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## CONGREGATIONS AND 12-STEP RECOVERY

**PROBLEM:** Each year, millions of Americans seek help for addictions of all kinds.

**SOLUTION:** Some congregations host 12-step groups, and other congregations form their own recovery and support groups.

Several years ago, when a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous found its meeting space too small and began searching for a more spacious place to gather, Allisonville Christian Church offered the use of its building.

“I’ve always thought a church is better off having as many people in and out as possible,” says Rev. Robert Riester, whose church also hosts a Boy Scout troop, a quilting club, and numerous other groups. “We give them a key and ask them to turn off the lights and lock the door when they leave.”

Congregations all across the city play the same role. Every day, AA and other 12-step recovery groups gather in sacred spaces, conduct their meetings, and leave. In most cases, members of the group have no other contact with the congregation.

“We have a few people visit the church from the group,” Riester says, “but if we saw it as an evangelistic tool, we would have to say that it’s not very effective. It’s more a matter of what we can give than what we can get.”

The result of this relationship is a striking imbalance. Congregations are highly important to the 12-step recovery movement because of the meeting space they provide. The directory of AA meetings for the Indianapolis area lists more than 350 groups; of these, more than 100 meet in churches or synagogues. Yet congregations’ influence in the movement is negligible. As Allisonville Christian’s case indicates, they usually have no sense of “ownership” of the 12-step programs that meet in their buildings. The groups aren’t ministries of the congregation.

Yet there is much more to the relationship than this tenuous connection suggests. If congregations have not had a significant role in the rise of 12-step recovery programs, that movement has had an influence on congregations, and it poses important challenges to them.

### MEETING NEEDS

Since its conception in the 1930s as a tiny, grassroots recovery program for alcoholics, the 12-step movement has flourished. AA does not keep official records, but it estimates that there are currently about 1 million AA participants—50,000 groups—in the United States alone. Other groups based on the 12-step model address every sort of addiction and disorder, including addictions to drugs, gambling, sex, food, and work. The number of people attending support and recovery groups suggests these groups are meeting real, widespread needs in American culture. “There are important issues of intimacy and care—giving and

receiving of care—that get worked out in a 12-step group,” says David Chaddock, clinical director of the Center for Family Life Ministries at Second Presbyterian Church. “Addictions grow out of isolation; the more you can get involved in community—the more you get involved in relating to others—the less isolated you feel.”

But if the demand for support and recovery groups is clear, congregations have been hesitant and uncertain in responding. Some have ignored the 12-step movement altogether. Others host a group but have no connection to it. Others have tailored the 12 steps to fit their own purposes and programs. These varied responses are, in part, a result of the movement’s origins in evangelical Christianity.

The enigmatic nature of this relationship is reflected in the story of Bill Wilson, AA’s founding father. Wilson, an alcoholic who was hostile to religion, came to sobriety through a crisis moment of transformation: “I lay on a bed,” Wilson wrote of the experience, “but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, ‘So this is the God of the preachers!’ ”

Soon, Wilson joined the Oxford Group, an informal gathering of evangelical Christians meeting in a New York City rescue mission. This group, which would serve as the model for 12-step meetings, was lay-driven. Unlike a church service, its meetings revolved around testimonials and prayer rather than preaching.

In the late 1930s, Wilson put the principles of the new 12-step movement in writing. With the help of other recovering alcoholics, he wrote *Alcoholics Anonymous*, commonly referred to as the Big Book. The publication remains critically important to AA. It not only serves as the organization’s “bible,” but sales of the book—about a million copies annually—continue to help finance AA.

In the Big Book, Wilson and his co-authors set forth the 12 steps to recovery that would guide AA and the recovery groups that have spun off from it. In the 12 steps, AA’s Christian origins are apparent. Step three, for example, states that “we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him,” an action that recalls the idea of conversion. Step five states that “we admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”—in Christian language, confessing their sin. Steps six and seven state that “we were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” and “humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings,” reflecting the theological concept of justification.

