

Session 1 - Introduction

WELCOME to the first session of the "Here Are The Steps We Took" Beginner Meetings. My name is _____ and I'm an alcoholic. Before we begin, let me remind you that this is a non-smoking facility. If you need to smoke, please do so outside and dispose of your cigarette butts in the cans provided. Please shut off all cell phones and pagers, or set them to vibrate. The restrooms are located _____. There are coffee and _____ provided near the kitchen. And please help yourself to any of the flyers or handouts provided. We would like to request that you leave this place in a better condition than you found it.

Let's begin with the "we" version of the Serenity Prayer – God, grant us the serenity, to accept the things we cannot change; courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

The Beginners' Classes (as these meetings were once called) are an all but forgotten piece of Alcoholics Anonymous history. Today, only a few AA members know anything about the Beginners' Classes that played such an important role in the initial success of the fellowship.

These classes were held throughout the United States and Canada during a period of time when AA was enjoying an estimated 75 percent recovery rate from alcoholism. In 1945, the A.A. Grapevine, which is a newsletter published by our New York City headquarters, devoted three articles about the Beginners' Meetings. These articles described the sessions in St. Louis, Missouri; Rochester, New York; and St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1942, a Philadelphia group held these Beginners' Classes on Friday nights. Newcomers quickly learned "How it Worked" and the fellowship grew rapidly.

By taking these classes, many thousands of AA's found the spiritual solution to alcoholism. They completed the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous in about a month. Then, in order to insure their own sobriety, they helped others through the Steps.

When the book Alcoholics Anonymous was first published in April 1939, the authors claimed 100 recoveries from alcoholism during the first four years of the organization's existence. This slow rate of growth was primarily due to the lack of written instructions on the recovery process.

After the publication of the Big Book "Alcoholics Anonymous", the fellowship received a considerable amount of publicity. This resulted in increased book sales and a substantial increase in membership.

Much of the growth during 1939 and 1940 took place in Cleveland, Ohio, as the result of a series of newspaper articles published in the Cleveland Plain Dealer starting on October 21, 1939. The fellowship gained national prominence with the release of a Jack Alexander article on AA in the March 1, 1941 issue of the Saturday Evening Post. By 1950, the membership had expanded to 100,000. Since then, the society has doubled in size every ten years until the early 1990s.

With the rapid initial growth in Cleveland, came the need for "classes" where new AA members could be taken quickly through the 12-Step Program. In the book "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age" (pages 20-21) it states:

"It was soon evident that a scheme in the personal sponsorship would have to be devised for the new people. Each prospect was assigned an older AA, who visited him at his home, or in the hospital, instructed him on AA principles, and conducted him to his first meeting. But in the face of many hundreds of pleas for help, the supply of elders couldn't possibly match the demand. Brand-new AA's, sober only a month or even a week, had to sponsor alcoholics still drying up in the hospitals."

Because of the circumstances, newcomers had to grasp the basic principles of the AA program in a very short period of time. They were then moved into service by helping others through the Steps. This method was very successful as evidenced by the early recovery rates in Cleveland. The book "Dr. Bob and the Good Old-timers" says on page 261, "Records in Cleveland showed that 93 percent of those who came to us never had a drink again."

So, if the classes were so important, whatever happened to them? Most AA's who have joined the fellowship within the past 25 years or so have never experienced the miracle of recovery that occurred back then, during the four beginner sessions.

Ruth R., a Miami FL Old-timer who facilitated the classes in the mid 1950s, provided some insight into the demise of the Beginners' Classes. She came into AA in 1953. At that time, the two books that were used to teach the classes were Alcoholics Anonymous and The Little Red Book. For those of you who don't know, The Little Red Book originally came from the leader notes of the Beginners' Classes back in the 1940's.

Ruth recalled that the classes were discontinued in the late 1950's as the result of the publication of the book, "12 Steps and 12 Traditions". In the Miami area, the "12 and 12" replaced both the "Big Book" and The Little Red Book, and Step Meetings replaced the Beginners' Classes.

During the process of converting to Step meetings, the groups went from WORKING all Twelve in four weeks, to just DISCUSSING the Steps in 12 or even 16 weeks. What originally had been conceived as a very simple program, taking a few hours to complete, evolved into something complicated and with less direction, and for many newcomers, an overwhelming burden. This was also the same period of time when the recovery rate in AA began to go down.

Our goal over the next five-week period is to attempt to present our 12 Step Program of Recovery to you as it was presented to the new members of AA in the 1940s. In doing so, maybe we too can experience a 75 percent recovery rate as the early members did.

Before I introduce our leaders for this evening, we'd like to ask you to help with cleaning up after the meeting and putting away the tables and chairs. Each of the sessions have been recorded, and CD's will be available at the end of each session.

Now, leading our first session tonight on Step 1 will be _____ & _____.