

Faith Leaders

Ask About
Alcoholics
Anonymous

**This is A.A. General Service
Conference-approved literature.**

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS® is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. 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.

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About Alcoholics Anonymous”

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Faith Leaders Ask About Alcoholics Anonymous

Introduction

Many thousands of alcoholics owe their lives to a nonalcoholic professional — a medical doctor, psychiatrist, counselor, law enforcement representative, faith leader or member of the clergy — who was knowledgeable enough about alcoholism to recognize the illness and take the actions that would cut through the alcoholic's denial and illuminate the road to recovery.

Often, nonalcoholics are able to help problem drinkers find the help they need to achieve sobriety. For example, in the most recent A.A. Membership Survey, 74% of those surveyed who received treatment or counseling said it played an important part in directing them to A.A.

Faith leaders are often the first people sick alcoholics turn to for help and understanding — and frequently the first to whom they candidly acknowledge their illness. In fact, many alcoholics look to faith leaders for spiritual guidance both before and after joining A.A.

Over the years, A.A. has had many friends in the world of religion, as it has in the worlds of medicine, psychiatry and business. Among such friends is the Very Rev. Ward Ewing, retired dean of General Theological Seminary in New York City and a former nonalcoholic trustee on the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. An Episcopal parish priest for 30 years, he believes it is very important to set a tone in the congregation that alcoholism is nothing to be ashamed of, and that there is a solution. He has consistently made information on alcoholism a part of adult education in his parishes. "There are always people standing at the door," he says, "not yet ready to come in, but indicating by their posture they want help for themselves or a family member."

He is very open about his involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous and makes himself available to work with students who need help.

Throughout the U.S. and Canada, and indeed

around the world, many faith leaders are familiar with A.A. as a nonsectarian, nondenominational ally in their efforts to help alcoholics stop drinking and lead healthy, productive lives.

Yet there may be many who are not aware of Alcoholics Anonymous and its program of recovery from alcoholism.

The purpose, therefore, of this pamphlet is to provide a useful introduction to Alcoholics Anonymous and to address some of the questions that are frequently asked by faith leaders about A.A.

What is A.A.? How does it work?

Alcoholics Anonymous is a worldwide fellowship of people from all walks of life who help each other to stay sober. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. Members share their “experience, strength and hope” in recovery from alcoholism at meetings and on a one-to-one basis.

At the core of the A.A. program are the Twelve Steps of Recovery (see page 16), a group of principles based on the trial-and-error experience of A.A.’s early members. Practiced as a way of life, the Twelve Steps include elements found in the spiritual teachings of many faiths. These Steps have helped A.A. members the world over to live sober, fulfilling lives.

Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, an early nonalcoholic friend of A.A. who was the rector of Calvary Church in New York City, once noted, “The Twelve Steps are one of the very great summaries and organic collections of spiritual truth known to history. They have an almost universal relevance.”

Amplifying this theme, A.A. co-founder Bill W. related this anecdote from a minister in Thailand: “We took A.A.’s Twelve Steps to the largest Buddhist monastery in this province, and the head priest said, ‘Why, these Steps are fine! For us as Buddhists, it might be slightly more acceptable if you had inserted the word ‘good’ in your Steps instead of ‘God.’ Nevertheless, you say that it is God as you understand Him, and that must certainly include the good. Yes, A.A.’s Twelve Steps will surely be accepted by the Buddhists around here.”

Additionally, while Muslim tradition pro-

scribes the use of alcohol in Islamic society, Muslim faith leaders have also recognized the need to support a concept of spirituality modeled on the Twelve Steps. Says Canadian preacher and imam Dr. Shabir Ally, “There’s nothing within the Steps that is contrary to Muslim faith.” In 1989, Muslim alcoholics in Baltimore looking for recovery developed *Millati Islami* (the Path of Peace), a program that integrates the Twelve Steps with Muslim beliefs, practices and the norms of Muslim society.

So, what are A.A. meetings like?

