Ontario Secular AA Groups
By Roger C

Histories,
Times and Places

February 2020
# Table of Contents

Ontario Secular AA Groups – Launch Dates.............................................. 1  
Introduction .................................................................................................. 2  

Beyond Belief Sobriety Group - Ottawa......................................................... 4  
Brown Baggers – Collingwood .................................................................... 5  
We Are Diversity – Toronto ....................................................................... 7  
The Only Requirement – St. Thomas ........................................................... 8  
Queen Street Secular Noon – Toronto ......................................................... 9  
We Agnostics – North Bay .......................................................................... 10  
Kawartha Freethinkers – Peterborough ..................................................... 12  
Journey Through Recovery – Kingston ...................................................... 14  
Ajax Freethinkers – Ajax ............................................................................ 16  
Beyond Belief – Kingston .......................................................................... 17  
All Are Welcome Group – Windsor ............................................................. 18  
Secular Sobriety Group – Ottawa ................................................................. 20  
We Agnostics – Hamilton ........................................................................... 21  
Bellwood Freethinkers – Toronto ................................................................. 23  
The Broader Path – Odessa ........................................................................ 24  
Newmarket Freethinkers - Newmarket ......................................................... 26  
Beyond Belief Suburban West – Mississauga .............................................. 28  
Whitby Freethinkers – Whitby ..................................................................... 29  
We Are Not Saints – Toronto ..................................................................... 31  
Widening Our Gateway – Richmond Hill ................................................... 32  
We Agnostics – Toronto ............................................................................. 34  
Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers ............................................... 35  

Times and Locations of Secular AA Meetings in Ontario ....................... 38
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>First Meeting Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Belief Agnostics &amp; Freethinkers</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Sept 24, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Agnostics</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Sept 7, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening Our Gateway</td>
<td>Richmond Hill</td>
<td>Oct 16, 2011*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Are Not Saints</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Nov 30, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitby Freethinkers</td>
<td>Whitby</td>
<td>Dec 6, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Belief Suburban West</td>
<td>Mississauga</td>
<td>Feb 11, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newmarket Freethinkers</td>
<td>Newmarket</td>
<td>Feb 11, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Broader Path</td>
<td>Odessa</td>
<td>July 8, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellwood Freethinkers</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Jan 3, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Agnostics</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Feb 4, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Sobriety Group</td>
<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>March 1, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Are Welcome Group</td>
<td>Windsor</td>
<td>May 14, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Belief</td>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>May 27, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajax Freethinkers</td>
<td>Ajax</td>
<td>Oct 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey Through Recovery</td>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Jan 23, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kawartha Freethinkers</td>
<td>Peterborough</td>
<td>May 2, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Agnostics</td>
<td>North Bay</td>
<td>June 4, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Street Secular Noon</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>March 5, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Only Requirement</td>
<td>St Thomas</td>
<td>March 7, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Are Diversity</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>March 12, 2019**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Baggers Beyond Belief</td>
<td>Wasaga Beach</td>
<td>Sept 18, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Belief Sobriety Group</td>
<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>Nov 28, 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ended on December 18, 2016
** Ended November 5, 2019
Introduction

Toronto’s Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers is the oldest and still active secular AA group in Canada.

It held its first meeting on September 24th, 2009 at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) on Bloor Street West. Today it continues to hold meetings there every Monday, Thursday and Saturday.

Now - for the record - it was not the first secular AA meeting ever launched in Toronto, or Canada.

According to the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup archives, there was a We Agnostics Group in downtown Toronto for a brief period of time in or around 1996.

And the first secular AA group ever in all of Canada was launched even a few years earlier, in 1992, in New Brunswick. It was called the “AA 4AF” (AA for Atheists, Agnostics & Freethinkers group) and served members for three years, until 1995, in Moncton.

And – more for the record – two other groups started and stopped their meetings in Ontario. One was just north of Toronto, in Richmond Hill, and was called Widening Our Gateway. Launched on October 16, 2011 it ended its meetings some five years later, on December 18th, 2016.

Another was in downtown Toronto and it was the first secular LGBTQ AA group. The name was We Are Diversity. It began on March 12 and ended on November 5, 2019.

Today, roughly a decade after the first one was launched, there are 20 secular AA groups in Ontario and 24 meetings. One every day of the week in Toronto.
There have also been two Secular Ontario AA Roundups (SOAAR), the first in Toronto in 2017 and the second in Hamilton in 2019. The next one is being organized by the women’s Brown Baggers and will be held in Collingwood in 2021.

The Roundups have two purposes. The first is to provide a very special opportunity for secular members of AA across Ontario to get together and meet each other. The second is to also encourage traditional AA members to attend so that, overall, Alcoholics Anonymous becomes a tad more modern and, indeed, more focused on true inclusiveness.

What follows are the histories of each of the groups in Ontario. **We have started with the most recent one**, Secular Beyond Belief in Ottawa, and then we end with the very first group, Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers in Toronto.

Enjoy! And may you be inspired to launch your own secular AA group in 2020.
Beyond Belief Sobriety Group
Ottawa

By Michel D.

The Beyond Belief Sobriety Group had its first meeting on Thursday, November 28, 2019. It was started with the help and support of the Secular Sobriety Group which has been in existence since March 2016.

The feeling amongst the members was that Ottawa needed a second secular group to complement the original one. Hence, it was decided to launch a new one in the West end of the city (the Secular Sobriety Group is downtown). The format of the new group is the same as that of the Secular Sobriety one - We start the meeting with a moment of silence. Attendees then introduce themselves before the AA Preamble and the Twelve Promises are read. The only change made is in the 12th one where we replace "God" with "Recovery".

We then read a chapter of the AA book *Living Sober* and ask members to share on what was read or anything that is related to their sobriety. Attendance has been very good at between 12 and 15, thanks to the support of the members from the Secular Sobriety Group.

