

# About AA

## “Singleness of Purpose” is Central to Recovery in A.A.

Today, when large numbers of people suffering a variety of ailments other than alcoholism are sometimes directed to A.A., causing confusion among members and the professional community alike, co-founder Bill W.'s 1955 message to the Twentieth Anniversary Convention still goes to the heart of the matter:

“There are those who predict that A.A. may well become a new spearhead for a spiritual awakening throughout the world. When our friends say these things, they are both generous and sincere. But we of A.A. must reflect that such a tribute and such a prophecy could well prove to be a heady drink for most of us — that is, if we really came to believe this to be the real purpose of A.A., and if we commenced to behave accordingly. Our Society, therefore, will prudently cleave to its single purpose: the carrying of the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Let us resist the proud assumption that since God has enabled us to do well in one area, we are destined to be a channel of saving grace for everybody.”

Echoing Bill W., Dr. Vincent Dole, a pioneer in methadone maintenance and a former (nonalcoholic) trustee of A.A., has said: “The source of strength in A.A. is its single-mindedness. The mission of A.A. is to help alcoholics. A.A. limits what it is demanding, of itself and its associates, and the program's success lies in its limited target. To believe that the process that is successful in one line guarantees success for another would be a very serious mistake.”

Fittingly, the theme of A.A.'s 1988 General Service Conference, held in April, was “Our Singleness of Purpose — Key to Unity.” Discussion focused on problems relating to the nonalcoholic addict. A main difficulty for A.A.: Many treatment centers are commonly lumping alcoholism and drug addiction under the term “substance abuse” or “chemical dependency.” Patients, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, are introduced to A.A. and encouraged to attend A.A. meetings on the “outside” when they leave. This despite the fact that while anyone is welcome to attend open A.A. meetings, only persons with a drinking problem are encouraged to attend closed meetings or become A.A. members.

Among the speakers at the Conference was delegate David S., District of Columbia. In addressing problems that threaten to dilute A.A.'s primary purpose, he was direct: “When I speak of being too friendly with our friends — the professional community, treatment centers, court referrals, nonalcoholic addicts and public information representatives, I refer to the seemingly frequent occurrences whereby there may be apparent signs of affiliation. For example, courts appear to dump alcoholic offenders on our doorstep, saying, ‘Take care of them’; treatment centers set up programs with A.A. as the nucleus; and professionals combine counsel with A.A. principles.

“We must encourage any and all ways to help the suffering alcoholic, and be grateful for every agency or method that tries to solve the problem of alcoholism. However, we have Traditions that prevent us from affiliating with anyone, even as outside agencies are under no obligation to abide by our self-imposed singleness of purpose.

“What we must seek is more effective understanding. One way is to continually emphasize our primary purpose; another is to stress the importance of group autonomy; and a third is to educate the nonalcoholic addict about what A.A. is and isn't. Repetition of our purpose and Traditions never fails to inform.”

David stressed that “cooperation with our friends is essential to our ongoing commitment ‘to be there when anyone, anywhere reaches out for help.’ But, as eternal vigilance is the price of our sobriety, let it also be the watchword for our cooperation.”

## Is Our Message Clear?

“I think that A.A.'s primary purpose has always been stated clearly in our literature,” delegate Beth B., Chicago Area, told Conference members. “However, I don't believe that we are presenting a clear message to our newcomers. Some examples: At a recent meeting, a woman talked about her new ‘battered women's group.’ The next person spoke about sex-abuse therapy. I wondered — is this A.A.?”

“One A.A. member said that her group was upset because a speaker that evening had talked only about drugs. Many could not identify; no one knew what to do. I suggested including the statement of A.A.'s primary purpose in the meeting format, that the group could decide through a group conscience meeting whether to advise future speakers to share their experience, strength and hope in recovery from *alcoholism*.”

After much thought, Beth relates, she realized that “part of the problem is due to years of not teaching newcomers about our A.A. way of life and, most importantly, about our primary purpose. In an attempt to rectify the situation, the Chicago Area is starting to move in a more positive direction. We are holding discussion meetings for group secretaries, service workshops, beginners and sponsors meetings; and we are studying the Traditions. The response has been gratifying.”

Beth points to “the amazing amount of quality material published by A.A.” — books, tapes, films, guidelines and service pieces; and pamphlets including “Is A.A. for You?”; “The A.A. Member — Medications and Other Drugs”; “This Is A.A.”; “Problems Other Than Alcohol”; “A Newcomer Asks”; and “Information on A.A.” (a white paper).

## When a Meeting Is Not a Group

“The A.A. group has been called the basic unit of our Fellowship and the foundation upon which A.A. stands,” delegate Jack C., Southern Minnesota, reminded Conference members. “Perhaps that is why we so zealously guard our definition of a group. There's such a proliferation of different kinds of meetings that we fear our message will be diluted.”

He explained that, while all A.A. groups hold meetings, not all meetings are A.A. groups. The A.A. group as we usually think of it, he said, fulfills six points defined by the group conscience of A.A. in the U.S. and Canada: 1) All members of the group are alcoholics and all alcoholics are eligible for membership; 2) As a group, members are fully self-supporting; 3) A group's primary purpose is to help alcoholics recover through the Twelve Steps; 4) The group has no outside affiliation; 5) The group has no opinion on outside issues; 6) The group's public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion, and maintains personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, TV and films. Also listed by the General Service Office are specialized groups — for men, women, gays, young people, doctors, etc. — which hold meetings in which only recovery from alcoholism through the A.A. program is discussed.

