

About AA

A.A. Reaches Out to Diverse Populations

A.A. has long been a haven for sufferers of alcoholism, drawing its ranks from a cross-section of society. It has been this way since the Fellowship's founding in 1935, offering alcoholics from all walks of life a chance at recovery.

With slow but steady growth in its early years, today an A.A. presence can be found in more than 180 countries, with membership estimated at over two million; there are approximately 108,000 A.A. groups around the world and A.A.'s literature has been translated into languages as diverse as Afrikaans, Arabic, Hindi, Persian, Swahili, and Vietnamese, among others.

Many feel that in order to keep sobriety, one must give it away. It is a theme running throughout the organization's long history, since the Fellowship's earliest days when cofounder Bill W., a New York stockbroker, reached out to Dr. Bob S., a surgeon from Akron, Ohio, in order to maintain his own sobriety and pass it on to another. From that seminal moment, A.A. members of all generations have recognized the need for carrying A.A.'s message of hope and healing to individuals and communities wherever alcoholism is present.

Inclusivity Key to A.A. Membership

In 1965, Bill W. noted, "Newcomers are approaching A.A. at the rate of tens of thousands yearly," a number some would consider small by today's standards. "We have atheists and agnostics," he observed, "...people of nearly every race, culture, and religion ...bound together in the kinship of a common suffering ... Therefore," he added, reflecting on A.A.'s longstanding Tradition of open membership, "let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of A.A. so long as he or she declares."

Keeping the doors of A.A. open to all, while reaching out to increasingly diverse populations around the world, is as important to today's membership as it was to the Fellowship's founders and guiding lights. "Inclusiveness is a broad topic," says Rev. Ward S. Ewing, an Episcopal priest, former dean of General Theological Seminary in New York City, and current chairperson of A.A.'s General Service Board of Trustees. "From the beginning, A.A. has been more inclusive than any organization I am personally aware of and A.A. continues to reach out to African Americans, women, young people, the Hispanic community, Native peoples, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) persons, and to a worldwide fellowship. There is only one requirement for membership — the desire to stop drinking."

Native North Americans Finding Help in A.A.

One community deeply touched by alcoholism that A.A. has been reaching out to for a number of years is the Native population in the

United States and Canada. "Our Native American communities are scattered all over the continent," says Ken S., an A.A. member with over 25 years of sobriety from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, who has been involved in carrying the message to Native communities for many years. "There are reservations in every state of this country. Canada is the same way. Clear up to the tip of Alaska, it's the same. In terms of service, how is the word of A.A. going to reach these remote areas?"

"Reaching out to Native communities has many challenges, particularly those of language, culture, socio-economics and geography, yet those who work with Native alcoholics have been finding new ways to overcome these old barriers," says Corliss Burke, former executive director of the Yukon Alcohol and Drug Secretariat in Canada and current nonalcoholic trustee on the A.A. General Service Board.

"This is where A.A. can be so beneficial," says Corliss. "I know that the treatment programs for which I have been responsible are effective at helping alcoholics get onto the road of recovery."

"A.A. can and does help First Nations people with their recovery and the process of healing. However, for First Nations people, accessing the program, psychologically and spiritually, it may involve overcoming unique and very real barriers," says Corliss. "Alcoholism runs rampant amongst this population and there is a whole new generation of children being born today into a family of practicing alcoholics."

The Power of Technology

One innovative way that A.A. members have been addressing the challenge of carrying the A.A. message to remote communities separated by vast geographic distances is through the use of technology as a means of getting together. "We now have an A.A. meeting, Yukon Unity Group, that is conducted by video-conference," says Corliss of her experience in the Yukon. One of the 14 locations for this video-conference is Whitehorse, the capital city, with a population of 25,000.

Others throughout Canada have utilized similar techniques for bringing people together in a geography where the only mode of

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travel between villages is by plane, using telephone conferencing to share experience, strength and hope. Through such means, a unique face-to-face A.A. event was recently organized — the first Eastern Arctic A.A. Convention, a two-day gathering of alcoholics and their families in Canada’s Northwest Territories, most of which was conducted in Inuktitut, the native language of the Inuits.