Despite the parallels to Christian teachings and practice encoded in the 12 steps, however, Wilson did not intend for them to be exclusionary. Under his influence, in fact, AA purposely distanced itself from the conservative evangelicalism of the Oxford Group, and Wilson’s Christian commitment later became a subject of speculation. As *Christianity Today* once observed, disapprovingly, he “never pledged his loyalty to Christ, never was baptized, never joined a Christian church, and the rest of his life was morally erratic.”

Wilson’s steps refer to God in vague terms—“a Power greater than ourselves” and “God as we understood him”—allowing room for interpretation. This tension between the 12-step movement’s evangelical origins and its spiritual relativism—any “higher power” that keeps a person sober is legitimate—has provoked debate about the nature of 12-step spirituality.

For many congregations, any potential controversy is defused by their hands-off role in the movement. After all, hosting a 12-step group does not necessarily imply an endorsement of—or require a defense of—the 12-step philosophy. Other congregations, such as the two described in the following profiles, have developed a response to the 12 steps, either because they are so large that an in-house recovery ministry is expected of them, or because they have chosen to make addiction recovery one of their ministries. These congregations are mainly Protestant; the movement has not generated the level of debate and interest in Catholic and non-Christian communities that it does among Protestants—perhaps a lasting legacy of the movement’s origins in an evangelical milieu.

#### East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian Church

Celebrate Recovery, the name given to the support and recovery program at East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian, was founded in early 1999 through the initiative of a church member who is also a recovering addict. Celebrate Recovery comprises three groups: two addiction groups—one male and one female—and

a codependency group for women. Each meets Sundays, from 6 to 7:30 p.m., and the men's addiction group also meets for an hour on Wednesdays in the church's Community Life Center. About half the participants (15 to 30 people per group) are members of the church. East 91<sup>st</sup> advertises the ministry on the radio, with flyers distributed in the local neighborhoods, and through listings in the newspaper.

Celebrate Recovery uses a variation on the 12 steps developed by a Southern Baptist megachurch in California. It sets forth "eight principles," each related to a beatitude and paralleling one (or more) of the 12 steps.

The first principle, for example, is to "realize that I'm not God" and admit that "I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable." The corresponding beatitude is, "Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor." The fourth principle is to "openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust." The related beatitude is, "Happy are the pure in heart."

In tandem with these principles, Celebrate Recovery groups also practice a version of the 12 steps, slightly modified to deliver an explicitly Christian message. References to "God as we understood him" in the original are reduced to simply "God." More important, each step is accompanied by its "biblical comparison." For example, step two—"we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves"—is twinned with scripture from Lamentations: "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord."

In addition to these formal, curricular differences, the general tone of a Celebrate Recovery meeting is different from its secular 12-step counterpart. Noticeably absent is the coarse language often present in a secular group. Instead, Celebrate Recovery groups are filled with testimonies to the transformational power of Christianity. The groups straddle a line between recovery group and evangelistic outreach.

"People talk about what scripture means, how it applies, what God is doing through them," says Kristi Thompson, director of the church's support and recovery groups. "Not everyone who comes is a Christian. I wouldn't say it's openly evangelistic, but it is in the sense that they meet some of the people whose lives have been changed through Jesus Christ and what it means to form a relationship with him."

## Second Presbyterian Church

Whereas East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian's addiction recovery ministry is mainly the work of Celebrate Recovery, individual counseling makes up the bulk of the work done by the Center for Family Life Ministries at Second Presbyterian. Since its founding in 1987, the Center has also offered educational programs—for example, marriage enrichment, premarital counseling, and parenting classes. Its funding comes from the church, from the Center's endowment, and from fees for services. About two-thirds of the Center's clients are from outside the church's membership.

The Center offers no 12-step support and recovery group, but this absence is not intentional. Clinical director David Chaddock says that the Center's four counselors frequently deal with addiction issues on an individual basis, and he welcomes the idea of establishing a 12-step group. He even speaks occasionally to other congregations about developing a Christian perspective on the 12 steps.

"I think it's very sound psychologically," Chaddock says. "What you're trying to do is get people to reconnect with a spiritual understanding of themselves, to be awakened to the choices they've made and how they've harmed themselves and others, and to work toward a reconciling through making amends. It's a beautiful model for how you help someone move through a spiritual journey."