The goal of the secular AA members in Ottawa is to perhaps have one meeting be a discussion using secular steps while the other continues to discuss *Living Sober* so as to better respond to members in AA who do not believe that they need supernatural help in overcoming their alcoholism, or at least, that they need not be bombarded with any form of religiosity.
Brown Baggers
Collingwood

By Deborah R.

The first meeting of The Brown Baggers group was held in Collingwood on August 19, 1994 in the basement of St Mary’s Catholic Church. In 2016, we moved to the Meeting Hall in the First Baptist Church in Collingwood.

Brown Baggers was a fairly “traditional” meeting up until 2014 when several of our members began voicing that we were really bothered by the incongruities between what AA “said” it was (AA Preamble) and what it did (using the Lord’s Prayer and other decidedly religious prayers). At that time a group conscience decision replaced the Lord’s Prayer with the AA Responsibility Statement as a way of demonstrating our intention of inclusion. This was a big decision for our area at the time and caused a lot of feathers to be ruffled.

But... before too long members who had stopped coming to our meetings began to return. As well, many more were attending who had not attended before. Our group membership has grown to five times the number it was before these changes were implemented. We have more and more newcomers attending and staying and often joining. We hear over and over how refreshing our group is in that we welcome and invite everyone to share and speak their truth. Newcomers and long-time members alike are grateful for meetings where they don’t have to “edit” or stay silent.

We now have five well-attended meetings per week, including Brown Baggers Beyond Belief, a women’s Secular meeting, which we started on September 18, 2019 at the Wasaga Community Church in Wasaga Beach.
All of our meetings are open, as we believe that format to be most beneficial to recovering alcoholics/addicts and those in their lives. If spouses, children and/or other significant people in our lives or our community can attend our meetings and gain a better understanding of alcoholism and addiction as it affects us and them, we can all recover more fully.

After much discussion, we, as a group, decided that introducing more inclusive practices into our existing group with the intention of eventually becoming a Secular group per se, was the better way for us to go. We have a great bunch of people who, for the most part, want to see AA evolve and meet the needs of today’s alcoholic.

Our most recent change is the decision to read a version of the Secular 12 Steps and a slightly amended version of the 12 Traditions (Tradition 2) at all five of our meetings and to find a venue to begin a new Secular speaker discussion evening meeting, which will be our sixth meeting and our second secular meeting. Our meetings are all during the day right now and we have been approached with the suggestion that perhaps we would consider an evening one as not everyone can attend many day meetings. Our next step, once we launch the evening meeting, will be to replace the Serenity prayer with something secular, most likely the Unity Declaration, and then list our group as Secular on all the appropriate websites and meeting lists.

We have a standing item on our business meeting agenda... “what more can we do for the newcomer and our community”. This is to ensure that we are always striving to become as inclusive and welcoming as possible. We want AA to be there for everyone who needs us... no matter what... no matter when... no matter who. As the Responsibility Statement says...

Anyone, Anywhere... AA
We Are Diversity
Toronto

By Andrew H.

This was a groundbreaking group for AA. As it is my belief that it was the first secular, LGBTQ+ group in the country. Toronto has a fairly diverse population, including the largest LGBTQ+ community in Canada. So the seed was planted very early in my own sobriety (Feb 12, 2016) to begin an AA group catering to the dual special interests of secular and LGBTQ+.

We held our first meeting on Tuesday the 12th of March of 2019. It was very well attended, with approximately 35 people.

The format was a topic discussion. Familiar to many who have attended the secular meetings in the Toronto area, three topics were volunteered from the floor, then we simply went around the circle with introductions and discussed any or all of the suggested topics.

The meeting settled quickly into a smaller meeting, typically with about eight people. The smaller format made for some exceptional sharing.

It was going well until I had some health issues beginning in September and could no longer attend – or be part of organizing - our weekly meetings. We decided to end the meetings of We Are Diversity on November 9, 2019.

My health issues are now resolved and the meeting absolutely helped me maintain my sobriety through a turbulent personal year. Our meeting also had a positive impact on others simply planting the seed that a sober life is absolutely attainable and desirable. Thanks to everyone involved in We Are Diversity for a terrific learning experience.
The Only Requirement Group  
St. Thomas

By Aaron N.

The first Only Requirement meeting was held on Thursday March 7, 2019.

The meeting is small and has averaged six people each week. We have had up to 15 and as few as three people.

The meeting is currently held in a church because we were unable to arrange another location. We did approach many places in the community like addiction services, the library, the health unit, etc. Most of the locations needed liability insurance or needed staff to be available. We will continue to look for a location other than a church but for now at least we can continue to meet at the current location.

The meeting is a topic discussion meeting. The format includes an introduction with readings of the secular AA preamble, the AA preamble, and a few other non Conference-approved readings. Usually it includes a reading from Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for a 12 Step Life by Joe C. We close the meeting with the Responsibility Declaration.

The group is in District 6 and we have a representative who attends the monthly district meeting. Despite some push back and controversy from some of the other groups and individuals the DCM has been very clear and supportive of the group. The group is listed on the meeting lists that are handed out at meetings as well as on the new website for District 6 of Area 86.

We are not yet registered with New York but plan to register the group soon.
Queen Street West Secular Noon
Toronto

By Joe C.

Queen Street West Secular Noon meets at the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health (CAMH) Tuesdays at noon. David W and Don C, with the help of Joe C and other Beyond Belief regulars attended the first meeting, March 5th, 2019. The committee to start the meeting was keen to host a meeting at CAMH and Wednesday noon was our first choice, Tuesday was available.

The group is the only mid-day secular AA meeting in the Toronto area. Queen Street Secular Noon is part of district 12 in AA Area 83 and Don C is the first General Service Rep for the group. Since inception, we are active at the district and attend the Area 83 Spring and Fall assemblies. District 12 puts on four meetings inside CAMH detox and Secular Noon signs up when we can. District 12 is very active and generally willing groups only get assignments every other month. So far, we have taken on one of the detox meetings, which is an obligation for four weekly meetings per month.

