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Hosting recovery support groups is an outreach of love, a sustaining resource for parish families, and a powerhouse of spiritual awakening that works both ways.

Good Book Upstairs, Big Book Downstairs

Recovery groups present opportunities to welcome others into sacred spaces.

By Karyn Zweifel

Most Episcopalians are familiar with their church spaces because they attend Sunday worship. But many Episcopal churches host recovery-related support groups on weekdays. Unfamiliar to the Sunday crowd and arriving by ones and 10s to 50 or more, they are generally a friendly, cheerful bunch. They sip coffee out of Styrofoam cups, sit in (usually) battered chairs, and strive with all their might to achieve a spiritual transformation by diligently, often urgently, working 12 steps.

Building a connection between the people of the church and the folks in

the basement starts with the basics of hospitality. The Rev. Jan M. Brown, a deacon at Bruton Parish in Williamsburg, Virginia, is vice president of Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church. When churches rent space to community groups like the Boy Scouts, they make a commitment to see the space is safe and welcoming.

“We wouldn’t have wine or alcohol out where young kids would have access to it,” Brown said. “That wouldn’t be safe or hospitable. The same applies to a church hosting an [Alcoholics Anonymous] meeting.

“One of the most important things our churches can do is become more educated about the subject,” she said.

“We need to learn about addiction and substance-use disorders. Part of that would include learning about what’s going on in the basement with 12-step and other support groups.”

Deep Connections

In the early 20th century, the Oxford Group was a popular movement for spiritual renewal and evangelism. Its leader in the United States, the Rev. Sam Shoemaker, was rector of Calvary Church in New York City. When Bill W., founder of AA, was first exposed to the Oxford Group’s ideas, he did not immediately find sobriety. But he did discover a way of life that was simple

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yet powerful enough to work remarkable transformations.

Members of the Oxford Group found self-improvement by performing self-inventory, admitting wrongs, making amends, using prayer and meditation, and carrying the message to others. Bill W. continued to attend Oxford Group meetings with Shoemaker, and the relationship was pivotal in developing AA, the first of many support groups with a historical connection to evangelism in the Anglican Communion.

Shoemaker was an influential 20th-century evangelical leader both inside and outside the Episcopal Church as a popular radio preacher and a missionary in China. One of his best-known talks is “What the Church has to Learn from AA.”

Shoemaker wrote, “Now perhaps the time has come for the Church to be reawakened and revitalized by those insights and practices found in AA. I think some of you may be a little horrified at this suggestion. I fear you will be saying to yourself, ‘What have we, who have always been decent people, to learn from a lot of reconstructed drunks?’”

“As a 12-stepper, I start every day with ‘I messed up, I am a sinner, my life

is unmanageable,’” said Raymond, an Episcopalian and AA member. “We always come back to step one, we always start by reminding ourselves we’re sinners. It’s cyclical. I take that in, and something changes in me, and I know I need help, I need surrender, repentance.”

In 1955, Shoemaker wrote that the church needed to learn

the necessity for a real change of heart, a true conversion. As we come Sunday after Sunday, year after year, we are supposed to be in a process of transformation. Are we? The AA’s are. At each meeting there are people seeking and in conscious need. Everybody is pulling for the people who speak and looking for more insight and help. They are pushed by their need. They are pulled by the inspiration of others who are growing. They are a society of the “before and after” with a clear line between the old life and the new.

Finding Spiritual Awakenings

Although the calm beauty and familiar, traditional fixtures in Episcopal sanctuaries undeniably influence spiritual growth, the mere presence of stained

glass, venerable wood paneling, and all the trappings of our churches is not a necessity.

“In general, sacred spaces are places where covenantal ministries take place,” Brown said. In other words, when a group of people decides to agree or promise to behave a certain way, that space becomes sanctified by that covenant. Within our churches we believe that God made a promise to us, and we make a promise back to God, she said.

Raymond believes any space is sacred where he may access the transformative nature of his higher power. “It happens to me in church, but it also happens in AA meetings,” he said. “The Holy Spirit touches me, and I am not just connected, I am transformed. It is an emotional response.” He is a member of a large cathedral parish, which has been hosting AA meetings for decades. “The meeting space is down in the bowels of the church,” he said.