The problem, Chaddock has found, is that his role as a counselor in the Center interferes with his attempts to establish a group. The movement's lay-centered philosophy de-emphasizes the importance of professional credentials and counseling.

"When it comes to the actual group work, they don't want a professional there," Chaddock says. "They're basically looking for churches that will let them have their meeting there, but they're not really interested in developing a leadership position."

"In the 12-step system, you have a sponsor who will be your primary confidant guiding you through recovery,"

he says. “They want you working very closely with a caregiver, and they can be apprehensive about the role of a clinician. But there are people who say, ‘I really want someone who’s been trained in counseling and psychology.’ Those people, I’ve had the opportunity to work with and establish a good relationship with.”

## DEBATING EFFECTIVENESS

The implications of these two examples are that any congregation with energetic, motivated lay leadership may be capable of starting its own 12-step group, and that a professional counseling program is not only unnecessary, it may act as a barrier. This might be considered good news for congregations without a counseling center—the vast majority. But the subject is complicated by several issues.

One is simply the effectiveness of 12-step groups. The approaches of East 91<sup>st</sup> Street and Second Presbyterian reflect two schools of thought about addiction recovery. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the scientific model, represented by Second Presbyterian’s Center for Family Life Ministries, has competed with the lay-driven, talk-therapy model, represented by the recovery groups at East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian. The two have little common ground.

Research on the relative success of treatment programs is not conclusive, but it is fair to say that the 12-step movement has many critics. They argue that the 12 steps are no more effective—perhaps less—than other treatment programs. Some critics say the movement is too simple-minded, others that its emphasis on powerlessness is positively harmful. This debate will not be resolved soon.

For most congregations, a more relevant consideration is finding leadership to organize a recovery group and lead the discussions—particularly for congregations that want to shape their groups to square with their values and theology. East 91<sup>st</sup> Street’s Kristi Thompson says that, even with lay leadership willing to take the initiative, implementing Celebrate Recovery “took a lot of time and investment to make sure it was being done up to our standards, and that people were getting the care they needed.” She trained leaders for about eight hours on how to lead discussions and handle various types of personalities in a group setting. She now meets with them once a month for updates. Of course, this training isn’t necessary if a congregation simply hosts an outside 12-step group.

Finally, if congregants are reluctant to admit that anyone among them needs help, they might resist the idea of starting a group. The stigma is probably less severe now than it once was, if only because recovery groups are so common. At East 91<sup>st</sup> Street, Thompson says that some people questioned the need for a support ministry when other 12-step programs are already available, but she met with little resistance once she made her case.

## REGAINING INFLUENCE

Lighthouse Mission in downtown Indianapolis offers a 12-step class called Rapha, one component of a six-month program designed to help unemployed, homeless men find work and live independently again. The program can accommodate 26 men at one time, but anyone is welcome in Rapha. Unlike most AA groups, the meetings are full of Christian references. “In AA, you just pick a power,” says Ted Baker, who came to sobriety through Rapha more than a year ago and is now the development associate at Lighthouse Ministries. “In Rapha, we say that Jesus Christ is our higher power.”

The Christian Center rescue mission in Anderson, Ind., sometimes offers Alcoholics Victorious, a 12-step group that parallels Alcoholics Anonymous. The mission also hosts a chapter of AA, but “a lot of our guys, when they become Christians, try to get away from that old language and behavior, and they’re more comfortable in the AV setting,” says the mission’s program director.

AV and Rapha—as well as the “eight principles” program used by East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian Church—are weapons in an effort by evangelical Christians to win back influence in a movement that began in their ranks, quickly distanced itself from them, and went on to achieve widespread cultural influence.

Their progress in this battle is uneven. The Christian Center’s Alcoholics Victorious program is currently on hold, awaiting leadership. Similarly, First Church of the Nazarene, a local church that offers a Christian 12-

step recovery group, has suspended its group for the moment.

Meantime, AA programs, and the 12-step recovery movement in general, are thriving. Their growth suggests that, whatever the result of evangelical Christians' quest to regain influence in the 12-step recovery movement, congregations of all kinds have something to learn from it.