Queen West Secular Noon attracts some of the regulars at Toronto secular meetings, some CAMH clients, out of towners who find us on the Meeting-App and locals who enjoy having a day-time meeting in Toronto's west-end. The meeting is open (anyone can attend) and the format varies. Sometimes we read a Living Sober chapter followed by discussion, or other literature. Sometimes a member shares for 10-15 minutes, followed by discussion.
The first secular AA meeting ever to be held in North Bay was the We Agnostics meeting on June 4th, 2017. The meeting is held at the White Water Gallery, a not-for-profit artist-run gallery which generously allowed for free use of their space. The meeting follows a topic format and provides sobriety chips, offers secular AA literature, and often reads from *AA Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12-Step Life* by Joe C.

North Bay typically has a more conservative/traditional leaning, and as such, the groups’ inception was not without controversy. Luckily, we were immediately listed at the GSO, and were listed at the District and Area levels shortly afterwards.

The group has taken steps to be as inclusive as possible, and is always looking for more ways to do so. For example, we do not hold hands during the Responsibility Pledge, as some people have found the ritual to be triggering. We adapted our readings to have gender-inclusive language (i.e. gender-neutral pronouns). The Safety Card provided by GSO in 2019 is read at the business meetings in order to remind members that our safety is top priority.

In May of 2018, the group requested a “secular” label on the Area 84 website, as the website has categories for groups such as women’s, men’s, and LGBT+ meetings. This launched a tremendous controversy that wasn’t resolved until July of 2019. The groups’ validity was suddenly called into question due to our use of alternative steps, and our non-traditional practices in general.
Representatives from the District level were sent to attend the meeting and report their findings back to District. The issue was discussed over multiple meetings, culminating in an impassioned speech from a group member. This ultimately led to District deciding in favour of listing the meeting as secular, a wonderful victory for We Agnostics and secular AA as a whole, paving the way for future groups in Area 84. For the complete story, check out Episode 111 of the Beyond Belief podcast.

We Agnostics is still the only secular AA group in North Bay, and its membership remains small. However, the tight-knit group consists of dedicated members who provide a network of support to each other - staying sober one day at a time.
Kawartha Freethinkers  
Peterborough

By Valerie C., Jim M. and Ollie C.

The Kawartha Freethinkers Discussion meeting came into being when three members of AA in Peterborough 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. 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.

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.
Jim located a good central location at the Mount Community Centre (formerly The Mount at Saint Joseph’s Convent).

The name Kawartha Freethinkers was selected for the meeting, and the first meeting was held on Tuesday May 2nd, 2017.

The meeting attendance was an impressive 21 AA members. Some 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, and they were not disappointed. The diversity of the members who continue to attend is a testament to the inclusive format. All are welcome to share their own personal experience in recovery.

On September 3rd, 2019 the Kawartha Freethinkers Group moved to Activity Haven, 180 Barnardo Avenue, Peterborough.

And a new meeting, Hope in Recovery, was started by Valerie at the Activity Haven on Thursday, November 7, 2019! It is a closed discussion meeting that begins with a few readings: the AA Preamble, the long version of Tradition Three, and whatever else related to recovery the Chair wishes to share. Those in attendance introduce themselves and then the floor is opened to discussion topics. The meeting ends with a quote, and here is part of it: “In AA there is hope for recovery from the frustration, despair and isolation most of us have felt as a result of our drinking. We hope you have been able to identify with something shared this evening… Thank you all for coming to the Hope in Recovery meeting! We will be here again next week and we look forward to seeing you then.”
In July 2015 the first Secular group in Kingston, Ontario was formed, The Broader Path. I had been attending AA meetings for about 2 ½ years. When I heard there was a secular group, I was curious.

At my first AA meeting I remember thinking that they state we are not a religious group, denomination, or sect. I was happy to hear that as I did not feel that religion should be part of the AA program, THEN when we closed with the Lord’s Prayer my thoughts were “Wow! How contradictory is that!” Now don’t get me wrong. I am not against any religion; it is just not for me. I feel I have what one might describe as energy from people, the universe and from nature.

I joined The Broader Path Secular group in September 2015. The Broader Path reads different secular literature as well as AA approved literature. One of the books we read was The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular Guide to Recovery. I really liked how it was written and could certainly identify with it. The group was expanding and going well, so a second group was formed, Beyond Belief. I attended that meeting as well and I now had two secular meetings to attend.

It was quite an experience to learn about how the District did not want the secular groups to be a part of AA. Thank goodness things are much better today and we have been accepted at the District table.

In January 2017 I decided to start another secular group called Journey Through Recovery. My husband and I own a small automotive business and we had a small office on the end of the
unit that we were not using. I decided I would hold the meeting in that office space. On January 23, 2017 we had our first meeting. I decided to make it a Twelve-step meeting using *The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular guide to Recovery*.

For me following a 12 step guide changed my life; they are a wonderful guide to help us through life. I really wanted to give others the opportunity to experience the 12 steps without the “God” bit. It was very important to me to be able to reach out to others who felt the same way as I do. I really wanted to eliminate the excuse of I cannot go to AA with all the God talk. Well now that excuse could no longer exist.

I applied for a group number and once I received the number our group then had a seat at the District table. Our meeting room was small and quaint; however we as a group wanted more space in order to expand, making it more comfortable and inviting for others to join us. We moved our meeting to Edith Rankin United Church in Collins Bay. Our first meeting in the new place was on February 4, 2019.

We hold business meetings once a month. We have a GSR, Donna B, an Alternate GSR Jonathan C, Secretary Martin D, Treasurer Paul K, and Kevin M, who takes care of our Coffee supplies. Our group is doing well and it is always wonderful to see new people walk through the door.


It’s all about our Journey Through Recovery.
Freethinkers Group
Ajax

By Tom C. and Cecelia R.

In August of 2015 Tom C and Cecelia R were in attendance at the Whitby Freethinkers Meeting and started discussing the possibility of having another Freethinkers meeting in the district and that Ajax might be a possible location.

Seeing that the Library seemed the most appropriate place to start, that’s what we did. Ajax Library was contacted and a room made available at minimal cost. The library was thought to be a great resource available for folks after the meeting to do some research on what was discussed that evening.