A.A. meetings are conducted on a voluntary basis by groups in cities and towns throughout the world. While there are many types of A.A. meetings, they essentially fall into two categories: meetings for alcoholics only (known as *closed* meetings); and meetings that are informational in nature which anyone, alcoholic or nonalcoholic, may attend (known as *open* meetings).

Closed meetings give members an opportunity to share their personal experiences with alcoholism more intimately, and to apply the principles of the A.A. program in order to live sober a day at a time. Many groups also hold closed *beginners* meetings, where newcomers to A.A. can share their experiences and become familiar with many of the fundamentals of A.A.’s program of recovery.

While some open meetings follow a discussion format, most tend to be more structured, generally consisting of talks by one or more speakers who share experiences from their active alcoholism and their present recovery in A.A. (We say in A.A. that our “stories” recount “what we were like, what happened and what we are like now.”)

Some open meetings — to which helping professionals, students, family members and others are invited — are held for the specific purpose of informing the public about A.A.

Nonalcoholics attending open A.A. meetings for the first time are often surprised to note the humor with which some members describe their drinking experience. Every talk is different — one may have a decidedly agnostic tone, while another may be laced throughout with deep religious beliefs. Importantly, A.A. speakers speak only for themselves and not for A.A. What they

all have in common, however, is the desire to strengthen their own sobriety by sharing it with others.

Most members, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, have found that regular attendance at meetings is essential to the maintenance of their sobriety. Newcomers are encouraged to attend meetings as frequently as possible.

As Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of New York City's Riverside Church and one of A.A.'s early friends in religion pointed out, "The meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous are the only place, so far as I know, where Roman Catholics, Jews, all kinds of Protestants, and even agnostics get together harmoniously.... They do not talk theology. Many of them would say that they know nothing about it. What they do know is that in their utter helplessness they were introduced to a Power, greater than themselves, in contact with whom they found a strong resource which made possible a victory that seemed incredible. I have listened to many learned arguments about God, but for honest-to-goodness experiential evidence of God, His power personally appropriated and His reality indubitably assured, give me a good meeting of A.A.!"

Where are A.A. meetings held?

Like other organizations, A.A. groups often rent meeting space in churches, temples, community centers, or other houses of worship. Although many A.A. meetings are held in facilities owned and operated by religious organizations, no affiliation or alliance with specific religious doctrines or movements is implied. Rather, this circumstance owes largely to the open-hearted acceptance of A.A. by various faith leaders and to the fact that A.A. groups seek to pay rent for the available space as any other organization would.

Are A.A. meetings held only in English?

A.A. today has an estimated two million members worldwide, consisting of more than 125,000 groups located in approximately 180 countries.

A.A. materials (books, pamphlets, videos, etc.) have been translated into over 110 languages, and many meetings are held in the languages represented by the communities they serve. For a listing of materials available in English, Spanish and

French from the General Service Office of A.A. (G.S.O.), see the back inside cover of this pamphlet or visit aa.org. For information on meetings held in different languages in your area, contact the local A.A. central or intergroup office. A list of these offices, as well as A.A. resources online or in other countries, can be found on aa.org in the “A.A. Near You” section.

What are the “Twelve Traditions” of A.A.?

The Twelve Traditions are to the life of A.A. as a whole what the Twelve Steps are to each member’s personal recovery.

The Traditions (see page 17) are suggested principles that ensure the survival and growth of the thousands of groups comprising A.A. Based on the experience of the groups themselves during A.A.’s crucial early years, they relate to the conduct of a group’s internal affairs, cooperation among groups, and their relations with the community at large. Most of the Traditions reflect the spiritual orientation of the Fellowship.

The Traditions are not formally binding on A.A. groups. But the overwhelming majority of groups throughout the world choose to conduct their affairs according to the principles they embody.

Why is anonymity important?

In stressing the equality of all A.A. members — and unity is the common bond of their recovery from alcoholism — anonymity serves as the spiritual foundation of the Fellowship.

