

Starting an Agnostic AA Group

Frequently Asked Questions [FAQ]

Those who choose to start an agnostic group have to make a few decisions. Some of these are the same decisions as those faced by any AA group and some are unique to agnostic groups. Like all AA groups, agnostic groups make decisions through an informed group conscience. Here are some of the common questions asked by beginning agnostic groups and some answers that will help the group make an informed decision.

Q. What should we name our group?

A. The most common name used by agnostic AA groups is "We Agnostics," simply because it's the name of chapter four in the Big Book. Some other groups choose names based on something in AA literature too. "Widening Our Gateway" takes its name from *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, where Bill Wilson says that the atheists and agnostics of the day "had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief." The "Children of Chaos" group takes its name from the second paragraph of Tradition Four, in the *Twelve and Twelve* book: "Children of chaos, we have defiantly played with every brand of fire." Other groups find something that appeals to them or represents their idea of the group. Examples of these names are "Beyond Belief", "Live and Let Live", "The Only Requirement" or "Freethinkers."

Q. How should we open and close our meeting?

A. Obviously, one of the distinguishing characteristics of an agnostic group meeting is the lack of prayer at the opening or closing of a meeting. Some agnostic groups read the following at the beginning of the meeting:

AA agnostic meetings endeavour to maintain a tradition of free expression, and conduct a meeting where alcoholics may feel free to express any doubts or disbeliefs they may have, and to share their own personal form of spiritual experience, their search for it, or their rejection of it. In keeping with AA tradition, we do not endorse or oppose any form of religion or atheism. Our only wish is to ensure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else's beliefs, or having to deny our own.

Agnostic groups sometimes have more than one reading to open and close the meeting, and these are often taken from AA literature, such as:

- The AA Preamble
- The Responsibility Declaration
- Appendix II: The Spiritual Experience (available from the Big Book)

Remember, each AA group has complete autonomy - accept where one group could affect another group or AA as a whole - to follow its own "group conscience." Therefore, whatever your group decides to read or recite during your meeting is strictly your concern.

Q. What meeting format should we use?

A. AA does not mandate a "standardized" meeting format. There are, however, a number of common formats that agnostic groups can choose from:

- *Topic* – Meeting topics can be arrived at in various ways: taken from a topic list previously created by the group, or selected ad hoc by the group at the beginning of the meeting. The GSO provides topics commonly used in AA meetings in the pamphlet [The A.A. Group....Where it All Begins](#), on p. 14. Topics listed in the pamphlet include: attitude, defects of character, fear, freedom through sobriety, gratitude, honesty, humility, making amends, resentments, sponsorship, acceptance, tolerance and willingness.
- *Study* – The group selects a book that the members feel will be helpful to their sobriety. A section or chapter from the book is read and then discussed after the reading. Some agnostic groups use the book *Living Sober* for this type of meeting.
- *Speaker* – One member of the group shares her/his experience, strength and hope with the other members of the group. This can be for the whole meeting or for just 10 or 15 minutes, giving the others a chance to share as well.
- *Step* – Each meeting focuses on a Step. Similar to non-agnostic AA meetings that use the original 12 Steps, members are free to share their "interpretation" of the step.

Q. Must an agnostic group use the original 12 Steps?

A. There are no *musts* in AA. Due to religious conflicts in early AA, a statement was added to precede all of the 12 Steps which declared that the Steps were only *suggested* as a program of recovery.

Since July 1950, when the first International AA Conference voted to approve the 12 Traditions, AA has not required or forced any AA group to use the original 12 Steps in their meetings or believe in a supernatural personal God.

The practice of "interpreting" the 12 Steps during meeting discussions is common in many AA groups. Many members find that the capitalized words "Power" and "God" and "Him" and "His" in the 12 Steps do not apply to their particular belief system. These members are welcome to verbally describe "something else" as a Power to substitute for believing in a supernatural personal God who keeps them sober. Agnostic groups allow complete free expression and group members can express disbelief that any supernatural Power is required to keep them sober.

Q. Can an agnostic group change the original 12 Steps?

- A.** There are some groups that have taken the capitalized words "Power" and "God" and "Him" and "His" out of the Steps, and created alternate versions of the Steps. These alternative versions vary widely from one group to the other, and many can be found at [AA Agnostica](#).

