

## The Clergy and Alcoholics Anonymous

### Early years: religious organizations offering assistance to alcoholics

Members of the clergy have shown remarkable humility in the face of the problem of alcoholism. Some churches and church-affiliated hospitals were among the first institutions to open their doors and offer services to alcoholics trying to get sober.

Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, the innovative and energetic rector of Calvary Church, ran a mission house in New York City, where the Oxford Group held meetings and quite a few alcoholics found reprieve in the early to mid-1930s.

The Oxford Group, a Christian movement with roots back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century in England (it takes its name from Oxford University), had the following formula for a Christian life: admit defeat, talk honestly about your feelings, make restitution, give of yourself, and pray. The Oxford Group also recommended meditation and belief in a God of the believer's understanding. Co-founders Bill W. in New York and Dr. Bob in Akron, along with others who were to join A.A., attended Oxford Group meetings for a couple years.

By the late 1930s, though, A.A. members in New York and in Akron had separated from the Oxford Group. The representatives of the movement saw Bill and his work with alcoholics as missing the point of the Oxford Group. Bill, they said, was not “maximum” — that is, he wasn't showing maximum commitment to Oxford Group principles. For his part, Bill knew instinctively that alcoholics would never accept the kind of force feeding of principles and practices in the Oxford Group. (Note: see pages 167-174 in “*Pass It On*” for details on A.A.'s break with the Oxford Group.)

Other methods also promised help to suffering alcoholics. One was the Samaritan Treatment, which is mentioned in the “Flower of the South,” a story in the Third edition of the Big Book, and now available in the volume *Experience, Strength and Hope* (p. 337). The Samaritan Treatment is a type of aversion therapy that the writer of the story in the Big Book describes as “excruciating.”

### Bill's Call to Rev. Tunks

The call that set in motion the final stages of A.A.'s founding was to a clergyman. There are a number of versions of exactly what happened. In a recording on file at the G.S.O. Archives, Bill W. recalls that phone call to the Rev. Walter Tunks, made in 1935 from the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel in Akron, Ohio:

“...well, I'll call up Tunks. And so I called up the good man and he came on the wire and I announced that I was another drunk looking for a drunk to work on. Well, that request he thought a little unusual. I imagine he had worked on drunks singly, but bringing them together in squads didn't seem to be an appealing idea. However, he referred me to another man [Norman Shepherd] who belonged to a religious group and said, ‘Now this fellow can do the business.’ So I talked with the second gentleman and he was just leaving town — it was Saturday — but he gave me the names of about ten other people....”



Examples of publications on alcoholism by the clergy.

### Sister Ignatia, Sister Victorine, and Sister Francis

The clergy's sympathetic response to A.A. extended to church-affiliated hospitals, which were more likely than other facilities to offer services to alcoholics trying to get sober.

Dr. Bob approached St. Thomas Hospital when he was investigating the possibilities of establishing a hospital facility for alcoholics. He spoke with Sister Ignatia, who had been the registrar at the hospital's admissions desk for six years.

A ward was subsequently devoted to the rehabilitation of alcoholics, with Sister Ignatia at its head. During her time the hospital, which was administered by her Order, the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, treated approximately 5,000 alcoholics. In 1952, Sister Ignatia was transferred to St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland, where she was put in charge of the alcoholic ward. During her 14 years there, 10,000 alcoholics were treated.

Although the G.S.O. Archives hold virtually no records on other Sisters who were involved in treating alcoholics, we do know of Sister Victorine, who assisted Sister Ignatia in Rosary Hall at the St. Vincent Charity Hospital, and was in charge there from 1965 to 1976.

In another part of the country, Ethelred F. Folsom, who later chose the name Sister Francis, founded Joy Farm in 1927 in Kent, Connecticut. Later known as High Watch Farm, it was one of the first rest farms for alcoholics. Sister Francis had three farms to begin with: one for children, one for adults, and a type of rest home for older people.

Bill W. was introduced to Sister Francis at Joy Farm by a pigeon of Marty M., an early female A.A. member. Bill talked to the Sister about A.A., and so impressed her that she announced: 'I'm giving you this place.' They explained to her that A.A. could not own any property and graciously turned down her offer.

## Clergy support to a newly formed Fellowship

One of the first published reviews of the Big Book, in April 1939, was by a well-known minister, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church in New York City. He wrote: "This extraordinary book deserves the careful attention of anyone interested in the problem of alcoholism."

Dr. Fosdick was an esteemed minister and his church was one of the most prominent in the country. His public support of the fledgling group of recently sober men was invaluable.

Associating his good name to this society of drunks, he lent the Fellowship legitimacy. Bill W. would later say that Dr. Fosdick was "the very first clergyman to recognize us," (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 183). At the Rockefeller dinner for A.A. in February 1940, "Dr. Fosdick gave us a most wonderful testimonial and expressed complete confidence in our future." (*ibid*, p. 184)

Dr. Fosdick, in his address to a meeting of the New York Group of Alcoholics Anonymous in November 1942, said:

"Every minister who is also a personal counselor has to deal with cases of alcoholism. For years I have dreaded that. Almost any kind of abnormality I would welcome rather than face a case of alcoholism. What to do with a thorough-going alcoholic?"