"A majority of my clients involved in 12-step programs tell me they would rather go there than church," says Second Presbyterian's David Chaddock. "Everyone knows that if you're in a 12-step meeting, you're struggling. Whereas, when people go to church, their sense is that they have to go all polished and put together, and nobody talks about what they're struggling with. I've said that the church of the 21st century may look more like a 12-step group than a traditional church. People want to have that safe place to go and say, 'I'm struggling.' And congregations haven't done a good job of creating that kind of space. If you talk about how you're struggling, too often that's taken as an absence of faith."

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Congregations provide the meeting space for many 12-step programs, but relatively few have started their own groups.
- The 12-step recovery movement began among evangelical Christians, but the leadership soon distanced itself from evangelicalism in an attempt to reach a broader base of people.
- Congregations that offer their own recovery groups usually tailor them to fit their own purposes and theology.
- Starting a recovery program based on a 12-step group involves a significant amount of time at the outset to train the group's leadership.
- A congregation interested in starting a 12-step group may face resistance among congregants to offering an in-house recovery program.
- The qualities that have helped 12-step groups flourish—their emphasis on honesty and acceptance—may be compatible with the values and theology of some congregations.

## **CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

Alcoholics Anonymous  
Indianapolis Intergroup  
136 E. Market St., Suite 1030  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 632-7864  
[www.indyaa.com](http://www.indyaa.com)

Allisonville Christian Church  
7701 Allisonville Rd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46250  
(317) 849-3957

Center for Family Life Ministries  
Second Presbyterian Church  
7700 N. Meridian St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46260  
(317) 253-6461

Counseling Center at the Crossing

9111 Haverstick Rd.  
Indianapolis, IN 46240  
(317) 575-6500

East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian Church  
Office of Support/Recovery Groups  
6049 E. 91<sup>st</sup> St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46250  
(317) 576-6127, ext. 381

Lighthouse Mission  
520 E. Market St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 636-0209

Rapha

Founded in 1986, Rapha describes its treatment program as “Christian-centered, integrating quality medical and clinical care with biblically based therapy.

1 (800) 383-HOPE

[www.rapha-hope.com](http://www.rapha-hope.com)

Books and articles

Davis, Diane Ruth and Golie G. Jansen. “Making meaning of Alcoholics Anonymous for social workers: myths, metaphors, and realities,” *Social Work*, March 1998. Reviews the opposing arguments about the effectiveness of 12-step recovery programs and includes an extensive bibliography.

Kurtz, Ernest. *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (1991). The standard history of the organization that established the model for 12-step recovery groups. A much condensed version of the same story can be found in Tim Stafford, “The Hidden Gospel of the 12 Steps,” *Christianity Today*, 22 July 1991. This article also contains an evaluation of the 12 steps from an evangelical Christian perspective and an interview with an advocate for the movement.

Lemanski, Michael. “The tenacity of error in the treatment of addiction,” *The Humanist*, May-June 1997. Forcefully presents a case against 12-step programs.

Internet:

The “Twelve Step Homepage” at [www.twelvestep.com](http://www.twelvestep.com) has links to several useful resources: numerous 12-step programs, news and discussion groups, and miscellaneous recovery-related sites.

Christian Recovery International is “a coalition of ministries dedicated to helping the Christian community become a safe and helpful place for people recovering from addiction, abuse, or trauma.” Its Web site, [www.christianrecovery.com](http://www.christianrecovery.com), has links to sites for clergy in recovery and people recovering from “spiritual abuse,” along with various other 12-step resources. CRI is associated with the National Association for Christian Recovery, whose page at [www.christianrecovery.com/nacr.htm](http://www.christianrecovery.com/nacr.htm) has links to an on-line bookstore and library with numerous relevant books and articles.

The Web site of Christian Recovery Connection, <http://crc.iugm.org>, has an “FAQ” section that includes a defense of recovery programs from a Christian perspective. It also links to Christians-in-Recovery, [www.christians-in-recovery.org](http://www.christians-in-recovery.org), which offers a database of established Christian recovery programs across the nation. Click on the “Resources & Tools” section, then on “Database of Recovery Resources.”

