

A History of the Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion Meeting

By Valerie C, Jim M and Ollie C

The Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion meeting came into being when three members of AA in Peterborough, Ontario felt that a meeting was needed in their area that was more inclusive of all members' beliefs or non-beliefs and values. The meeting stressed the importance of accepting all alcoholics' views as well as ensuring a safe, welcoming venue where all could feel free to express their experience in recovery without fear of reprisal or judgment.

The founders of the meeting were Jim M, Oliver C, and Valerie C. Each member had their own personal experience in AA and had developed a spirituality that included a blend of agnosticism and freethinking humanism. All agreed that the traditional meeting formats in the area that started with a prayer, ended with a prayer, and included typical dogmatic AA readings that inferred sobriety was obtained through the power of a Christian God was not in accordance with their own spiritual experience. The traditional format was not inclusive of the 21st century needs of the newcomer who might come to AA with their own set of cultural beliefs and would be put off by all the God talk. The founding members also wanted a meeting where they could feel free to express their own beliefs and encourage others who might enjoy a new format.

When Jim M first came into the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, in Peterborough Ontario, he did not do very well. Jim could stay sober repeatedly for three months, and once for six months, but he kept going back out for more research. The main reason Jim was not successful was that he did not believe in God, consequently many of the steps were a bafflement to him. Jim did eventually stay sober for over forty years by sheer tenacity, and a powerful determination to figure out how he could evolve his own spirituality.

We have all met newcomers who were dubious about the existence of a supreme being. They stayed sober and worked the AA Program to the best of their ability. However, after a number of years of sobriety, they grew discouraged and left the fellowship. Jim M was disturbed by the loss of these members.

One female member named Moira longed to have an Agnostic AA meeting in Peterborough. Overwhelmed by cancer, she could not travel to the nearest Freethinkers Meeting in Whitby. Just prior to that time, Jim had met Oliver C and his wife, Valerie C. They had cultivated a friendship based on mutual interests and a discussion about Agnostic AA. They traveled several times to the Whitby Freethinkers Discussion, once to a 15 Year Medallion for Oliver's friend Craig C, and on another occasion to a Group Anniversary. Jim was impressed, and bought the thought-provoking book of daily reflections, written by Joe C.: *Beyond Belief, Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*. Jim shared this good news with Moira. She immediately bought the book and read a blog every day on the internet about Agnostic AA. As she grew weaker, Moira bravely planned her own funeral service (which would have no mention of God). Just before she died Moira celebrated ten years of sobriety in her home with a few select friends.

In the spring of 2017 Oliver C, Valerie C, and Jim M went again to the Whitby Freethinkers Discussion Three Year Group Anniversary. During the car-ride back to Peterborough they animatedly discussed the prospect of starting a new Freethinkers Discussion Group of their own in Peterborough. Jim thought of his deceased friend, Moira, and many others who had vanished from the AA scene. He wished he had

taken action earlier. Oliver contacted his friend Craig C in Whitby who forwarded the Whitby Freethinkers meeting format. Oliver found other agnostic and freethinker meeting formats on [AA Agnostica](#) and [Secular AA](#). Craig C and Bob K (the founding members of the Whitby Freethinkers Discussion) cautioned us to avoid controversy and not to antagonize the conservative element of the old-timers in Peterborough AA. "Fly under the radar," seemed to be their motto. Oliver C attended the Area 83 Spring Assembly. Oliver C met with Joe C along with other Agnostic and Freethinker members and GSR's from Toronto, Kingston, and Ottawa. They discussed the support and/or rejection experienced by these other groups in their respective districts and intergroups.

The three founding members of the new Freethinkers Discussion Group in Peterborough felt that the timing was perfect. There were several organizational meetings held on Tuesday evenings at Oliver and Valerie's home to finalize a format. Finding a hall for the meeting was the immediate challenge. Oliver and Valerie looked at the local cable public announcements for the week's upcoming activities and where they were held. All agreed that the meeting was not to be held in a church basement in keeping with the message they wanted to convey. Valerie searched the internet on her cell phone for a meeting hall during the meetings. Several of Jim's own attempts were fruitless. The Peterborough public library was under re-construction. The Lion's Club was too expensive. Two other ideal facilities were already rented out on Tuesday evenings. Oliver contacted a local treatment centre who would not rent a room if the public would be attending as it was a secure facility. Finally, Jim located a good central location at the Mount Community Centre (formerly The Mount at Saint Joseph's Convent). The property had been previously owned by the Sisters of St. Joseph but was subsequently sold to a non-profit, non-denominational charitable corporation that was transforming the ten-acre space to carry on social justice work by sharing the land with tenants, gardeners, arts groups, meeting organizers and non-profit organizations that needed meeting rooms and office space. The location was ideal, it conveyed a message of inclusive community and the directors were more than happy to rent the space to a worthy cause.

The name Kawartha Freethinkers was selected for the meeting, and Tuesday evening was chosen at 8:00 p.m. due in part as there was no AA discussion group on Tuesday night in Peterborough. Copies of all the readings intended to be used were laminated and ready to hand out at the first meeting on Tuesday May 2nd, 2017. A logo and format for the Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion Meeting was agreed upon and created by Valerie printed and ready for our first meeting. A coffee maker and supplies were purchased and Valerie said, "All we need is a coffee pot, even if we do not have resentment, and we are all set to start our own meeting."

After a decision was made on the meeting space and the rent was paid for the month of May 2017, the meeting particulars were forwarded to the local DCM and PIC chair. Oliver ensured the meeting was listed on the Kawartha District website and included in the April and May announcements. The meeting was also listed on the [secularaa.org](#) website and announced at local meetings. Craig C and Bob K from the Whitby Freethinkers Discussion attended the first ever secular AA meeting in Peterborough on May 2, 2017 in an act of solidarity and support. The founders were unsure who and how many may attend (if any at all).

The meeting attendance was an impressive 21 AA members. Some were curious about the new "Freethinker" meeting and others expressed sheer joy at being able to share their own experience in an inclusive and accepting venue. Of note was a member with over 30 years of sobriety who had not been to meetings in the previous five years, but he had followed the agnostic movement online. Others in attendance were members from the LGBTQ community, feminists, humanists and members of all ages,

length of sobriety and gender. They were seeking a meeting where they could share openly and honestly without fear of judgement or prejudice, they were not disappointed. The second meeting on May 9th, 2017 was equally successful with 20 members in attendance. A number of familiar faces had returned; a few new members had heard about the new Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion Meeting. The third meeting was held on Tuesday, May, 16th. Twenty one were in attendance, one whose attendance was her second ever meeting who made the trip from Port Perry after hearing of the meeting the night before at the Whitby Freethinkers meeting. They were all ecstatic. The diversity of the members who attend is a testament to the inclusive format. All are welcome to share their own personal experience in recovery.

Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion Meeting (CD)

Tuesdays, 8:00 p.m.

The Mount Community Centre

1545 Monaghan Road, Peterborough ON