Tom and Cecelia discussed requirements... coffee, cookies, and it was agreed that most folk do bring their own coffee and at this time this expense could be eliminated until the group got going financially. The first meeting would be held on a Thursday night at 7 PM (later changed to 7:30 PM), on October 8, 2016.

The format was the selection of two topics and a step discussion. With support from some of the members of the Whitby Freethinkers group our first meeting got underway.

A small core has stayed together with Ajax Freethinkers and the discussions are open and honest and very considerate. We are part of the Lakeshore Districts (26-28) and Eastern Ontario Area 83.

The group is welcoming and willing to help others. The meeting is very thoughtful and considerate to all those who attend, including those who believe in a God or a higher power. We endeavour to be sensitive to the needs of all.
Beyond Belief
Kingston

By Peter T.

On Friday, May 27, 2016, at noon, the Beyond Belief secular AA meeting was held for the first time at Hotel Dieu Hospital in downtown Kingston. Thirteen people attended the first meeting, including those who arranged it, Don M. and Peter T.

The meeting was an offshoot of the Broader Path, a secular group in Odessa. Several of the Broader Path’s older regulars were from Kingston, twenty-three kilometres to the east. They needed a meeting more readily accessible, particularly in winter.

From the beginning, the meeting was attended by both agnostics and believers, newcomers and old-timers, and it soon became known for its depth and its frank and open-minded treatment of aspects of recovery that regular AA meetings may overlook.

The range of people who have sampled our approach and liked it is encouraging. Six to twelve regular attendees have not ruled out becoming a group, which could be accomplished simply by registering with GSO in New York. But District 36, under whose umbrella we fall, has its own rules for approving groups, rules that necessitate applying first to them for recognition, not New York.

However, since the district’s attempt to delist The Broader Path and formally remove it from the council table fell short of the required two-thirds majority by a couple of votes in December, 2015, tempers have been cooling, on both sides.

In the meantime, one day at a time, most of us deeply appreciate what we have now.
The All Are Welcome group of Alcoholics Anonymous in Windsor, Ontario started with a chance meeting between two of the founding members at the We Agnostics meeting on a November 2015 Tuesday evening in Toronto. The two chatted after the meeting and agreed to meet up and talk about starting an agnostic / atheist / freethinkers meeting once Steve moved to Windsor. After Steve moved to Windsor, he met with Dave, Bill K and John T and discussed setting up a meeting. They agreed on a format that was modeled after the Toronto We Agnostics meeting and held the first All Are Welcome Group meeting on Saturday May 14, 2016 with 14 people in attendance.

One of the interesting things about the formation of the group was approaching the priest of the Catholic Church that would end up being the venue where the group meets. When told of the idea of starting the first AA agnostic / atheist / freethinkers meeting in the Windsor area, the priest was very supportive. In fact, he identified as a "friend of Bill W" and attends the meeting once or twice a month himself!

Each Saturday it's a topic discussion selected by those in attendance. Topics range from Step 1 to "Loneliness", "Gratitude" or "Handling relationships while being sober". Frequently our attendance is six to ten people and sometimes fewer. The size of the group makes for some intimate sharing and sometimes people simply share about what they're currently dealing with rather than any of the three topics.

The make-up of those attending our group is diverse. We have agnostics, atheists and believers who are attending in order to escape some of the dogma and rigid thinking they sometimes find
at some other AA meetings. We have lots of people who have been visiting the Windsor area and came to check out our meeting not realizing we're an agnostic meeting. They tend to be pleasantly surprised to find we're really not much different from "regular" AA meetings and end up enjoying themselves. We also have some people who like our meeting but come perhaps once every one or two months.

The group started a second meeting, this one on Wednesday nights and at a different location, on January 2, 2019.

We love our All Are Welcome Group and are confident and encouraged as we move forward.
The Secular Sobriety Group
Ottawa

By Dave B. and Michel D.

Our group held its first meeting on March 1st, 2016, a few weeks after five AA members gathered wanting to form a "secular" group in Ottawa. We meet on Tuesday nights at 7:00 PM in a Community Centre because a church basement was not an option for our group, which is based upon a secular spirit.

The format is that of a closed discussion meeting for alcoholics. We open with welcoming words, followed by a moment of silence. We then introduce ourselves rather than recite the Serenity Prayer which has been adopted by most groups. The prayer is not something that was part of the format when AA started and we did not feel that saying the prayer was in keeping with the essence of a religious-neutral group. We then have someone read the AA preamble, followed by the reading of the 12 Promises. The only change made to that reading is the replacement of the word "God" in the last promise by "life". We then ask those present to read a chapter of the AA book "Living Sober" before we discuss what we have just read as a group. The meeting closes with the AA Responsibility Declaration.

We did not choose to read and/or change the wording of the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions simply because we do not want to start a controversy in the community. The aim of the group is to conduct an AA meeting and not delve into a debate on religion. Rather, we fill a need for members to discuss AA issues in a "religion-free" environment – as it was intended by the founders who often stated that AA was a spiritual and not a religious program.

We hope to continue providing help to the still suffering alcoholic for many years to come.
We Agnostics
Hamilton

By Roger C.

The first We Agnostics AA Meeting in Hamilton, Ontario (District 10, Area 86) was held on February 4, 2016 in the First Unitarian Church.

It may seem odd for some to hold an agnostic meeting in a church, but the Unitarian Universalist Church has an impressive history of supporting non-believers in AA. The first meeting of “Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics” (Quad A) was held at the Second Unitarian Church in Chicago on January 7, 1975. Indeed, the first ever Conference for We Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers in AA was held at a Unitarian Church, in November 2014, in Santa Monica, California.

At first the We Agnostics meeting was held in a small room and it felt cramped when more than ten people attended. After a few months the meeting moved to the Fellowship Hall, the perfect name for an AA meeting location.

