

A Theory of Evolution



Is AA changing? I say yes — and thank God! In fact, AA has been evolving from its earliest days. Moreover, had it not changed in important ways, many of us would not be in AA, and the Fellowship itself might well have become a casualty.

But thanks to changes resulting from trial and error and divine guidance, AA membership has been opened to anyone and everyone who has a desire to stop drinking.

It was not always so. In the beginning, only mature white males professing Christianity were welcome, since the infant Fellowship grew out of the Oxford Group that was founded on the idea of First Century Christianity. When Bill W. met with Dr. Bob in Akron in 1935, there were no Steps or Traditions to guide them — just "one drunk trying to help another." They did have in common their membership in the Oxford Group and familiarity with its "Four Absolutes": absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love.

Over the first few years, the tiny groups in Ohio and New York developed a "word-of-mouth program," which Bill summarized as six "precepts":

- 1) We admitted we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
- 2) We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
- 3) We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
- 4) We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
- 5) We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
- 6) We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

The word-of-mouth program was Bill's starting point when he set out to draft the "How It Works" chapter of the Big Book. Bill has recorded how the initial draft of what became our Twelve Steps was completed in about half an hour as he lay on his bed, writ-

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ing in a yellow tablet. And he has told us that the expansion of the program from six points to twelve was not unanimously accepted.

It took heated debate among the handful of sober early-timers in New York and Akron to hammer out the language of the Twelve Steps and the text of the Big Book that opened the way for "those of all faiths and no faith" to be welcomed. AA literature describes the discussions that produced the language that removed the barriers to membership for countless thousands.

Early on, it was common practice to screen prospects and to require "surrender" and affirmation of belief in God to be accepted. Clarence S., founder of AA's third group (Cleveland), has given a dramatic account of his testing by Dr. Bob to gain admission. And Bill records the fact that his first draft of the Steps was heavily sprinkled with references to God and that The Seventh Step read: "Humbly, on *our knees*, asked Him to remove our shortcomings."

The critical change was the adoption of the phrases "as we understood Him" and "a Power Greater than ourselves," making it possible for agnostics, atheists, and followers of any and all religions to feel welcome.

However, unwritten roadblocks to membership remained for a while — notably for women, young people, and minorities.

Although the first woman to join AA is said to be responsible for rejection

of *One Hundred Men* as a possible title for the Big Book, she soon relapsed and disappeared from the AA scene. It was not until several years later that another woman joined and pioneered the way for other females to follow. It wasn't just the members who raised roadblocks for women; if anything, their wives resisted even more: women who drank heavily were regarded as fast and fallen females, and the wives feared they would lead their husbands astray. Marty M. has written much about the difficulties of acceptance encountered by women during the early years. Even though women have long since been welcomed throughout the Fellowship, many of them still remember the shame and humiliation they experienced in coming to AA because of the greater stigma society attached to the female alcoholic.

Young people also found it difficult to gain acceptance in AA for a long time. Old-timers still tell of being rejected well into their thirties because of their youth and inexperience, and told to come back after they had drunk longer and suffered more. This prejudice against the "high bottom" alcoholic apparently was widespread at least as late as the sixties. Even today, the very young do not feel welcome in all groups. Part of the problem probably stems from the fact that many — perhaps a majority — of the young are dually addicted and may sometimes refer to their problem with other substances, for which they can be

chastised by older members.

An unwritten color line likewise existed in AA for many years. AA literature does not speak to this situation, but a history of AA in the Washington, D.C. area records the establishment in 1940 of a "colored" group in Arlington, Virginia by a white businessman for his black employees. This group apparently was short-lived, but in 1945 the Cosmopolitan Group was started and flourished as a segregated group in Washington for many years. Although today blacks and other minorities are well represented in meetings throughout the Fellowship, one can speculate that their acceptance probably followed the pattern of desegregation in society as a whole.

AA's evolution over nearly six

decades has seen the Fellowship grow from a tiny closed nucleus of "a nameless bunch of alcoholics" to a respected worldwide life-saving movement of over two million women and men of all races, ages, and sexual orientation, beliefs and nonbeliefs — anyone with a desire to stop drinking. Today women make up more than one third of AA's membership, people thirty and under nearly one quarter, and those of every race, color, and creed (or none) fill our ranks in some 145 nations.

Our Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions have stood the test of time, but AA has not been so inflexible as to refuse to change when change is dictated by experience.

May it ever be so.

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