



## How to Start a Secular AA Meeting - FAQ

*By Roger C.*

Those who choose to start a secular AA meeting have to make very few decisions. Here are some of the questions asked when these meetings are being put together.

### **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 meeting.

### **How should we open and close our meeting?**

Many secular groups have at least two readings, the Secular AA Preamble to open the meeting and the Responsibility Declaration to close it.

**The Agnostic AA Preamble:** *AA agnostic meetings endeavor 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.*

**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.*

Remember, each AA group has complete autonomy to follow its own “group conscience.” Therefore, whatever your group decides to read – or not 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 groups can choose from:

- **Topics** – These are usually selected by the group at the beginning of the meeting. You can have a meeting with one or two or even three topics. It often depends upon how many people are in attendance.
- **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 passed around so all can participate in the reading) and then discussed after the reading. Some groups use the book *Living Sober* for this type of meeting. Lately a number of secular AA groups do the daily reflections reading from Joe C’s book, *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, with the latter option giving all those in attendance a chance to share as well.

## Can an agnostic group change the original 12 Steps?

There are groups that have taken the words “Power” and “God” and “Him” and “His” out of the Steps, and created their own versions of the Steps. These vary widely from one group to another, and many can be found here at AA Agnostica: [The Alternative Steps](#). Secular Steps can also be found in [The Little Book – A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps](#).

AA’s cofounder affirmed that the 12 Steps could be changed: *“Do you think we should tell those people: ‘You can’t belong to Alcoholics Anonymous unless you print those Twelve Steps the way we have them?’ No.... We even have a Tradition that guarantees the right of any group to vary all of them, if they want to.* (Bill Wilson, General Service Conference, 1953)

However, creating a secular version of the Steps can sometimes be controversial. Some Intergroup / Central Offices can be rather dogmatically Big Bookish. You should know how your Intergroup/Central Office will react.

Another option is not using the Steps at all at your meeting. That works too.

## What’s a GSR?

As mentioned in the “How to Start an AA Meeting” article, it’s important to register the meeting/group with the General Service Office (GSO). That way it is easier to be included in your local AA Central Office and to be officially recognized as an AA group.

The GSO will also encourage you to elect a person in your group as a General Service Representative (GSR). This person – your GSR – will attend and vote at your local Central Office meetings, usually held once a month, along with some GSRs from every other meeting in your area.

The pamphlet [GSR – General Service Representative – Your Group’s Link to AA as a Whole](#) provides a description of the General Service Conference structure and the role of the GSR. Again, there are

absolutely zero obligations imposed on an AA group. You don't have to have a GSR. Many groups do not. But it's the choice of your group. It can help to get your group involved with "AA as a Whole" and setting up local events, such as a regional conference.

### **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 alcoholics and/or addicts. Anyone can attend an "open" meeting, usually relatives or friends of the alcoholics and addicts, but these people are often not permitted to speak during a discussion.

### **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.