

Presentation by Ashley M.

Pacific Region of Alcoholics Anonymous Service Assembly (PRAASA) 2015

Hello Everyone! My name is Ashley M. and I am an Alcoholic. My sobriety date is October 10, 2000 and my home group is the Chubbuck Sunday Night AA Group in Chubbuck Idaho. I currently serve as the DCM for District 1, Idaho Area 18.



I have been given the topic: Does our Fellowship make Agnostics, Buddhists, Spiritualists, etc., feel welcome in our recovery meetings? Through a lot of prayer and meditation, I have decided not to give any of my own personal experience on this topic. Everything you will hear from me today is coming directly from other members of AA or from AA Literature. So without further ado, here we go:

In the book Alcoholics Anonymous page 12 it says, "It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning." In the Twelve steps and Twelve Traditions it states on page 26, "First, Alcoholics Anonymous does not demand that you believe anything. All of its twelve steps are but suggestions."

In The Language of the Heart (page 848), it reads "The phrase "God as we understand him" is perhaps the most important expression to be found in our whole AA vocabulary. Within the compass of these five significant words there can be included every kind and degree of faith, together with the positive assurance that each of us may choose his own."

So yes in our literature, I believe we have done our best to be all inclusive, not exclusive, but what about in the groups and as individuals? Do we make everyone feel welcome?

I interviewed individuals from Idaho, Hawaii, Colorado and Alaska to see if the fellowship in Alcoholics Anonymous is welcoming the Agnostics, Buddhists, Spiritualists, etc. and this is what I have found:

One member shared the following: Sometimes the best way to answer a question is to put yourself in the exact same position as a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or a Jewish person. If AA started in Jerusalem instead of the United States, would we be saying a Jewish Prayer instead of the Lord's Prayer? Could you say that prayer openly accepting Mohammed as your higher power? Would you hang Buddhist prayer flags around your meeting hall?

This member stated that they do not have any direct experience with not feeling welcome in AA because of their spiritual beliefs, but it is easy for them to see how others may be offended or unable to attend because of our strong Christian beginnings. The responsibility statement says, "I am responsible when anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there." This member believes we can cast a wider net if we were to get rid of some of the dogma that is in AA.

I interviewed another member and she said the following:

Our fellowship does not make anybody feel anything: We are responsible for our own feelings. There are numerous ways, however, in which the fellowship can convey an attitude that is less than welcoming. This member spoke directly to member attitudes and actions, many of which are supported by common practices, and both supported and contradicted by our literature.

This member moved through the process of coming to terms with recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous as a non-believer, she felt increasingly that she would be ostracized should the truth become known. She is grateful to have some years of recovery and much practice at “fake it till you make it”, which is great if you don’t kill yourself in the interim. At any rate, on her part there was a lack of honesty driven by fear to be honest about her atheism and it seemed to risk her recovery in AA.

In 2006, she came out about her beliefs and the years of lying about her beliefs. It was at her town’s only closed AA meeting in the presence of many with similar periods of recovery – she was at 18 years and change. Cross talk directed specifically at her share was immediate. “I thought you were smarter than that,” and “How can you NOT believe given your recovery,” and “You’ll get there.” Seriously. This thinking comes straight out of “We Agnostics”, and Tradition Three, in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, not to mention a thousand other scraps suggesting we all get to God or die drunk.

That same year that she came out as a non-believer, one of the local fellowship’s beloved old timers was asked to start us off with the closing prayer. Circling up and joining hands, to initiate the prayer, this old timer did not say “Who makes the stars and keeps us out of bars?” or “Who keeps us sober?” He lead the group into the prayer by saying “Who keeps Amy sober?”

This member believes it is less true today than in the past, but there has been an institutional discrimination, by word and thought and deed, against non-believers in AA. Right, we’re spiritual not religious, though we religiously conform to habits and conventions that are deliberately or potentially alienating for those who believe differently.

When she came into the program it was pretty common for people to say ‘God will scare them out and booze will scare them back.’ she keeps it in the forefront of her mind that “God will scare them out and booze will kill a whole lot of them”.

Unfortunately, the members I interviewed were all asked the same question: To give me examples of when they felt discriminated against and when they felt like they were being supported in their beliefs. It saddens my heart deeply to tell you that their experiences with being discriminated against were significantly higher than that of being supported. One member said that she felt supported when she was asked to be the Sunday Spiritual Speaker, and at her home group they closed with Zippidy Doo Da instead of the Lord’s Prayer.

Another member stated that she finally felt that she was being supported when she found an Atheist/Agnostic meeting. I would like to share one more quote from the Language of the Heart (pg 853) where Bill shares his experience , “In AA’s first years, I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to a number of nonbelievers”.

Even now I catch myself chanting that same old barrier-building refrain, “do as I do, believe as I do – or else.

In closing, I would like to thank the PRAASA Committee for asking me to present because I have made some great new friends and learned a lot by diving into the literature.