Initially there were two meeting formats. A person, chosen by the chair, would speak for 10 or 15 minutes, choosing their own alcohol/recovery related subject. Or it was a topic meeting, and those present would select three topics and each person would then share on one or all of the topics.

These days, it is just a topic meeting. And, given there are so many folks in attendance, only one or two topics are discussed.

Readings at the meetings include a secular version of the 12 Steps, the AA Preamble and the Agnostic AA Preamble. The meeting begins with a moment of silence.
We Agnostics is also an official group, registered in New York (Service Number 717806) and with the Hamilton AA Central Office.

Our group now consists of a wonderful crew of many members. Several even come from Port Dover, an hour’s drive away. A few members had ceased attending or not gone to AA meetings because of the excessive religiosity of some of them, and are delighted to again have the opportunity to share, and to share honestly. Sobriety ranges from a few months to over 40 years. We have business meetings from time to time and our invariably inspiring meetings are a reflection of our group conscience.

All of our meetings conclude with the Responsibility Declaration:

“I am responsible. When anyone anywhere reaches out for help I want the hand of AA always to be there and for that I am responsible”.

***

On September 10, 2018 we launched a second We Agnostics AA meeting, also at the First Unitarian Church, this one on Mondays!
Bellwood Freethinkers
Toronto

By Suzanne R.

Bellwood Freethinkers was started at 10:30am on Sunday January 3, 2016, and has been going ever since.

The meeting grew with word of mouth and by July 2016 was the most attended meeting on Sunday morning at Bellwood (with about 20 clients in attendance and members of the community).

We have a special format, even within the Secular community. It is a discussion meeting, choosing one of the first three steps plus any topics suggestions from the group. We allow crosstalk in the meeting, with the idea that it keeps the conversation flowing.

Clients often have specific questions about life after treatment and this is a great way to foster discussions around what recovery looks like for different people. Members from the outside quickly follow suit. It works well for the Bellwood group, and I am in no way advocating for this approach for community meetings.

There are several conditions for chairing the meeting, as set out by Bellwood: the chairperson is a Bellwood Alumnus with a minimum of three months of sobriety; the chairperson will encourage past clients who are attending the meeting if they are in relapse to speak with a counsellor at the Bellwood Addictions Treatment Centre.

We do not collect a 7th or participate in Intergroup. We use a secular AA preamble and secular steps. With the success of the Sunday meeting an additional Secular meeting was added to Friday night at 7:15 in January of 2018. It is a closed meeting mostly for Bellwood clients, many of whom are in their first few days of treatment.
During a conversation in 2015, Martin D. and I confided that we were atheists and felt increasingly uncomfortable in some AA meetings. With a third member of the fellowship, an agnostic named Dennis K., we formed a Steering Committee to start an agnostic/atheist AA meeting in the Kingston area. Resources found online at AA Agnostica proved quite helpful.

Participants at the meeting would study both conference-approved and non-AA materials related to recovery from alcoholism. All comers in search of sobriety were welcome. Twelve people attended our first gathering on July 8, 2015 at Emmanuel United Church in Odessa, Ontario. John B., a believer with 20 years in AA, came to pray for us, eventually joined, and embarked on a spiritual journey that has forged his belief in a power greater than himself that he calls LOVE.

Over the next six months our Group Conscience agreed on a secular set of 12 Steps for internal use. By then we had 13 members representing more than 200 years of sobriety. Some were new, while one had been sober over 45 years.

In December of 2015, our Group presented its first medallion to Fred B. for 5 years of continuous sobriety. Fred didn’t expect many people at his celebration but was delighted that there was standing room only that night.

The Group contacted the Kingston Public Information Committee to request a Website listing. They were pleased to have a secular alternative to offer suffering alcoholics who contacted the website but indicated an aversion to regular AA meetings because
of the ‘God thing’. To ensure that the hand of AA would always be there, they immediately listed The Broader Path.

However, when news of our secular Group reached the District 36 Table there was some apprehension. In August 2015 we had registered with the GSO and, in October 2015, received service number 716632. Despite this, a motion was made to remove The Broader Path from the website and deny our GSR a seat at the Table. District 36 facilitated an e-mail debate. Some letters of support advocated inclusion while others passionately promoted exclusion. We experienced the timeless wisdom of placing principles before personalities.

In December 2015, the motion to delist our Group fell just short of a 2/3 majority. A subsequent motion placed a moratorium on further efforts to delist The Broader Path until January 2017.

The ongoing experience with our group, and the results of the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, eventually resolved this divisive controversy.

The Broader Path continues to grow, and to attract newcomers.

We neither endorse nor oppose atheism or any religion. Our secular Group carries the message that suffering alcoholics can find sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous without having to accept anyone else’s beliefs or deny their own. Love and tolerance of others is our code.
Newmarket Freethinkers
Newmarket

By Glenna R.

Grace S. and Jeff M. started the Newmarket Freethinkers Group on February 11, 2015 at the Baptist Church on Main St. in Newmarket, Ontario. For a couple of years, Grace and Jeff had been making the 50 minute trip south each week to Widening Our Gateway (WOG) in Richmond Hill (just north of Toronto) but felt that the time was right to begin a freethinkers group in their own neighbourhood. Paul K., an original member of WOG had just moved north to their area, and I (another original WOG member) hailed from north east of Newmarket so the Newmarket Freethinkers Group was not only more local for us but had a good secular basis from which to start.

We had approximately six people each night in the beginning and sometimes went as high as 15 on some nights, so we averaged eight or so pretty consistently. Recently, however, we have noticed that we are now always getting “out of town” people, from Barrie (to the north of us) or from Toronto to the south.

So, we have tried a new approach and have relocated the meeting to the “Quaker Meeting House” on Yonge Street, in the south part of town and have changed the day of the meeting to Tuesday from the original Wednesday. With the move, our first meeting in the new location and new day began with four people and two members. This has stayed fairly consistent so, after the New Year, we switched back to our original Wednesday night.