He went on to say that, "I ... recommend all rabbis, priests, and ministers to acquaint themselves with this movement, avail themselves of its help, and encourage the groups that may be forming in their community."



*Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) of Riverside Church in New York City did Alcoholics Anonymous a great service with his early support.*

Members of the clergy were among the first to comprehend that this society of drunks took a broad approach to problem drinking. The Rev. George Little, who helped found A.A. in Canada, wrote in the early 1940s that A.A. members "work on thoughts, desires, attitudes, relationships, purposes, and habits. They are agreed that the root trouble is in the thinking, not in the drinking." (from the article, "The God Concept in Alcoholics Anonymous," by the Rev. George Little)

Father Dowling, a Jesuit priest from St. Louis, Missouri, who later became Bill W.'s spiritual sponsor, was among A.A.'s earliest nonalcoholic supporters. In a 1947 interview, later published by The Queens Work, he said:

"Those Twelve Steps are the real spiritual powerhouse of A.A. I remember the astonishment of one Jesuit, whom I believe to be wise in the ways of the spirit, when he first read A.A.'s Twelve Steps. He was astounded at the great similarity between those steps and the Foundation and First Week of 'The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius,' which contains the basic and ridding-oneself-of-sin part of Jesuit spirituality.

"Both the Twelve Steps and the Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises aim at a man's recognition of his dependence on God. Both the Twelve Steps and the First Week [of 'the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius'] seek in and for man the springboards of fear (always the beginning of wisdom) and shame (the next best thing to innocence) through his consideration of his sins, the result of those sins, and the removal of them by confession."

## ‘What the A.A. Program Can Mean to the Rest of Us’

The title of an article by Dr. Shoemaker — “What the A.A. Program Can Mean to the Rest of Us” (reprinted from *The Evangel*, a magazine of Christian experience) — reflects a changing relationship between the clergy and Alcoholics Anonymous. From the early days of quiet acceptance of the alcoholics into their fold, through their steadily growing support throughout the 1940s and 50s, prominent clergymen now addressed what alcoholics could teach to the world.

Dr. Fosdick, in his autobiography, *The Living of These Days*, published in 1956, writes: “I have listened to many learned arguments about God, but for honest-to-goodness experiential evidence of God ... give me a good meeting of A.A.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 324)

Dr. Shoemaker, according to the account in his wife’s biography of him (*I Stand by the Door*, by Helen Smith Shoemaker, p. 193), “used to say frequently that if everyone sitting in the pews of our churches had the same sense of gratitude and the same ability to give themselves that the A.A.s have in reaching and salvaging drunks, we would have a very different America.”

Dr. Shoemaker had a deep appreciation for the wisdom of the Twelve Steps. In a 1963 article (republished in the March 1973 AA Grapevine), he writes: “I have always been interested ... in what this program can mean to anyone who wrestles with a real problem. And who has not? A pile of wisdom and experience is packed into the Twelve Steps.”

The Steps, he said, “are one of the very great summaries and organic collections of spiritual truth known to history. They have an almost universal relevance. They will offer a ‘way out’ for many a person who knows nothing personally of alcoholism.”

According to Laurence Robbins Plank, pastor of First Unitarian Church in St. Louis, in a sermon he delivered in May 1941: “The alcoholic is generally ... immunized against the advice of clergymen,” he says. “For most part, the clergy universally have confessed that they were well nigh helpless with regard to an alcoholic.”

He goes on to note that Alcoholics Anonymous was doing much more than simply keeping its members dry, and that the society of ex-drinkers had hit upon something highly valuable.

“No man can say he had found God who has not learned by so doing how to love his neighbor, for God is love. And these individuals, men and women of Alcoholics Anonymous, have demonstrably found and released that God. Not a theoretical God, not an abstraction, but a working inward process in the hearts and minds of men.”

On the question of whether A.A. is proselytizing, he says, “they are not fanatics; they aren’t even apparently pious.”

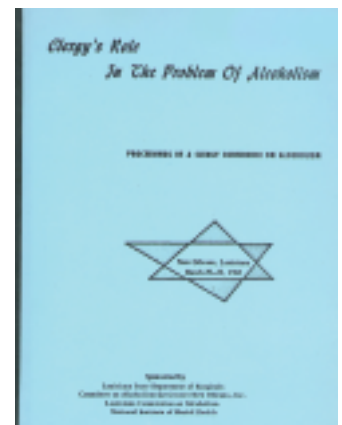
## Clergy Addresses Alcoholism

The clergy’s continued involvement in the problem of alcoholics is demonstrated in a series of conferences focusing on alcoholism that some members of the clergy convened in the 1960s. Bill W. addressed one of these conferences in 1960. (The G.S.O. Archives holds proceedings of subsequent clergy conferences.)