Creating a version of the Steps that varies from the original 12 Steps can be a controversial subject. Some Intergroup / Central Offices insist that groups only use the original 12 Steps. These local offices have sometimes been known to de-list a group from their published meeting list when they discover a group is not using the original 12 Steps. What this means to a group is that the local office will no longer advertise the agnostic meeting in its local meeting list, and will not allow the agnostic group a vote in local office affairs. As part of an informed group conscience, the group should be aware of the issues with using a written variation of the original 12 Steps and factor that into its decision.

Being de-listed by a local office does not mean that the group is no longer an AA group. The General Service Office (GSO) maintains its own list of AA groups in Canada and the U.S., along with the group's designated General Service Representative (GSR), and this master list is unaffected by any decisions made by a local office.

Q. Should the new group list itself with the General Service Office (GSO)?

- A.** While an AA group is under no obligation to list itself with the GSO, listing with the GSO provides benefits that listing with a local office cannot. This is because at the same time that the group is listed with the GSO, the group can notify the GSO of the name of its General Service Representative (GSR). Having a GSR listed with the GSO can be an important part of being an AA group, because it ensures your group will have a vote and voice in the General Service Conference structure. The pamphlet [General Service Representative – May be the Most Important Job in A.A.](#) provides a description of the General Service Conference structure and the role of the GSR.

Q. How do we get listed with the local Intergroup / Central Office?

- A.** Most major metropolitan areas have a local office and any AA group can ask to be listed. The list is a service to groups in the local community, so that other AA members and non-AA members who are thinking of joining the fellowship can see what meetings are available. Each of these offices is a completely independent AA entity and each has its own procedures for how to list a new meeting with them. Many of these offices are agnostic friendly, but some are not (the case of the Intergroup in Toronto being a recent example).

Your group will have to research the listing procedure used by your local office and also determine if it is agnostic friendly. Your group may also decide to elect a representative to attend the local AA office meetings, if there are any. It all depends on the office and the inclinations of members of your group and its "group conscience."

Q. Are there other ways to let people know about our meeting?

- A.** An additional place to list your meeting is on the [Worldwide Agnostic A.A. Meetings](#) list. The agnostic AA website in New York City has provided this list of all known agnostic groups and their meetings as a much-appreciated service to recovering alcoholics. It helps people to find agnostic meetings in or outside of their local area.

There are other ways to get the word out about your meeting, if need be. These are tried and true methods that have been in use by AA groups since the 1940's. For instance, your group can use a local newspaper or magazine, just as most groups did for decades (attraction, not promotion), before there were local AA offices. Some groups still do this today, where there is no local office. Some groups create their own web page. And of course, there is word of mouth. Once people hear about these meetings, they start coming.

Q. When we list our meeting, should we make it an "open" or a "closed" meeting?

- A.** AA groups are either "open" or "closed." The term "closed" means the meeting can only be attended by AA members, namely those who have a drinking problem and "have a desire to stop drinking" ([The A.A. Group...Where it All Begins](#), p 13). An "open" meeting means anyone can attend. To make an informed group conscience decision, the group should consider whether it wants to be "open" to those struggling with other substance addictions or those who are not yet sure that they have a desire to stop drinking.

Q. Where's a good location to hold our meeting?

- A.** All locations are good if it's mutually acceptable to both parties. Although church basements have been a staple location for AA groups in the past, some churches may not be comfortable having an "agnostic" meeting on their premises, since these groups are clearly "not religious." An exception to this would be the Unitarian fellowship, which has decades of history of supporting agnostic groups in AA. Other locations that agnostic groups have used include men or women's clubs, treatment centers, community or senior centers, association facilities (i.e. Moose Lodge, Finnish Hall), non-profit organizations (i.e. United Way), college or university facilities or library facilities.

Some agnostic groups have even been able to use Alano Clubs for their meetings.

Q. How many people are needed to start a new group?

- A.** The short answer would be two people, given that Tradition Three says: "Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation." On the other hand, the more people that can get involved with starting the group, the easier it will be to get some of the basic tasks done, such as making the coffee and making sure the doors are unlocked on meeting nights.