A.A. and Native Traditions Working Together

According to Rod B., a full-blooded member of the Navajo Dineh tribe, a recovering alcoholic sober for 27 years, and a trustee on A.A.’s General Service Board, “I believe that in fulfilling our responsibility of carrying the message to Native Americans, it is helpful to understand as much as possible about the culture, tradition, and history of Native people.

“This can be a very challenging undertaking, especially when you consider the many different languages, belief systems and philosophies this encompasses.” However, Rod believes that many Native traditions are similar to the underlying principles of A.A.

“I was born on the Navajo Reservation, but raised in the Salt Lake City area, away from my culture, language, and tradition. When I started drinking and during the whole time I drank, I didn’t care about any of that. It wasn’t until I started getting sober that I began to think about those things and saw how important they are for me. Many Natives have their culture first, then A.A. I had A.A. first and then my culture. I began to see how devastating alcoholism has been to Indian people and to me personally. This understanding of my culture and tradition has enhanced my sobriety, and Alcoholics Anonymous has enhanced my culture and tradition.”

A.A. Literature Can Help

When it comes to carrying the message to special populations, there are a number of A.A. pamphlets that can be of help: “A.A. for the Native North American,” “A.A. and the Gay/Lesbian Alcoholic,” “A.A. for the Woman,” “A.A. for the Black and African American Alcoholic,” “A.A. for the Older Alcoholic —Never Too Late,” “Young People and A.A.,” “Memo to an Inmate Who May Be an Alcoholic.” (For a full listing of A.A. pamphlets, visit the A.A. Web site at www.aa.org.)

“The A.A. Member— Medications and Other Drugs”

Recently updated and revised, the latest version of this pamphlet maintains an important theme from the earlier version: “No A.A. member should ‘play doctor.’ All medical advice and treatment should come from a qualified physician.”

Some members must take prescribed medications. However, A.A. experience indicates that the misuse of prescription medication can threaten the achievement and maintenance of sobriety. A number of suggestions provided in this pamphlet are offered to help A.A. members find the right balance and minimize the risk of relapse.

Throughout the pamphlet, emphasis is placed on the critical importance of an honest and cooperative relationship between A.A. members who may need prescription medications for serious medical problems and the doctors who prescribe those medications.

“A.A. for the Alcoholic With Special Needs”

Recently approved by A.A.’s General Service Conference, this new pamphlet contains stories from A.A. members with a wide variety of challenges, such as autism, brain damage, learning disabilities, blindness, deafness or hearing impairment, confinement to wheelchairs, etc.

Since 1996 A.A. has maintained a clear focus on “Special Needs” through an assigned staff member at A.A.’s General Service Office and in 2009 the process was begun to create a recovery pamphlet for alcoholics with special needs. The General Service Office also publishes A.A. Guidelines on Carrying the Message to the Deaf Alcoholic, which was developed in the late 1970s, as well as A.A. Guidelines on Serving Alcoholics With Special Needs, which was developed a few years later.

“A.A. for the Native North American”

In this pamphlet, men and women, all Native people, share how they gave up drinking. They have found it possible to be A.A. members and still be proud of their rich Native heritage and spiritual teaching. First printed in 1989, it was reprinted in 2009 with an updated introduction and new stories.

E-Books: Carrying A.A.’s Message in a Digital World

After a lengthy process of Board planning, budgeting and development, the e-book versions of *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are now available in English, French, and Spanish.

With A.A.’s new e-books, available through the A.A. Online Store on the A.A. Web site (www.aa.org), members and others interested in A.A.’s program of recovery can now have the Fellowship’s core literature available literally at their fingertips, saving time, space and money, while adding mobility and ease of use. The searchable text feature allows readers to find specific passages, phrases or keywords quickly and allows readers to adjust the type size to their liking and add bookmarks and notes to highlight important aspects of the text.

Initially, the supported devices are the Apple iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad, with an Android version of the A.A. eReader App available soon.

How Can A.A. Help You?

Would you be interested in having an A.A. presentation at one of your professional gatherings? Or would you like information about recovery from alcoholism in A.A.? If so, please contact the C.P.C. desk at the General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, or cpc@aa.org. We welcome your questions, comments and requests.

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