In his address to that conference, Bill said: “While it is most obvious that free choice in the matter of alcohol has virtually disappeared in most cases, we A.A.s do point out that plenty of free will is left in other areas. It certainly takes a large amount of willingness, and a great exertion of the will to accept and practice the A.A. program. It is by this very exertion of the will that the alcoholic corresponds with the grace by which his drinking obsession can be expelled.” (p. 191, *The Proceedings of the Twelfth National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism*, April 19-21, 1960, NY, NY)

At the same conference, Bill also said: “Many a non-alcoholic clergyman asks these questions about Alcoholics Anonymous: ‘Why do clergymen so often fail with alcoholics, when A.A. so often succeeds? Is it possible that the grace of A.A. is superior to that of the Church? Is Alcoholics Anonymous a new religion, a competitor of the Church?’

“If these misgivings had real substance, they would be serious indeed. But, as I have already indicated, Alcoholics Anonymous cannot in the least be regarded as a new religion. Our Twelve Steps have no theological content, except that which speaks of ‘God as we understand Him.’” (ibid p. 194)



*Proceedings of a clergy conference on alcoholism (March 1963: New Orleans, LA)*

## Spiritual but Not Religious

The sympathetic understanding between A.A. and those in religious vocations has contributed to a misunderstanding among some about the nature of A.A., namely, that it is religious. The universality of A.A., though, is undeniable. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the main text of the program, has been translated into 49 languages. A.A. members meet in 150 countries around the world and the Fellowship includes people from all major faiths.

As noted by the Rev. Little in his previously mentioned article, “The God Concept in Alcoholics Anonymous,” the definition of God is highly personal in Alcoholics Anonymous. “Trying to visualize the Higher Power is a hindrance rather than a help.”

He says that active alcoholics have been turning over their lives to another power long before their arrival in A.A. “Surrender to the Higher Power is not difficult for alcoholics, because for years they have surrendered to a lower power. Alcohol has a power, an intoxicating power,” says Little.

Like so many of the clergy, the Rev. Little sees A.A. as a resource for others beside alcoholics. “Churches will be wise not to try to guide or control this movement but to learn from it,” he writes.

## Recognition

The clergy came to recognize formally the achievements of the Fellowship in improving the lives of so many alcoholics and their families. This resulted in a number of awards to Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1967, the order of Conventional Franciscan Fathers and Brothers granted the Franciscan Award to Alcoholics Anonymous. The letter to G.S.O. announcing the award read in part: “We hope that the granting of the Franciscan Award to the society of Alcoholics Anonymous will be an impetus to all the members to continue and increase their great and much needed work.”



*The Franciscan Award, shown here, is on display at the G.S.O. Archives. This was the second time the Franciscans granted the Fellowship an award. Acknowledging that first award, Bill W. wrote in January 1950: "From the A.A. point of view, an interesting and helpful precedent has been established. We shall be able to say with confidence when other donors put in an appearance that they would do quite as well, even better in fact, if they chose to*

*honor the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous rather than any of its founders. As I told you, this happy concept was not mine at all. It really came from the Founder of your own order, St. Francis of Assisi, whose example and spirit have already done so much for me and for A.A."*

In 1971, Archbishop Enrici of Great Britain spoke at the A.A. European Convention meeting in Bristol. He suggest-



*Medallion of the Good Shepherd presented to representatives of A.A. by Pope Paul VI in January 1972.*

meetings with various Vatican officials, culminating in a private audience with Pope Paul VI — something the two A.A.s had no reason to expect.

“The Pope graciously greeted us, not only for our own sakes but for the work of Alcoholics Anonymous we were engaged on, which he described as fine work,” wrote one of the visitors in the March 1972 issue of *The Furrow*, an Irish magazine that covers Catholic church issues.

The Pope presented the visitors with the Medallion of the Good Shepherd, which is on display at the G.S.O. Archives in New York.

## Enduring Relationship

Alcoholics Anonymous early on struck a chord with the clergy, who could see that this unorthodox movement of low-bottom drunks had a roadmap to a spirituality that lived and breathed. Members of the clergy continue to contribute to our work, with Class A trustees serving on the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The relationship has been complex, evolving from simple support to deep admiration, as expressed by Dr. Fosdick: (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 323)

“Alcoholics Anonymous, grown to its present astonishing strength, is a godsend to us ministers. How can we understand an alcoholic — his compulsive desire for liquor, the hopeless captivity against which he futilely contends, one determined decision after another to stop drinking ending in collapse? When we talk to an alcoholic, he knows that never having been in his place we cannot understand his plight. But when an ex-alcoholic, who has been in the depths himself and has taken the Twelve Steps to freedom, talks to an alcoholic, amazing results can follow and have followed in countless thousands of lives.”

ed that A.A. should consider sending a delegation to the Vatican, which, he said, was poorly acquainted with the work of the Fellowship.

Acting quickly on the suggestion, an A.A. from Ireland and another from England traveled together to Rome a couple of months later. With help from the Rector of the English College there, they arranged