of heart, a true conversion. At each meeting, there are people seeking and in conscious need. Everybody is pulling for the people who speak, and looking for more insight and help. They are pushed by their need; they are pulled by the inspiration of others who are growing. They are a society of the 'before and after,' with a clear line between the old life and the new.

- "In thousands of places, alcoholics can go and hear recovered alcoholics speak about their experiences and watch the process of new life and outlook take place before their eyes. There you have it, the need and the answer to the need. The A.A.s say that their public relations are based not on promotion but on attraction. This attraction begins when you see people with problems like your own, hear them speaking freely of the answers they are finding, and realize that such honesty and such change are exactly what you need yourself."

### Experience Points the Way

How can members of the clergy effectively tell alcoholics about A.A.? Experienced voices emphasize the following points: (1) Explain that A.A. can help only if they have a desire to stop drinking; (2) Urge them to keep an open mind, even if the A.A. program at first doesn't seem to make sense, and to "keep coming back"; (3) Stress A.A.'s single purpose—to help alcoholics achieve sobriety; (4) Explain that A.A.s come from all walks of life; (5) Assure them that their personal anonymity will be respected; and (6) Report that, according to the best medical evidence, alcoholism is a progressive illness that can be arrested, though not "cured," when the alcoholic stops drinking. Note that recovery is progressive too, and that they will have all the help they need in making the transition to a sober, fulfilling life.

These and other points of information are included in the newly revised, A.A. Conference-approved pamphlet "Members of the Clergy Ask About Alcoholics Anonymous," available from the General Service Office.

A.A.'s newest Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, Elaine M. Johnson, Ph.D., is acting administrator of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration in Washington, D.C. An acknowledged authority in the treatment of chemical dependency, she has created and vigorously supported national programs for the treatment of alcoholism, especially those serving under-age youth and pregnant women.

Noting that "alcoholism has touched the personal lives of almost all of us through the illness of a family member or a friend," Dr. Johnson says that "A.A.'s success in rehabilitating alcoholics is unparalleled. Therefore, for me, there is no greater personal honor than my selection as a trustee."

During her first year on the board Dr. Johnson will serve on the trustees' Committees on Cooperation With the Professional Community, Conference, International Convention/Regional Forums, and Treatment Facilities.

The A.A. General Service Board consists of seven nonalcoholic and 14 alcoholic trustees. In her new capacity, Dr. Johnson joins a company of distinguished nonalcoholic trustees who over the years have helped A.A. continue its founders' original vision of self-support and singleness of purpose. They have been especially effective in carrying the A.A. message of friendship and "cooperation without affiliation" to their fellow professionals the world over.

### Can A.A. Help You?

A.A. always seeks to strengthen and expand our communication with members of the clergy and other professionals who come in contact with alcoholics. We welcome your questions, comments and suggestions—so please be in touch!

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