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Winnipeg Group Celebrates 50 Years

Alcoholics Anonymous might never have gotten off the ground without early non-alcoholic friends, and the Winnipeg Group of AA in Manitoba is one good example. The group, now celebrating fifty years of carrying the message, owes its beginnings in November 1944 to the early efforts of a psychiatrist who cared about alcoholics.

Dr. T. A. (Alex) Pincock, then Manitoba's Provincial Psychiatrist, was

much concerned with the treatment of alcoholism in psychiatric institutions and hospitals, and in particular with the lack of long-term success (beyond drying the alcoholic out, giving him back his health, and turning him loose). At the time, doctors could do little but that — then watch in dismay as the alcoholic returned to former drinking patterns.

In the summer of 1943, Dr. Pincock spoke with William Bailey, a former

member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly who was lecturing on the subject of alcohol. Mr. Bailey had visited the Yale School of Alcohol Studies and heard of an organization calling itself Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr. Pincock was mystified, as he had just returned from a tour of psychiatric facilities in the U.S. and had heard not one whisper of this new society. So in the early fall of 1943, when Dr. Brian Bird, his assistant, went on a refresher course at University Hospital in Minneapolis, Dr. Pincock asked him to find out what he could about this Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr. Bird managed to attend meetings at the Nicollet Group in Minneapolis, and returned to Winnipeg with a copy of the Big Book.

In February 1944, Percy E., who was undergoing treatment for alcoholism in the Psychopathic Hospital of Winnipeg General Hospital (known as "Psycho"), was told about AA and given a copy of the Big Book. He read it, and on his discharge, wrote to Drs. Bird and Pincock, stating his willingness to try this new treatment:

"I assure you I am sincere in offering my services either in a pioneering capacity, or as a disciple of others if they exist here, and am willing to participate in the movement under discussion. I would appreciate any guidance or suggestions you might care to offer. Faith without works is dead! Never before have I been brought face to face with what I am — an alcoholic whose case is parallel with many mentioned

in the book Alcoholics Anonymous. I am convinced that I am leaving the institution with a humility and a lack of resentment never experienced by me before."

The First Meeting

Late in 1944, Dr. Pincock wrote to several patients who had undergone treatment for alcoholism during the year, suggesting that an AA group be formed, and assuring them that they would run their own show, with the doctor acting in an advisory capacity only. Percy E. responded, as did Grettir J., and they met each other on November 26, 1944. With this meeting, Alcoholics Anonymous began in Winnipeg.

With the Big Book as their source of inspiration, the two members began Twelfth Step work almost immediately. In "Psycho," they found Alex T, who became the third member of the fledgling group — the first group formed between southeastern Ontario and Vancouver.

An organizational meeting was held in the library of the Psychopathic Hospital on January 2, 1945, with Dr. Pincock attending. The three founders realized the need for more members, regular meetings, and constant discussion. They ordered Big Books and AA literature from the New York office. Two members of the Nicollet Group in Minneapolis, Barry C. and Don K., came up once a week for an entire year, offering help and advice.

Percy, Grettir, and Alex began to meet twice a week for lunch at the St. Charles Hotel, as well as in each others' homes, and slowly the group acquired more members. By the end of summer 1945, the Winnipeg Group had a membership of thirteen, and had begun to hold lunches and meetings in the Marlboro Hotel.

In fall 1945, Art B. offered the use of his office in the Somerset Building as a meeting place, and three meetings were held there every week. By early 1946, there were eighteen members, and they decided to rent a permanent home for the group. With little money but vast faith, they rented an old hall at 213 ½ Osborne Street, which had been used for storing furniture. The rent was \$40 per month. Five members put up securities for a bank loan and spent \$3,500 (which at today's prices represents nearly \$40,000) on furniture and fixtures. The loan was repaid in two years. Members' wives pitched in to scrub and polish, and the whole group worked to get the meeting place in shape.

Growing Pains

The early growth of AA was sometimes stormy. Friction arose between

hair-triggered alcoholic personalities. Monthly business meetings, with their business details and bureaucratic trappings, did little to diminish friction. The members spent a good deal of time and energy drafting a constitution and by-laws — really superfluous to an AA group. Everyone meant well, but it was a wonder that anyone stayed sober during this time of troubles.

The members soon realized that in order to live the AA way, a true partnership between alcoholics and their wives was necessary. Open meetings were arranged, and a women's auxiliary made up of the non-alcoholic wives was formed. This step had its down side, though: the group's first real

split arose over some members' objections to the use of the clubrooms by the women's auxiliary on Wednesday evenings. After a bitter discussion, these members left the group, and on January 22, 1947 formed the Assiniboine Group.

Personality clashes and friction continued, although the Winnipeg Group was actively twelfth-stepping alcoholics and helping bring to the general public, through churches and businessmen's groups, the knowledge of what AA is and what it was at-

tempting to do for the alcoholic.

Eventually, two factions arose in the club. One wanted to form a separate group and rent the clubrooms once a week. This proposal was turned down at a meeting in April 1949 — after which occurred the Great Secession. No less than thirty-six members of the Winnipeg Group walked out, and in May of that year formed the Alano Group.

AA Spreads Across Manitoba

We can look back today and see that all this strife was a blessing in disguise, for it was the means by which AA was spreading across Winnipeg. But conflict was not the only stimulus for growth. In December 1947, the first public meeting of AA in Winnipeg took place, when Barry C. of the Nicollet Group from Minneapolis addressed the Rotary Club in the Playhouse Theatre. In February 1948, some Winnipeg Group members and their wives drove to Brandon, where they spoke to the doctors and staff of the mental hospital and to the local clergy, and also helped form the Wheat City Group at a meeting in the YMCA.

Bill W. and his wife Lois visited Winnipeg in February 1948, and spoke at a dinner meeting at the Royal Alexandra Hotel. This was a wonderful stimulus to the AA movement in Winnipeg.

By 1948, the Winnipeg Group had four or five French-speaking members,

and these AAs decided to form a French-speaking group. In February 1948, the nucleus of the group that is now the St. Boniface-Norwood Group met for the first time.

Women alcoholics came into their own when they formed the Women's Group in February 1953.

In those early days, the Winnipeg Group handled correspondence with "loners" in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and gradually Alcoholics Anonymous spread throughout western Canada. In 1950, groups were founded in Stony Mountain Penitentiary and in Headingly Jail.

Today, there are approximately 170 AA groups in Manitoba, over 50 of them in metropolitan Winnipeg. Manitoba AA membership includes more than 5,000 recovering alcoholics, and at one time, the Winnipeg Group was one of the largest AA groups in the world.

Winnipeg members today look back with gratitude, and see that AA in Winnipeg had an ideal sponsor. Dr. Alex Pincock had been a medical missionary, specializing in psychiatry, and his professional skill, combined with a deep faith in the power of God to help suffering people, enabled him to communicate with alcoholics to a degree attained by few. With characteristic modesty, Dr. Pincock always maintained that he did nothing — that we alcoholics did it all. But "we alcoholics" know better.

Bob F., Winnipeg, Man.

