

AA Meeting Paper

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On Friday, January 20, 2023, I walked into the basement of a brownstone building on a quiet street in midtown Manhattan. It was one minute before the start of the meeting and the room was already buzzing with energy. Fifteen, white, middle-aged women, were seated on padded chairs that spread across the room. This was an open Alcoholics Anonymous anniversary meeting for the month of January, and there were three celebrants¹, Jessica, Jackie, and Sara.

It was Jessica's first anniversary of sobriety. She was a twenty-something who had been drinking from strangers on the street and is grateful she was not raped. She started a new job a year ago and she owes everything to her sobriety. Jessica admitted she is still on step six and she hasn't told people about her participation in AA because it is hers and it's private. She doesn't care that her friends "mourn the loss of the old her."

Jackie is a plumber from Brooklyn and she celebrated thirty-three years of sobriety. She started by saying that she would only speak for 3 minutes because she wanted to give the other 5 minutes to Sara, who was speaking next. Jackie said the key is to "Just show up." She pointed to the sign on the wall behind her and said it really helped her. It read, 'Let us love you until you learn to love yourself.' When she first came to AA she didn't like herself. She hasn't talked to her kids in 19 years. You don't have to be liked, she said, just likable. Jackie called Sara and convinced her to come to this anniversary meeting because she believed it would help her.

Sara is newly widowed. She celebrated her thirty-third anniversary of sobriety. Sara spoke candidly about the loss of her husband, Mitch, who died a few months ago. They did everything together, including AA. Like two peas in a pod - they were comfortable simply sitting together in silence. She joked that one of the ladies at the meeting once gave them only one anniversary card directed to "Sara and Mitch." That made Mitch upset, and he said "we are two

¹ All names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals

people!” Sara believes Mitch is still present with her, and she still talks to him. She is committed to sobriety. The other day she saw half a marijuana joint on the sidewalk. Unmoved by it, Sara reasoned she would need a lot more than that to numb her pain. She would need an anesthesiologist. “So, don’t pick it up,” she said. “You can’t pick it up.” After the celebrants spoke a woman brought a tray of three cupcakes for the celebrants. Later, near the middle of the meeting the same woman came around to everyone attending with a tray of cupcakes and offered them to everyone. I smiled as I took one – it was a good night to be at this meeting.

The members of AA are seeking a life change from intoxication to sobriety. AA is a 12-step program for people recovering from alcohol addiction. The members at the meeting that I attended were facing life challenges of the loss of a loved one and broken relationships with family and friends. The members were recovering through participation in group therapy at AA.

The open meeting that I attended was very celebratory and positive. It gave the members an opportunity to recognize the successes that they and others achieved with sobriety. The chair opened the meeting and asked if anyone was new or visiting from out of town who would like to introduce themselves. I stood and said my first name and I said that I was glad to be there. Several in the room responded by saying “welcome,” and I felt they were sincere. The format of the meeting was discussion-based and after the three celebrants spoke the other members shared.

One by one members they gave consoling words to Sara and shared about their own sobriety experience. A woman reassured Sara that she wasn’t the only one who lost Mitch, “we all lost him.” Regarding sobriety, a woman in sweatpants recalled that the first time she ever said she was an alcoholic was in that room. She recently had a friend tell her that he didn’t know why she stopped drinking because she didn’t have a drinking problem. Then an hour later he came back to tell her he’d forgotten that she ruined Samantha’s wedding. A woman in her

forties, on the other side of the room said she hasn't seen her son in quite some time, but she is actually a good mother and she's glad she is going through the custody battle sober. A man who arrived a few minutes late said that he's grateful for the support he gets in the group. A woman said that the AA meetings gave her the strength to keep going.

The group members achieved change through open communication about their struggles and successes with alcoholism. They saw change in their lives by being consistent in their shared commitment to sobriety. Members that attended regularly were successful in achieving and maintaining sobriety. They supported each other and some became friends over time.

There are several things that the church can learn from how AA does things. First, the church should recognize the power of unity and common goals. The church should rally people around common goals of discipleship training and helping the poor. The goals of a particular church should be easily identifiable so that the members can communicate it to non-members. The church may want to designate open meetings and closed meetings. The benefit of closed meetings is that insiders can build cohesiveness among themselves. Open meetings would help the church to reach newcomers through evangelism. The church may also benefit from incorporating a discussion format to give members an opportunity to express their hopes, fears, and dreams with others in the group. Discussion-based church meetings may provide members with a greater sense of belonging. It is important for the church to learn from AA that non-hierarchical organizational structures can be effective in increasing engagement of members. When members are encouraged to share from their own experiences, they can help others learn and achieve better outcomes. Churches may also benefit from incorporating 12-step discipleship programs to provide benchmarks for maturing in Christ. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to the AA meeting and I was impressed by the power of self-help group therapy to bring about change.