

# Hosting a Twelve-Step Meeting in your Church

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A major, and often overlooked opportunity for witness, evangelism, and reconciliation exists in every parish church – the opportunity of offering its facilities to the community. Providing space for group meetings is an easy way to do this, and such space is especially sought after by the Twelve-Step groups: Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), Narcotics Anonymous (N.A.), Al-Anon, Gamblers Anonymous (G.A.), Overeaters Anonymous (O.A.), and similar fellowships. Many parishes who have provided such meetings space for years may not give themselves enough credit for this strong, quiet ministry.

Hosting Twelve-Step groups is an obvious ministry, because every parish includes persons who suffer the effects of misuse of alcohol and other drugs – both problem drinkers and drug users, and those close to them. Any aware pastor or priest can tell you that the need is there.

**What is a Twelve-Step Group?** A.A. was the first; all later ones are modeled after it. A.A. is a fellowship of those who want to overcome the disease of alcoholism. Its members understand that in the fellowship their anonymity is protected. They work a program of recovery that includes spiritual surrender, dependence upon a Higher Power, acknowledging one's shortcomings, making amends wherever possible, seeking contact through prayer and meditation with God as each one understands God, and carrying a message of hope to others who are similarly affected.

**The Church and A.A.** The church has a long history of relationship with A.A. More than fifty years ago an Episcopal priest, the Reverend Samuel Shoemaker of New York City's Calvary Church, was influential in the early days of A.A., and since then A.A. and other Twelve-Step groups have been meeting in churches everywhere. Providing space to a Twelve-Step meeting is a privilege and an opportunity, because doing so contributes to the recovery of health, hope, and the joy of living for anyone who attends.

Problems can arise, however, as the host church attempts to work out a mutually satisfactory relationship with an A.A. or other Twelve-Step group. With patience, tolerance, and compassion, these difficulties can be resolved. It is well worth the effort required of both parties to resolve them.

**Working with the Group Secretary.** Most Twelve-Step groups have a Group Secretary. This is the group's contact person for the church, the one whose phone number should be on record in the church office, the one who is notified when there are conflicts, the one who carries any message from

the church to the group and vice versa. The Secretary is also the person to whom the church's key is entrusted.

**Smoking.** One of the first matters that must be addressed when any Twelve-Step group begins meeting at a particular church is the question of smoking. Permission to smoke in public places is no longer taken for granted and fewer people expect to be able to do so. And more and more people are conquering their addiction to nicotine as they work to build a healthier life style.

In its relationship with the group, the individual church's own policy on smoking should be the guide. If smoking is permitted at other church meetings – coffee hour, for example – it's appropriate to allow smoking in the Twelve-Step group.

Most Twelve-Steppers do not expect to be able to smoke inside a church and most churches expect meetings held in their facilities to leave the building and grounds exactly as they were found. If the group's members leave cigarette butts on the grounds the Group Secretary should be notified and proper receptacles furnished either by the group or by the church. This situation can easily be negotiated as most group members are happy to comply with these simple requests.

### **Scheduling of meeting times and places.**

Working out mutually agreeable meeting times and places for groups can be a challenge for busy parishes. Again, the Group Secretary is the person with whom the church negotiates. The local Central Service Office can also be helpful with questions, communications, or suggestions.

A meeting should be scheduled and situated so that no one from the parish intrudes upon the designated space or time. When a parish agrees to provide space to a Twelve-Step meeting it is also agreeing to offer privacy and anonymity to all those who attend. Others in the parish should respect this need.

**Can anyone attend a meeting?** Meetings are classified as *open* or *closed*. Anyone may attend an open meeting. A closed meeting is open only to members of the fellowship, or, in the case of newcomers to A.A. or N.A., anyone who wants to stop drinking or using other drugs. Those who are not members or potential members of the fellowship but would like to attend an A.A. or N.A. meeting can ask the local Central Service Office for direction to an appropriate *open* meeting. Chances are that if some members of your congregation participate in a Twelve-Step group, they go to meetings elsewhere.

**Size of groups and space required.** Size of the groups varies greatly, from a handful of regulars to several hundred at a big meeting. Naturally, the size of the group determines what space in the building is allotted to the meeting. Some large meetings may have smaller side meetings going on at the same time – for example, for newcomers or young people. Such a side meeting requires an additional smaller room – perhaps a library, or a classroom. From the beginning this should be a point of negotiation and understanding.

**Access to building and facilities.** If the building would not otherwise be unlocked at the time of the meeting, a key, or other means of access is entrusted to the Group Secretary. Access to restrooms is obviously essential.

**Child-care.** Baby-sitting is frequently provided by a group for its members. Where leadership is available, Alatot or Alateen meetings are established to help children and teenagers who must live with a chemically dependent person. More often, simple child-care is provided as a convenience. A suitable room is helpful for this, and groups appreciate being offered the use of a church's nursery or preschool room for the purpose.