At the personal level, anonymity provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics outside A.A. meeting rooms, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers. However, in their personal relationships with non-alcoholics — and those they think might have a problem with alcohol — A.A.s may feel free to say they are recovering alcoholics. Here, openness may help to carry the A.A. message.

At the level of press, radio, TV, films, the Internet and social media, anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members. It does this by putting the “reminder” brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power or personal gain.

Public attention and publicity for individual members of A.A. would invite self-serving competition and conflict over differing personal views.

In the words of Tradition Twelve, “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.”

Is religious belief part of the A.A. program?

A.A. does not inquire into alcoholics’ religious beliefs — or lack thereof — when they turn to the Fellowship for help.

However, the A.A. program of recovery is based on certain spiritual values, and individual members are free to interpret these values as they think best, or not to think about them at all.

“Without question the Twelve Steps lay out a spiritual program, but it is a spirituality based on experience, not doctrine,” says Ward Ewing. “Central in the spirituality of A.A. is mystery... mystery at the miracle of lives changed by following these simple principles.”

Most members, before turning to A.A., had already admitted that they could not handle their drinking — alcohol had taken control of their lives. A.A. experience suggests that to get sober and stay sober, alcoholics need to accept and depend upon a spiritual entity, or force, that they perceive as greater than themselves. Some choose the A.A. group as their “Higher Power”; some look to God — as they understand God; and others rely upon entirely different concepts.

One A.A. member relates, “I realized that the Fellowship, though comprised of human beings, represented a power greater than anything human. Even more surprisingly, by taking the Steps in my own clumsy way, supported by the unconditional love of my fellow alcoholics, I had discovered a quiet, inner voice — a God within.”

Is prayer observed in the A.A. program?

There are two references to prayer in the Twelve Steps, as written by the founders of A.A. The Seventh Step reads: “[We] humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” And the Eleventh Step states: “[We] sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only

for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

Many groups often close their meetings with a prayer or a statement determined by the autonomy and agreement of the group. Some A.A. meetings close with a collective recitation of the Lord’s Prayer or A.A.’s Responsibility Declaration (“When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there; and for that, I am responsible”). Others use the Serenity Prayer:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Today, A.A. is composed of members of all faiths, along with many who are atheist or agnostic. According to Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, “Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religion and cannot take the place of religion,” and members are free to use whatever prayers they are comfortable with — or none at all.

How can faith leaders and A.A. cooperate effectively?

For faith leaders who counsel alcoholics, it can be helpful to know active A.A. members in the community to whom they can refer anyone looking for help with a drinking problem. Once contacted, A.A. members will take special interest in newcomers, provided they want help; take them to a meeting; and share the experience of their own recovery in A.A.

There are several things that faith leaders can do to familiarize themselves with the A.A. program:

- Attend some open A.A. meetings.
- Become acquainted with A.A. literature — such as the books *Alcoholics Anonymous*, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and *A.A. Comes of Age*; the booklets *Living Sober* and *Came to Believe*; and some of the pamphlets listed on the inside back cover of this pamphlet.
- Recognize the spiritual (though nondenominational) aspects of the A.A. program.
- Call upon A.A. for help when the situation warrants it.
- Open their doors to A.A. meetings.

What can chaplains in the military do?

Like other faith leaders, military chaplains are often the “safest” people a problem drinker can approach. Chaplains can help direct alcoholics to available A.A. meetings, either on or near the base. Additionally, if no meetings are available, chaplains may be able to connect interested alcoholics with other A.A. materials, such as books and pamphlets or A.A.’s magazines, Grapevine and La Viña. Online meetings are also available for those members of the military who may be deployed, and chaplains can help get them connected electronically through correspondence groups. (A.A.’s General Service Office can provide information on such resources.)

How can faith leaders counsel alcoholics about A.A.?