“Bridging the gap is so important, and I’ve tried all my years to do that,” said an anonymous priest who is a member of AA. “There’s such a deep spirituality in 12-step programs. I wish recovery people knew the depth of our [Episcopal] traditions, and I wish church people knew the extraordinary, transformative experience of spiritual awakening that happens in recovery.”

“I am a Christian, but I found God in AA,” said one member of a Southern urban parish. “I don’t think that’s sacrilegious. It’s an extraordinary aha moment. You realize, *I didn’t do anything, this happened to me, this is a spiritual awakening!* I feel warm, I feel wrapped up in the arms of God. AA saved me, it brought me dependence on God.”

Parish basements are just as sanctified as our sanctuaries, Brown said. “People don’t see that they need to go upstairs because they get all they need downstairs.

“In some places what’s going on in the basement is better than what’s going on in the sanctuary,” Brown said. “The people upstairs would like the honesty, the ability to share freely, the sense of

safety that characterizes a 12-step meeting. You can speak without feeling like someone's going to try to step in and fix you. In the meetings people share their experience, strength, and hope."

Twelve-step recovery begins with an admission of powerlessness and promises spiritual awakening to those who work through each step honestly. It involves surrendering, identifying your shortcomings, reconciling, and then repeating it, in an ever-deepening cycle of spiritual growth.

Taking Our Inventory

"We have a problem within the church; our church culture has contributed," Brown said. "Church is not currently a safe place for people in addiction. We need to take internal steps, inventory where we stand, and get clear about our own practices and ideas about alcohol before we can choose to make changes."

Brown serves on the Episcopal Church's Commission on Impairment and Leadership, formed in response to a tragedy involving an impaired bishop and the death of a bicyclist in 2015.

Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church was originally known as the National Episcopal Coalition on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. RMEC is now a separate 501(c)(3) organization of clergy and laity, led by an all-volunteer board. It has been instrumental in bringing the issues of addiction and recovery to the attention of General Convention, most recently the 2015 resolutions regarding alcohol use and abuse in church settings.

One recovery resolution passed by General Convention in 2015 seeks to create a new normal in the church's relationship with alcohol. "We aspire to be a place in which conversations about alcohol, substance misuse, or addiction are not simply about treatment but about renewal, justice, wholeness, and healing," it says in part.

Recovery Ministries has much to offer the individuals, families, and parishes within the Episcopal Church. "Many of us are in recovery ourselves," Brown said. "What we all share is a conviction that the church is responsible for offering God's healing to those living with addictions and also for pro-

viding their loved ones with strength and guidance. Recovery is not the outcome for every person, so we need to make space for everybody."

That process begins with simple conversations about the nature of the disease of addiction. Talking about it can be difficult, since many people still believe alcoholism and addiction can be overcome by willpower or that drinking and drug use are moral fail-

come would mean offering non-alcoholic refreshments that are just as attractive as any other choices, Brown said. Episcopal churches also should serve food when alcohol is on offer; observe all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the serving of alcohol; and make sure people who are intoxicated do not continue to drink or enter their cars to drive home.

"Recovery Ministries is not about



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Offering attractive, non-alcoholic beverage choices at social events is one way to help people in recovery feel welcome.

ings. Through the lens of recovery, addiction is a disease affected by multiple factors and can be treated to restore people to fully functioning members of society. An essential piece of treatment, experts agree, is finding communities with new attitudes about substance use and abuse.

"Imagine if, because of your illness, you couldn't participate fully in church," Brown said. "Think about a child with a peanut allergy. When he was invited to go to church camp, nobody panicked and said, *Oh, no, how can we go four days without peanut butter?* There was a conversation, and people offered alternatives, because we want to be in community with that child. So what happens in our parish lives that excludes people in addiction?"

Parish events with abundant alcohol may come to mind. To make a non-drinker or newly sober guest feel wel-

making everybody quit drinking," Brown said. "We just need to have these conversations. What are the cultural norms and practices that make our brothers and sisters slip or fail?"

"People in the rooms of AA and other 12-step programs have practical, workable experiences in finding spiritual wholeness that not all church people have experienced," said another priest and AA member. A loving God has responded to this disease with power and love, he said — love found as close as your parish hall or Sunday school rooms. For those who find themselves in a meeting, the sound of metal folding chairs being placed into a circle filled with experience, strength, and hope is a beautiful chime of its own, just as inspiring as any of the finest silver Sanctus bells.

Karyn Zweifel is an author and freelance writer in Birmingham, Alabama.