As we learned, a Tuesday night meeting in this area meant that we were running a group in direct competition with a fairly well attended Traditional meeting and that our attendees therefore were those from out of town. Time will tell whether we can again begin to draw a bit more from the local community or whether
we will remain dependent on folks who are from out of town and who know us as the only secular group in this northern part of Southern Ontario.

The Newmarket area is known as a fairly conservative community and there have been times over the years when a number of our members have wondered if the Newmarket area was the wisest choice to establish a secular AA meeting. Again, time will tell.

Our meeting format has stayed fairly consistent over the years except that a 10 minute meditation is now a regular part of our meeting. We open with the Serenity Prayer, followed by a reading of the AA Preamble and The 12 Steps. If there is someone new to the meeting, we read the 12 Traditions. Then we have a check-in, i.e. “How was your day or week?” We collect the 7th. That is followed by a reading from Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life, chosen by the Chair. Afterwards, we do a ten minute meditation. The meditation is followed by each person speaking on the meditation, the reading or a topic he/she chooses. Sometimes, we have a discussion based on the latter event. This depends on the timing. We close with the The Responsibility Pledge.
The AA Beyond Belief Suburban West meeting got its beginning when Carol M solicited interest in starting a secular meeting in Mississauga. She had been traveling into Toronto for meetings and wanted one closer to home.

The first meeting was held on Wednesday February 11, 2015, with an attendance of about 25 people. Many were Toronto AA members supportive of the new group, but there was also several new people looking for a secular AA meeting for the first time.

The meeting is a closed discussion group. The original format was a three topic meeting, with step one being discussed when a newcomer came. The format has grown to also include a reading from a variety of sources, including the Big Book, *Living Sober, Staying Sober Without God*, step study material and daily readers, along with any topic someone wants to discuss. Step one is still discussed when a newcomer is in the room.

There is a core group of half a dozen members and regular attendance of six to eight more people. The meeting is listed with the General Service Office and in District 6 of Area 83. The General Service Rep attends District meetings and the female members carry the message into the Jean Tweed Centre for Women.

The meeting opens with a statement of inclusion welcoming anyone who comes looking for help with a drinking problem. No form of religion or atheism is endorsed or opposed.

We close with the AA Statement of Responsibility.
In October of 2013, two people, Craig C. and Bob K. met for a preliminary discussion regarding the starting of a secular AA group in the Whitby area (20 minutes east of Toronto). The two had been put together by Joe C., founder of the Beyond Belief AA group in downtown Toronto.

Craig had been a mainstream AA member for 12 or 13 years, but was increasingly plagued by the cognitive dissonance that arises when one's behaviors don't align with one's core beliefs. Disaffection with traditional Alcoholics Anonymous, in all its religious glory, had propelled Craig to start voicing his doubts and disbeliefs. All of that very well received by his liberal sponsor, but not so well received by his not so liberal home group. The result was that Craig was left on the periphery of the mainstream AA scene, with little desire to attend meetings.

Bob's AA history was quite different. Twenty-two years sober at the time of the time he first met Craig, he had been an out-of-the-closet atheist during that whole time. Bob continued to be an active member of a conventional AA group in Pickering, but was also involved with the secular AA community in Toronto, and was a regular contributor to the AA Agnostica website.

Craig took the organizational helm in the group founding project, and secured a meeting location at the main branch of the Whitby Library - pretty much perfect for a non-religious AA meeting.

A format was agreed upon. A one-hour discussion meeting was to have three topics each week. One topic is automatically a step (on a rotating basis), and two recovery-related topics are added from what is offered up during introductions. Step one is often added.
when newcomers are present. The style is somewhat unusual in the region, but very popular among the regulars.

The naming of the group was a matter of great discussion. The ultimate choice "Whitby Freethinkers" was decided upon.

NO steps at all are read - conventional or altered. The desire to be listed superseded the need to express rights granted by the principle of group autonomy. The battle that had been lost, albeit not permanently, by the initial two Toronto agnostic groups, was dodged.

The Whitby Freethinkers opened in January, 2014. Early on, the meeting wasn't precisely hitting the target market of atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers. It's undeniable that liberal friends from the believer camp contributed to survival of the meeting. Nonetheless, the mission of helping people poorly served by traditional groups, was to some degree being accomplished. Regular attendees have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the existence of the Whitby Freethinkers meeting.

The chairperson reads what is elsewhere called "The Agnostic Preamble," but isn't labeled as such. In the spirit of inclusion, is the addition that the meeting is "open to ALL who have an interest in recovery from alcoholism but may be especially comfortable to those embracing a spirituality which lies outside of the mainstream Christian culture predominant at the time our literature was written".

Closing the meeting is rather straightforward and without ritual - the chair simply thanks everyone and encourages attendance the following week.
Our group “We Are Not Saints” was the fourth secular AA group in the Greater Toronto Area.

We held our first meeting on November 30, 2012, in the east end of Toronto at the Unitarian Universalist Church. Twenty-one people attended the first meeting, which included wonderfully supportive friends from the three other secular groups in Toronto.

Chuck D inspired the launch of this meeting and he started the meeting, on time, at 8 PM. “Good evening,” he said. “I want to welcome you to the first meeting of ‘We Are Not Saints,’ an agnostic AA group in Toronto.”

Chuck read the Agnostic AA Preamble and then three topics were suggested and discussed, in a lively and engaged fashion, by those present. It ended, as agnostic meetings invariably do, with the Responsibility Declaration, and with all those in attendance feeling a very, very strong sense of gratitude.

Very little has changed since our first meeting. We still meet in the basement at the Unitarian Congregation on Hiawatha Road. We still meet Friday nights at 8 PM. We continue to start the meeting with the AA Preamble and the Agnostic AA Preamble. We choose three topics, share our experience strength and hope, and end with the Responsibility Declaration.

Many of the members have changed over the years. Many have remained the same. Normally we have about 15 people at each week. We are grateful for a meeting that allows the newcomer – any newcomer - to feel included, no longer alone, and part of a caring and supportive fellowship in AA.
The *Widening Our Gateway* group of Alcoholics Anonymous opened its doors in Richmond Hill, Ontario on Oct 16th, 2011. Since its inception, our discussion meeting has taken place on Sunday evenings from 8 to 9 p.m. In January of 2016 we shifted the meeting start time from 8:00 to 7:00 to get people home a little earlier on a Sunday night in preparation for the work week.