As always, children are more energetic than their parents, and they need more entertainment. They may play with the toys of the church. A changing table or crib may also be needed. It is helpful when the church is as accommodating as possible in this regard. If there are incidents or problems, the parents and other group members need to know about them, for all members of Twelve-Step groups want to be good guests.

**Kitchens and supplies.** These are two more important considerations. Coffee is a hallmark of A.A. and N.A. groups. It's a rare group that does not provide its own equipment for this familiar comfort. Groups will have their own pots, coffee, cups and so on, but they will need a place to prepare and clean up, usually a kitchen. Kitchen supplies belonging to the church should be put away or obviously marked as such, to avoid difficulties. A good working relationship with the Secretary helps sort out any confusion that may arise around this concern.

**Storage.** Another concern, almost as important, is storage. Many church buildings lack good storage space. In the best situation, a Twelve-Step group will be able to keep its coffee materials, literature, and meeting

supplies in a specified location at the church during the week, eliminating the need to lug everything back and forth.

When closets are in short supply, it's appropriate for the church contact person to ask the group to provide a suitable, possibly portable, locking cabinet that can be placed in a mutually convenient spot. If the congregation is fortunate enough to have extra space, the offer of even a corner in a back room behind a door will be welcomed by the group. Discussing this whole concern at the outset is best.

**Clean-up.** The state of the meeting room after meetings can be a source of tension. Ideally, a group leaves the building exactly as it was found. The group as a whole is as interested in this as the host church. In practice, however, groups integrate newly sober people into their activities by assigning them easy tasks, such as putting out chairs and cleaning up. Someone who has been sober only two months after drinking steadily for 15 years may not be the most conscientious person in the world. Paper may not get picked up, spills may not be wiped completely away, thermostats may remain at 70 degrees overnight. Such oversights should not be treated as calamities. Relearning responsibility is part of growth in recovery.

Appropriate solutions. There are several constructive approaches to this problem.

1. A spokesperson for the church speaks to the Group Secretary, keeping communications direct and clear, without nagging.
2. The church considers whether it wishes to take care of such matters as part of its own contribution in ministry to recovering persons. If the sexton or janitor has to spend extra time cleaning up after a meeting, the church may decide to cover the extra costs itself. From the point of view of responsibility, it is generally best to expect the group to deal with the consequences of its own actions.
3. Negotiation of minimal compensation for weekly clean-up may be worked through. A negotiated clean-up fee per meeting might be requested to cover extra costs.
4. The church may want to make some helpful modest investments in items such as set-back thermometers, more or larger trash cans, or dollies for stacking chairs, or butt receptacles outside.

**Contributions vs. rent.** Charging for space use is a common concern. Virtually every Twelve-Step group wants to make a donation to the host for use of the facilities. No group expects a free ride. Churches do have differing policies on fees for outside groups, however, and if this

arrangement is seen as an outreach ministry, charges should only cover costs incurred, without bringing income to the church. Utilities, custodial help, and minor general overhead are the usual costs of hosting Twelve-Step groups.

The most common and desirable form of agreement specifies only voluntary contributions from the group to the church. If the parish budget is very tight and all costs must be recovered, the church can request a modest fee for each meeting, the sum being set through negotiation. Considering this as rent is another matter. Tax laws may be involved, as well as the church's insurance and advice from the church's attorney or accountant may be necessary.

**Insurance.** An important word must be said on the subject of insurance; a property-liability insurance package protecting the congregational unit ought to be in force. A minimum of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) coverage is suggested, although the actual amount will depend upon what the congregation can afford to pay for insurance.

**Referrals and literature.** A meeting your church hosts does not automatically become your referral place. If you have questions or concerns about alcoholism, addiction, or someone's drug or drinking problem, it's best to call a qualified substance-abuse agency or counselor. If none is available, the Group Secretary or Central Service Office may be able to help.

The group usually keeps some of its literature around. You may ask for some of it, keeping in mind that it costs the group money to provide. They will gladly supply what you need, but it's better not to presume.

**A powerful servant ministry.** Offering this ministry of evangelism, witness, and healing is a quiet but strong statement for a parish to make. The church is called to be the servant and best offers itself as such. No one should feel taken advantage of, however. Clarity around the ministry and in communications will greatly enhance the work. Those who benefit from church-hosted Twelve-Step meetings will be among the first to acknowledge that accommodating them is one of the finest servant ministries the church can provide.

*This article is a modified form of one originally appearing in Interchange, the Newsletter of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio. The Reverend Mr. Selnick is Rector of St. Christopher's-by-the-River Church, Gates Mills, Ohio.*

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