



How to Start a Secular AA Meeting - FAQ

By Roger C.

Those who choose to start a secular AA meeting 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 (secular) groups make decisions through an informed group conscience. Here are some of the questions asked when these meetings are being planned with answers that we hope will help the groups make informed decisions.

[While it is possible to start an AA meeting without formally starting an AA group, i.e. one recognized by the AA General Service Office (GSO), we assume and recommend that the two belong together and that those launching a secular AA meeting should formally register as a group with the GSO.]

What should we name our meeting?

The most common name used for secular AA meetings (and groups) is “We Agnostics,” simply because it’s the name of chapter four in the Big Book. Other groups find a name 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 in AA”. It is certainly helpful when the name makes it clear to others looking for such a meeting that it is a secular AA meeting.

How should we open and close our meeting?

Obviously, one of the distinguishing characteristics of an secular meeting is the lack of prayer. Many secular groups read the Agnostic AA Preamble at the beginning of their meetings:

AA agnostic meetings endeavor 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.

These meetings regularly have more than one reading, and these are often taken from AA literature, such as:

- The AA Preamble.
- The Responsibility Declaration (Often used to close secular AA meetings)
- Appendix II: Spiritual Experience. Here is an abbreviated and slightly edited version: [Appendix II](#).

Remember, each AA group has complete autonomy – except 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 during your meeting is strictly your choice.

What meeting format should we use?

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 AA Group...Where it All Begins](#). 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.
- **Reading** – 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. Lately a number of agnostic AA groups do the daily reflections reading from *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* and then go around the room for a discussion.
- **Speaker** – One member of the group, or a guest, shares her/his experience, strength and hope with the other members of the group or chooses a specific theme as the topic. This can be for the whole meeting or for just 10 or 15 minutes, giving the others a chance to share as well.

Can an agnostic group change the original 12 Steps?

There are 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 [here](#) 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 are disturbingly dogmatic and 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 12 Steps, as originally published in 1939.

As part of an informed group conscience, the group should be aware of the issues with formally using a secular version 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 includes all secular AA groups, including those that use an alternative version of the 12 Steps.

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

While an AA group is under no obligation to list itself with the GSO, listing with the GSO provides options that listing a meeting with a local office do not. At the same time that the group is listed with the GSO, the group can also name its General Service Representative (GSR). The pamphlet [General Service Representative – May be the Most Important Job in AA](#) provides a description of the General Service Conference structure and the role of the GSR. The group's GSR may attend (and have a vote at) regional district and Area Assembly meetings.

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

Most major metropolitan areas have a local office and any AA meeting can ask to be listed. The list is a service to groups in the local community, so that those who are thinking of joining the fellowship or simply want to go to another or a different meeting can see what meetings – and what kinds of meetings – are being held.

Your group's GSR may also attend and vote at local AA Intergroup meetings, if there are any, which are often held on a monthly basis. Again, there are absolutely zero obligations imposed on an AA group.

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

An important place to list your meeting is on the [Secular AA](#) website. The site provides a worldwide list of all known agnostic groups and their meetings and this is a much-appreciated service to recovering alcoholics. It helps people to find agnostic meetings in and outside of their local area.

There are other ways to get the word out about your meeting. You can provide flyers about your meeting which you can ask to have placed on the Literature tables of other AA meetings in your area. Your group can also use a local newspaper or magazine, especially if there is no local Intergroup list. And some groups even create their own web page. Here are two examples: [We Agnostics Boca Raton](#) and [Portland Oregon Secular AA](#).

When we list our meeting, should we make it an “open” or a “closed” meeting?

Meetings are either “open” or “closed”. The term “closed” means the meeting can only be attended by AA members, alcoholics with a “desire to stop drinking”. Anyone can attend an “open” meeting, usually relatives or friend of AA members, but only members are allowed to share at the meeting.

Where's a good location to hold our meeting?

All locations are good if it's mutually acceptable to both parties. A perhaps surprising but common location for secular AA meetings is the Unitarian Universalist Church, which has decades of history of supporting agnostic groups in AA. The first ever agnostic AA meeting was held at a UU Church in Chicago

in 1975. And the first ever secular AA convention was held at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Santa Monica, California.

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. And some agnostic groups have also used Alano Clubs for their meetings.

How many people are needed to start a new group and meeting?

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 AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation." However, the more people involved, the easier it will be to get the basic tasks done, meeting by meeting.

I launched a secular meeting in Hamilton, Ontario, called We Agnostics, on February 4, 2016. It is held every Thursday evening at 7 PM and is attended by between 10 and 20 people.

It is in the (appropriately named) Fellowship Hall at the First Unitarian Church. A good location: downtown and easily accessible.

And let me just say this: I love the meeting. I was nervous when it was first launched, afraid it might not work. But it works! At the end of each and every meeting I feel re-energized and inspired.

So, should you start your own group and meeting? Yes! It can be life-saving. For others. And for you.