When our five originating members met to decide which day throughout the week might be best, we felt that there was a need in the Richmond Hill area for Sunday evenings since the closest Sunday meetings in the vicinity were either quite a few miles away to the south and even farther, north of the city.

Sunday evening meetings, however, do present challenges in attracting attendance given that many attendees, indeed our own members, have indicated that Sundays are considered by many to be a time when family events often conflict with, and have priority over, attending a Sunday evening meeting.

Still, smaller attendance in a discussion format often means a more intimate environment where the sharing of our experience, strength, and hope is often quite profound. Newcomers certainly do not get “lost in the crowd” at a *Widening Our Gateway* meeting.

Attendance from the very beginning has varied week to week ranging from 7 to 20 people. In the past year, however, our weekly attendance has been on the low end, and our group members have decided to move the meeting beginning in July 2016 to Sunday mornings at 10:15 in the hopes that a morning
meeting may better service the needs of alcoholics in the area without conflicting with Sunday evening family time.

Our meeting format begins with the conventional moment of silence, followed by the “Serenity Prayer” and includes “What is AA?,” the “Twelve Steps” (with some secular variations) and the “Twelve Traditions.” We add our own specific group preamble that states that we offer an inviting and compassionate environment where alcoholics are free to express any doubts or disbeliefs they may have regarding what other members throughout AA’s history have traditionally called God.

As many know, our “God-talk” in AA can often intimidate, frighten, or anger newcomers, or even block others from fully engaging in AA’s spiritual program of action. For this reason, Widening Our Gateway considers itself to be a “freethinkers” group of Alcoholics Anonymous warmly welcoming believers, agnostics, and atheists alike.

Those attending our group as atheists and agnostics can find comfort and strength knowing that our namesake comes from Bill Wilson’s observation regarding AA’s origins in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age that: “Every voice was playing its appointed part. Our atheists and agnostics widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief.”

Not all meetings last forever, of course. Widening Our Gateway ended its meetings on December 18th, 2016.
We Agnostics
Toronto

By Larry K.

The history behind this group is not particularly involved or lengthy. In some ways it is just a group of people who wanted to carry the message of hope to all alcoholics.

Faye P and I met at Beyond Belief in Toronto. We agreed that a local Unitarian Universalist church could make some space available for a secular AA meeting. So we went about the process to have a meeting begin on September 7, 2010.

It wasn’t initially a group. It was just a meeting to see if it could coalesce over time. And it did.

We Agnostics decided to be an open discussion meeting. It also decided to adopt one of the Chicago Quad A secular versions of the 12 steps as part of its format.

During our growth period we decided to register our group and start attending district meetings as part of our commitment to service work.

Boom... delisted by the Toronto Intergroup. Barred from attending its meetings. Denied a voice. Denied an appeal. As the Toronto intergroup rep for We Agnostics I presented our case at the monthly general meeting. I continued my pursuit of group recognition at GTAI. And We Agnostics was eventually again included in all aspects of the fellowship.

Our group fluctuates in size season to season. Fifteen to 25 is common. Usually evenly balanced male to female, but that too can fluctuate. We are privileged to offer meetings 52 weeks a year and provide a reaching hand for those in recovery.
Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers
Toronto

By Roger C.

The Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers AA Group met for the first time at 6:30 PM on September 24th, 2009 at the University of Toronto (Ontario Institute of Studies in Education – OISE) on Bloor Street West in Toronto.

Twelve AA members attended the first meeting. Sobriety dates varied from newly sober to 33 years.

It was decided that reading a chapter a week from Living Sober would be a good way to start the meeting, followed by round-table discussion. More often than not now, it’s a 10-15 minute lead, followed by discussion. Many Toronto groups facilitate discussion with what is called locally a “popcorn style.” Anyone can start sharing once someone has stopped. This was discussed at a business meeting and it was decided to have group participation go around the room in an orderly fashion.

For a format, meeting scripts and notes from San Francisco and New York City groups found online were used. Some had their own secular version of the Twelve Steps. Many secular groups used the preamble:

Agnostic groups of AA attempt to maintain a tradition of free expression and conduct a meeting where alcoholics may feel free to express any doubts or disbelief they may have, and to share their own personal form of spiritual experience, their search for it, or their rejection of it. We do not endorse or oppose any form of religion or atheism. Our only wish is to assure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else’s beliefs or having to deny their own.
The wave of members included Larry K, who was a pioneering regular who would, along with Faye P and a core of other members, go on to start the second secular AA meeting, *We Agnostics*, in the east end of Toronto. Chuck D would later join the group and then went on to start the Friday night *We Are Not Saints* secular AA group. Two people - Bob K and Craig C - were connected via Beyond Belief and launched the *Whitby Freethinkers* meeting in January 2014. Carol M, a Beyond Belief regular would be one of the founding members of *Beyond Belief Suburban West*, Wednesday evenings in Mississauga. I was a member of Beyond Belief and later started *We Agnostics* in Hamilton. Denis K was a Toronto native living in Vancouver and attended Beyond Belief any time he was in Toronto; Denis would take this idea back to his men’s AA group in Vancouver and they converted to start *We Agnostics*, Vancouver’s first agnostic / atheist AA group. Beyond Belief relied on many other regulars - of varying beliefs - who were very supportive.

By December 20th, 2009 Intergroup had the meeting listed including (popular at the time) the group’s own website homepage which was approved by the GTA1 Executive committee. The Beyond Belief site also included the agnostic AA preamble, links to other agnostic/atheist AA groups and both Beyond Belief’s secular/agnostic interpretation of the Twelve Steps along with AA’s 1939 original suggested Steps.

By May of 2010, the meeting was moved to a larger room, one that held 40 or more attendees. A Saturday meeting was started as well.