Faith leaders who have worked closely with A.A. emphasize the following points in counseling alcoholics:

- A.A. membership embraces a cross-section of society. But no matter how different members’ backgrounds may be, all share a kinship in recovery from alcoholism through A.A.’s program of recovery.
- Keeping an open mind is important. If the A.A. program initially does not seem to make sense, first impressions may change with continued attendance.
- According to the best medical evidence, alcoholism is a progressive illness that can be arrested only when the alcoholic stops drinking. In A.A., alcoholics will find thousands of individuals who, through their shared experience in recovery, can help them make the transition to a sober, fulfilling life.

Do any faith leaders belong to A.A.?

Yes. Alcoholism knows no boundaries and can equally affect people from all walks of life. A number of alcoholic faith leaders, representing various backgrounds and religious affiliations, have achieved sobriety in the Fellowship.

***How is A.A. organized?
Who runs it?***

A.A. has no central authority. There is minimal structural organization and a handful of Traditions instead of bylaws. A.A.'s essential work is done by alcoholics who are themselves recovering in the Fellowship. Typically, two or more alcoholics meeting together for purposes of sobriety may consider themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they are self-supporting and have no outside affiliations. Local groups generally select committees to oversee vital group activities and services.

Overall responsibility for A.A.'s worldwide service agencies has been entrusted by the groups to the General Service Conference, composed of area delegates from the United States and Canada who meet annually. Serving in a custodial role is the board of trustees — 14 A.A. members and seven nonalcoholic friends of the Fellowship who serve on a rotating basis.

How are A.A. services financed?

There are no dues or fees for membership and, as stated in the A.A. Preamble — an introductory statement often read before A.A. meetings (see the front inside cover of this pamphlet) — “We are self-supporting through our own contributions.”

A.A. is entirely supported on the voluntary contributions of members, and funds are never accepted from outside sources.

The expenses of an individual group (for rent, refreshments, literature, etc.) are defrayed by the contributions of group members, usually offered during group meetings.

What does A.A. not do?

A.A. is an entirely unpaid, nonprofessional organization, unaffiliated with any other agency or approach to alcoholism. Hence, A.A. does not provide legal, medical, religious, psychiatric, educational or social services. A.A. meetings are conducted on a voluntary basis and there are no membership requirements beyond a desire to stop drinking.

What about problems other than alcohol?

Some professionals refer to alcoholism and drug addiction under the umbrella of “substance abuse” or “chemical dependency.” With this broad definition, nonalcoholics or people with problems other than alcoholism are sometimes introduced to A.A. and encouraged to attend A.A. meetings. A.A. has only one single purpose: to help alcoholics achieve sobriety. As noted previously, nonalcoholics may attend open A.A. meetings as observers, but only those with a drinking problem may attend closed meetings.

There are a number of other Twelve Step Fellowships patterned after A.A. that may be helpful for those nonalcoholics who are seeking help. A.A. has no opinion on any of these other approaches and neither endorses nor opposes them.

How can faith leaders contact A.A.?

Faith leaders are most welcome to attend open A.A. “speaker” or discussion meetings, and many local A.A. service committees will, upon request, provide informational presentations for churches or other interested organizations. Sessions can be tailored to meet your needs. A typical agenda might include one or several A.A. films and a presentation by one or more A.A. members about how the Fellowship operates.

Alcoholics Anonymous can be found on the Internet at www.aa.org and has a free-of-charge meeting finder app called Meeting Guide (for iOS and Android) that provides meeting information from A.A. service entities in an easy-to-access format. Also available are online meetings, which members of the military and others often use when they are in places where there are no meetings nearby.

Literature about the A.A. program, as well as specific directions for getting in touch with a local A.A. group, may be obtained by visiting A.A.’s website, aa.org; writing to the General Service Office of A.A., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; or calling 212-870-3400. Faith leaders can also contact A.A.’s Cooperation with the Professional Community service directly at 212-870-3400 or by email at cpc@aa.org.

***Are there any
other helpful resources?***

For additional information, these resources are available from A.A.'s General Service Office (visit aa.org) or your local A.A. central or intergroup office:

“Many Paths to Spirituality”

A pamphlet sharing experience, strength and hope from A.A. members with various perspectives on spirituality.

