

## Cultural Challenges in Reaching Remote Communities

Hi I'm Becky P., a grateful recovering alcoholic. Thank you for inviting me to participate in the dialogue of this huge and important topic. This is a "we" not a "them" issue. Area 78 is home to vast numbers of cultures. First Nations, Indigenous, the deaf community, people from Mennonite and Hutterite colonies, and people migrating to Canada are some. Each with their own distinct culture. If our primary purpose really is to carry the message, then finding solutions to cultural challenges becomes paramount. Hopefully ideas from these talks will *convey respect* for all people coming through our doors, and will *build trust* with newcomers so they keep coming back. This talk is on geography, words and religion: three cultural challenges of remote communities.

Area 78 is the largest geographically in North America, covering almost 2 million square miles. We have large numbers of remote communities north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel, where Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba end, to the north, all within Area 78. Many of these communities experience rampant alcoholism, fetal alcohol syndrome and high mortality rates, year after year. A particularly high suicide rate is noted among young people.

It's hard for most of us to imagine living in a remote community .... so, allow me to paint you a picture. Imagine you were born and raised in a small community of let's say 300 people. You've reached a point in your life where you want to stop drinking before you die. So, you leave home to attend rehab. Completing this, you go back home...to your community of 300 people; you are different from who you were, when you left. You no longer fit in, as before. The community is your family, friends, coworkers, neighbours – all the same people, you now don't relate to the same way.

And, there is no AA. No meetings to choose from; no AA community or fellowship; no sponsors, no AA literature, no one to phone. Everyone knows everyone and you no longer feel like you belong. Where is your support? If you can imagine this, then you have an idea how some of our members feel in their community and you can understand the high rate of relapse.

Some remote communities have internet, some do not. Building a tower for service is ~ \$3,000: that's a huge cost for a poor community. Some areas do have internet, but going online for a meeting in a remote area isn't easy. Often internet's only available at a public center, where there's no anonymity, no escape from gossip. Besides access to online meetings, we also need professionals, treatment centers and correction facilities to become aware of online meetings as well as knowing about AA literature, sponsorship lists and how to support people wanting to get sober and stay sober.

Now a word about...words. Words are part of language. If we share the same understanding of words, we can learn and communicate. If there is a breakdown somewhere, there is no learning or understanding – this creates a barrier for sobriety.

My friend David M, lives in Inuvik, Northwest Territories with his wife, Sandra. In 2014, David sent in a recommendation asking the General Service Office to consider publishing a “plain language version” of the Big Book to assist AA members for whom English is their second language, and for those with low literacy skills or mental challenges. Grasping simple concepts can be daunting when it's presented in a language we don't understand. As a former speech language pathologist, I worked with people who had brain damage, and fetal alcohol syndrome. They need concepts and ideas to be presented in simple language. People who've had a stroke struggle to recall

words that were once easy for them. Some of these people come to Alcoholics Anonymous, not understanding the textbook, concepts and principles because they don't get the words in our Big Book. David's idea of a plain language version of the big book is receiving further consideration at the General Service Board.

A talk about words is not complete without discussing the "God" word. No other word has triggered so much angst, in so many people, as does the word "God" for alcoholics.

Residential schools operated in Canada for over one hundred years. It is a dark history of unspeakable magnitude. The effects of these Church-run facilities were traumatizing. Attending meetings in a church or being told one must believe in God can re-traumatize. Generations of First Nations, Indigenous peoples were raised in these institutions, their culture, spiritual practices and their language was ripped away from them. There is much more in the word, "God" which people outside this experience could ever understand. Yet, we must. Our big book uses many other references to the spiritual solution besides "God".

At our last (68<sup>th</sup>) General Service Conference, we voted to adopt "The God Word" pamphlet, published by AA in Great Britain. The pamphlet says: ***"There is room in AA for people of all shades of belief and non-belief. It is important to remember that AA is not a religious organization; we have a simple idea that there is a power greater than us as individuals."***

People from remote communities were asked if there were any commonly-used words, phrases or sayings that made them feel uncomfortable. Many said that hearing the Lord's Prayer as a newcomer told them that AA was a Christian organization.

And that leads us to.....religion. Years ago, my first sponsor joined in holding hands when the Lord's Prayer ended our meetings, but she would not say it. Asking her after, she said it was in deference to those newcomers to AA, who may be Muslim, Buddhist or atheist. Religion can become a cultural issue. AA is not a religious society, yet this is probably the most misunderstood concept of Alcoholics Anonymous. It's the first thing many professionals and the public assume about us. It's a natural assumption given that we talk about a concept of God, many meetings are held in church basements, and yes, many use the Lord's Prayer to begin or end meetings.

***Fortunately, or unfortunately, the Lord's Prayer is not conference-approved***

***material.*** I recently read "*Should We Say It*" from the March 2019 issue of the Grapevine. The author describes what our fellowship looked like in the 1930s. Our AA program was started by two older, white gentlemen, Bill and Bob, who virtually define WASM – white, Anglo Saxon males. Perhaps those first one hundred members of AA did share similar backgrounds, but that's just not what AA looks like today. The phrase "***we are a people who normally would not mix***" continues to reflect our ever-growing, diverse demographic.

Alcoholics Anonymous has over 2 million members in North America, is offered in over 180 countries. Our big book's now available in 71 languages. We all come from different backgrounds, and we all belong. Every one of us has our own personal idea of a power greater than ourselves.

If "the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking", we may ask ourselves: Does using a Christian prayer accurately reflect Tradition 3; does it inform newcomers of AA's inclusivity. In *Language of the Heart*, Bill reminds us: "***Whatever***

***you do, please don't let someone else's religious beliefs prevent you from finding the solution that is available to you through AA."***

I too, stand in unity with my brothers and sisters if the Lord's Prayer is said to begin or end a meeting, but I will not say it. It conveys an association with religion that is not present in Alcoholics Anonymous. Especially to newcomers. As we continue this dialogue, we become more open to all ways of life, to ***every person*** who desires sobriety. We want always to be inclusive, to truly build a fellowship based on respect and trust. So, those are my thoughts. Thanks for listening and thank you all for my sobriety. Becky P., Panel 68, Area 78 Delegate, AB, NT, W. Nunavut