Today Beyond Belief meets three times a week: a secular Step meeting Monday, a speaker discussion meeting Thursday and a topic discussion on Saturday. Instead of being the only agnostic AA group in Canada, 41 secular AA meetings are found in eight
provinces from Dartmouth/Halifax, Nova Scotia to Nanaimo, BC (as of October 2019).

Service has always been a suggested component of our AA program of action. Beyond Belief is involved at Intergroup and formed a committee to travel to Austin in 2016 to bid for the 2018 International Conference of Secular AA (ICSAA) and hosted this biennial conference in August at the Marriott Eaton Centre Hotel. Provincially, the biennial Secular Ontario AA Roundup (SOAAR) was launched and the first one-day gathering was held in Toronto in 2017.

Of course, what hasn’t been shared yet is the expulsion of the Beyond Belief group - as well as the We Agnostics group - from the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup (GTAI) on May 31, 2011. And the Widening our Gateway group on April 24, 2012. Why was this done? Because the group had its own secular versions of the 12 Steps. The expulsions lasted a long time. Until Larry K. launched a formal legal challenge against this action via the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal on September 18, 2014. Until AA World Services unanimously decided on the expulsion of the GTAI on October 31, 2016. Until, finally, the chair of the GTAI announced at a meeting that the ousted secular AA groups were to be re-listed and treated as respected members. This happened on January 31, 2017. Almost six years after the expulsion. And since then, secular groups have indeed been treated as legitimate and respected members of the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup.

All in all, we are delighted with the growth of the group and the creation of other secular groups in Ontario and across Canada. We are honoured to help alcoholics in recovery. We are delighted with the celebration of Beyond Belief’s tenth anniversary which took place on Saturday November 23, 2019. And we remain determined to continue to grow and to be a part of a secular movement within AA which is, quite clearly, committed to helping anyone, anywhere who reaches out for help.
# Times and Locations of Secular AA Meetings in Ontario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunday 10:30 am</td>
<td><strong>Bellwood Freethinkers</strong></td>
<td>Bellwood Health Services, 175 Brentcliffe Rd, Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday 4:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>We Agnostics</strong></td>
<td>White Water Gallery, 122 Main St East, North Bay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 7:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>We Agnostics Hamilton</strong></td>
<td>First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, 170 Dundurn St S, Hamilton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 7:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>Beyond Belief Agnostics &amp; Freethinkers</strong></td>
<td>Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St South, Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 7:30 pm</td>
<td><strong>Journey Through Recovery</strong></td>
<td>King Street Auto Centre Building, 121 Days Rd, Kingston</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 7:30 pm</td>
<td><strong>Whitby Freethinkers</strong></td>
<td>Whitby Central Library, 405 Dundas St, Whitby</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 12:15 pm</td>
<td><strong>Queen Street Secular Noon</strong></td>
<td>CAMH Outpatient Centre, Bell Gateway Bldg, 100 Stokes St, Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 7:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>The Sobriety Group</strong></td>
<td>Sandy Hill Community Centre, 250 Somerset St E, Ottawa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 8:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>Kawartha Freethinkers</strong></td>
<td>Activity Haven, 180 Barnado Ave, Peterborough</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 8:00 PM</td>
<td>Newmarket Freethinkers</td>
<td>Quaker Meeting House 17030 Yonge St. Newmarket</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 8:00 pm</td>
<td>We Agnostics</td>
<td>First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, 175 St Clair Ave W., Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 2:30 pm</td>
<td>Brown Baggers Beyond Belief Women</td>
<td>Wasaga Community Church, 278 Main St, Wasaga Beach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 7:00 pm</td>
<td>Beyond Belief Suburban West</td>
<td>South Common Community Centre, 2233 South Millway, Mississauga</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 7:30 pm</td>
<td>All Are Welcome</td>
<td>St. David's Anglican Church, 3401 Byng Rd, Windsor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 8:00 pm</td>
<td>The Broader Path</td>
<td>Emmanuel United Church, 63 Factory St, Odessa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 7:00 pm</td>
<td>Beyond Belief Sobriety Group</td>
<td>Alexander Community Center, 960 Silver St, Ottawa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 7:00 pm</td>
<td>We Agnostics</td>
<td>First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, 170 Dundurn St S, Hamilton</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 7:00 pm</td>
<td>Beyond Belief Agnostics &amp; Freethinkers</td>
<td>Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St West, Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 7:30 pm</td>
<td>Ajax Freethinkers</td>
<td>Ajax Public Library Main Branch, 55 Harwood Ave S, Ajax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 7:30 PM</td>
<td>Hope in Recovery</td>
<td>Activity Haven, 180 Barnardo Ave, Peterborough</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 8:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>The Only Requirement</strong></td>
<td>Saint Thomas Christian Church, 451 Wellington St, St. Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday Noon</td>
<td><strong>Beyond Belief</strong></td>
<td>Hotel Dieu Hospital, 166 Brock St, Kingston</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday 8:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>We Are Not Saints</strong></td>
<td>Neighbourhood Universalist Church, 79 Hiawatha Rd, Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday 6:30 pm</td>
<td><strong>Beyond Belief Agnostics &amp; Freethinkers</strong></td>
<td>Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St W, Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday 7:00 pm</td>
<td><strong>All Are Welcome</strong></td>
<td>Our Lady of the Assumption Church, 350 Huron Church Rd, Windsor</td>
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AA Agnostica is meant to be a helping hand for the alcoholic who reaches out to Alcoholics Anonymous for help and finds that she or he is disturbed by the religious content of many AA meetings.

There is an increasing number of groups within AA that are not religious in their thinking or practice. These groups don’t recite prayers at the beginning or end of their meetings, nor do they suggest that a belief in God is required to get sober or to maintain sobriety. If the readings at their meetings include AA’s suggested program of recovery, then a secular version of the 12 Steps will often be shared.

AA Agnostica (https://aaagnostica.org) does 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 their own.
Secular AA Preamble

AA secular meetings endeavour to maintain a tradition of free expression, and to 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 their own.