“The ‘God’ Word”

A pamphlet sharing experience, strength and hope from atheists and agnostics in A.A.

Came to Believe

A collection of stories by A.A. members who write about what the phrase “spiritual awakening” means to them.

Alcoholics Anonymous, Appendix II

A section of A.A.'s basic text relative to spiritual experience.

About A.A.

A newsletter for professionals.

**These items are available from
AA Grapevine (visit aagrapevine.org)
or your local A.A. central or
intergroup office:**

Spiritual Awakenings, Vol. I and II

Sharing from A.A. members.

One Big Tent:

Atheist and agnostic A.A. members share their experience, strength and hope.

“For Professionals” on aa.org:



THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Notes

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A.A. PUBLICATIONS Below is a partial listing of A.A. publications. Complete order forms are available from the General Service Office of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Telephone: (212) 870-3400. Website: aa.org

BOOKS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
DAILY REFLECTIONS
AS BILL SEES IT
OUR GREAT RESPONSIBILITY
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
'PASS IT ON'

BOOKLETS

LIVING SOBER
CAME TO BELIEVE
A.A. IN PRISON: INMATE TO INMATE

PAMPHLETS

Experience, Strength and Hope:

WOMEN IN A.A.
A.A. FOR THE BLACK AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN ALCOHOLIC
A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN
YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.
A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC — NEVER TOO LATE
LGBTQ ALCOHOLICS IN A.A.
THE "GOD" WORD: AGNOSTIC AND ATHEIST MEMBERS IN A.A.
A.A. FOR ALCOHOLICS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES —
AND THEIR SPONSORS
ACCESS TO A.A.: MEMBERS SHARE ON OVERCOMING BARRIERS
A.A. AND THE ARMED SERVICES
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?
MANY PATHS TO SPIRITUALITY
HISPANIC WOMEN IN A.A.
MEMO TO AN INMATE
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
(An illustrated pamphlet for inmates)

About A.A.:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT A.A.
IS A.A. FOR ME?
IS A.A. FOR YOU?
A NEWCOMER ASKS
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?
THIS IS A.A.
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP
THE A.A. GROUP
PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL
THE A.A. MEMBER—MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS
SELF-SUPPORT: WHERE MONEY AND SPIRITUALITY MIX
EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT US:
AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR TWELVE TRADITIONS
THE TWELVE STEPS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE CONCEPTS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE TRADITIONS ILLUSTRATED
HOW A.A. MEMBERS COOPERATE WITH PROFESSIONALS
A.A. IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
A.A. IN TREATMENT SETTINGS
BRIDGING THE GAP
A.A. TRADITION—HOW IT DEVELOPED
LET'S BE FRIENDLY WITH OUR FRIENDS
UNDERSTANDING ANONYMITY

For Professionals:

A.A. IN YOUR COMMUNITY
A BRIEF GUIDE TO A.A.
IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A RESOURCE
FOR THE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL
A MESSAGE TO CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
IS THERE A PROBLEM DRINKER IN THE WORKPLACE?
FAITH LEADERS ASK ABOUT A.A.
A.A. MEMBERSHIP SURVEY
A MEMBER'S-EYE VIEW OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

VIDEOS (available on aa.org)

A.A. VIDEOS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
HOPE: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
A NEW FREEDOM
CARRYING THE MESSAGE BEHIND THESE WALLS

For Professionals:

A.A. VIDEO FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR LEGAL AND CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR EMPLOYMENT/HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

PERIODICALS

AA GRAPEVINE (monthly)
LA VIÑA (bimonthly, in Spanish)

A.A.'S RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help,
I want the hand of A.A. always to be there.

And for that: **I am responsible.**

For additional information, visit www.aa.org
(Information for Professionals)
or contact the Cooperation
with the Professional Community desk at the
General Service Office: cpc@aa.org or 212-870-3400.