"Some A.A.s," Jack says, "meet clearly as A.A. groups; some just hold meetings — to discuss some problem in addition to alcohol, such as drug abuse and smoking; and still others gather together as family groups that include A.A.s and nonalcoholic family members and friends." Jack notes that "the most important area of distinction is singleness of purpose. The groups defined as A.A., along with the specialized groups, consist of alcoholics only and, consequently, can profess to one purpose: helping alcoholics recover from alcoholism. Also, because their memberships consist solely of alcoholics, these groups may contribute to the support of A.A. service entities throughout the service structure. However, the 'family gatherings,' which may include nonalcoholics and thus dilute A.A.'s singularity of purpose, are considered meetings, not groups. Their contributions, coming as they must partly from non-A.A. members, cannot be accepted by the various service entities of the Fellowship."

It is also important, Jack cautions, to understand that not every entity calling itself Alcoholics Anonymous is in fact A.A. "Some treatment centers call their aftercare A.A.," he says, "yet their meetings are restricted to alumni of the facility. Such meetings frequently include nonalcoholic drug addicts and do not participate in carrying the message as suggested by A.A. This is a clear case of institutional affiliation and disqualifies these meetings from holding group status."

Why does A.A. take care to make such distinctions? The answer may be summed in one powerful word: identification. When the chips are down, A.A. experience shows the alcoholic need to identify with others — to speak the "language of the heart" as Bill W. put it — is a requisite to lasting recovery.

Importantly, the need of other "addicts" for a primary identification appears as strong. This is one reason why A.A. gladly cooperates with other mutual help organizations. By letting them adapt our program to their purpose, we can fulfill ours: to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

## How Some Self-Help Programs View Their Relations With A.A.

It's true what they say: "A.A. was not invented." Its basics were brought to us through the experience and wisdom of others, including various religions and our immediate forerunner, the Oxford Group. In turn, the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts that have been given to us in one form or another we freely share with other self-help fellowships striving to fulfill their own reason for being.

One such organization is Narcotics Anonymous. Founded in 1953, it lists more than 12,000 groups worldwide. Recently the trustees

of N.A. shared "Some Thoughts on Our Relationship to A.A." in their bimonthly newsletter, *Newsline*. "N.A.," they state, "is modeled after, though not identical to, A.A. Nearly every N.A. group in existence has leaned to some degree on A.A. in its formative stages. Our relationship with that Fellowship over the years has been very real and dynamic."

The N.A. trustees find that "one of A.A.'s greatest strengths is its single-minded focus on one thing only: By limiting its primary purpose to carrying the message to alcoholics, avoiding all other activities, A.A. is able to do that one thing supremely well. The atmosphere of identification is preserved by that purity of focus, and alcoholics get help.

"From early on, A.A. was confronted by a perplexing problem: 'What do we do with drug addicts? We want to keep our focus on alcohol so the alcoholic hears the message, but these addicts come in here talking about drugs, inadvertently weakening our atmosphere of identification.' The Steps were written, the Big Book was written — were they supposed to rewrite it all? Allow the atmosphere of identification to blur so that no one acquired a clear sense of belonging? Kick these dying people back into the street?"

A.A.s "studied the problem carefully," the N.A. trustees note, "and the direction they outlined possessed their characteristic common sense and wisdom. They said that while they cannot accept nonalcoholic addicts as members, they freely offer their Steps and Traditions for adaptation by any groups who wish to use them. They pledged their support in a spirit of 'cooperation, not affiliation.' This farsighted solution to a difficult problem paved the way for the development of the Narcotics Anonymous Fellowship."

Another fast-growing self-help organization that views A.A. as its parent fellowship is Cocaine Anonymous (C.A.). Less than six years old, C.A. already has 800 groups throughout the world. C.A. offers identification and recovery to thousands of drug-addicted persons not reached by Narcotics Anonymous or other self-help programs.

Reflecting on C.A.'s "excellent relationship" with A.A., World Service trustee Jennifer R. explains, "We at C.A. look for guidance from A.A. and learn from its experience." In C.A., Jennifer points out, "Our common identification is expressed in Step One: 'We admitted we were powerless over cocaine and all other mind-altering substances — that our lives had become unmanageable.' Even as we look to A.A. for guidance, we feel separate, because each fellowship has a unique primary purpose. Both of us have an enormous amount of work to do; and each time someone recovers — whether from alcoholism in A.A. or from mind-altering substances in C.A. — we are helping each other."

One of the oldest self-help organizations patterned on A.A.'s program of recovery is Overeaters Anonymous (O.A.). Formed in Los Angeles in 1960, O.A. has 8,200 groups in 48 countries. Says General Service trustee Susan G., of Irving, Texas: "A.A.'s Twelve Steps have saved my life, and the lives of countless others. A.A.'s willingness to share fully what it has and to recognize the necessity of hewing to a singleness of purpose has opened the way to recovery for all of us."

## Some Self-Help Resources

**Cocaine Anonymous**, P.O. Box 1367, Culver City, CA 90232, 213-559-5833; **Narcotics Anonymous**, 16155 Wyandotte St., Van Nuys, CA 91406; **Overeaters Anonymous**, 219 - 190th St., Torrance, CA 90504, 213-542-8363; **National Self-Help Clearinghouse**, Graduate School & University Center, City University of N.Y., 33 W. 42nd St., New York, NY 10036, 212-840-1259