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### THE MIDNIGHT CHURCH

*by Philip Yancey*

#### **Its members consciously lean on each other**

I attended a unique "church" recently, one that exists without a denominational headquarters or paid staff and yet attracts millions of committed members. Its name is Alcoholics Anonymous. A friend had invited me during a poignant conversation in which he confessed his problem to me. I'd like you to come with me," he said, "and I think you'll get a glimpse of what the early church must have been like." When I pressed him for details, he simply smiled and said, "Come, You'll see."

At 12 o'clock on a Monday night I entered a ramshackle house that had been used for six other sessions already that day. Acrid clouds of cigarette smoke hung like tear gas in the air. I soon sensed what my friend had meant in comparing A.A. to the early church: a well-known politician and several millionaires were mixing freely with unemployed dropouts and dazed-looking-kids who wore Band Aids to cover needle marks on their arms. The group conveyed obvious warmth, and conversations tended to be intimate and intense: alcoholics can expertly cut through a facade of polite aloofness or feigned strength.

When we went around and introduced ourselves, it went like this: "Hi, I'm Tom, and I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict." Instantly everyone shouted in unison, like a Greek chorus, "Hi, Tom!" Then Tom, and each person there, shared a personal progress report on his battle with addiction. For many, these fellow members are the only people in the world who treat them with care and respect, and even a ritual can have profound meaning.

Quaint phrases such as "One day at a time" and "You can do it" decorated the dingy walls of the room. My friend mentioned that those archaisms hint at another similarity to the early church. Most of A.A.'s received wisdom is passed down in the form of oral traditions from its founding members of more than 50 years ago. Nobody much uses A.A.'s up-to-date brochures and public relations pieces. Mainly, they rely on an old book called the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, which tells the stories of the early members' lives in stilted, almost King Jamesian prose.

A.A. owns no property, has no headquarters and no consultants and investment counselors jetting across the country. Its founders intentionally built in restrictions to kill off anything that might lead to a bureaucracy. They believed their program could work only if kept to its most basic, intimate level: the relentless support of one alcoholic giving his or her life to help another. Yet A.A. has proven so effective that 250 other organizations have sprung up in deliberate mimicry of its program.

There are good historical reasons for the parallels to an early church structure: the

Christian founders of A.A. included a conscious commitment to God as a mandatory part of their treatment. The night I attended, everyone in the room repeated the 12 principles, which acknowledge total dependence on God for forgiveness and strength. In the testimonial time, it was jarring at first to hear people use religious terms equally in profanity and in expressing their dependence on God - both with utter sincerity. Agnostic members often first substitute the euphemism "Higher Power," but after a while that seems inane and they revert to "God."

My friend often reflects on what he calls "the Christological question" of A.A. A deeply committed Christian, he has put his intellectual faith in abeyance while struggling with simple survival. The A.A. "church," which has none of Christianity's underlying doctrine and centrality of Christ, keeps him alive. The Christian church seems irrelevant, vapid, and gutless to him. He is not alone, for others in his group tell stories of rejection, judgment, "a guilt trip." A local church is the last place they would stand up and declare, "Hi, I'm Tom, I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict." No one would holler back, "Hi, Tom."

My friend admits he will find his way back to the church someday, and he has not abandoned the doctrine. In fact, he says A.A. has resolved for him some of the most troubling paradoxes of the faith - the free will determinism conundrum, for example: How can a person accept full responsibility for actions knowing that family background, the economy, and hormonal imbalance all contribute to that behavior? A.A. is unequivocal: it requires every alcoholic to admit full and complete responsibility for all behavior. Rationalizations are forbidden. Or take the doctrine of original sin: It will take maybe 10 seconds to convince an A.A. member of that doctrine at which so many balk. A.A. members express the truth every time they introduce themselves. No one is ever allowed to say "I was an alcoholic."

For my friend, immersion in A.A. has meant salvation in the most literal sense. He knows that one slip could - no, will - send him to an earthly death. A.A. members have responded to his calls at 4 A.M., finding him in the eerie brightness of all-night restaurants where he has been sitting for hours at a formica table filling a notebook with the sentence, "God help me make it through the next five minutes." Now he is approaching the one-year anniversary of his last drink - an important milestone by A.A. reckoning. And yet he knows that 50 per cent of those who reach that milestone eventually fall away.

Standing inside A.A. and looking with a curious observer's eye at the local church, my friend wonders about the plinth of undergirding doctrine on which his new "church" rests. Meanwhile I stand inside the local church and looking with a curious observer's eye at A.A., wonder instead why A.A. met his needs when the local church did not. He had attended a progressive church that offered a similar climate to that found in A.A. There too, millionaires mixed with dropouts and members offered acceptance, not judgment. Why was it not enough? I asked him to name the one quality missing in the local church that was somehow provided by A.A. He stared at his cup of coffee for a long time. Then he said softly one word: dependency.

"None of us can make it on our own - isn't that why Jesus came?" he explained. "Yet most church people give off a self-satisfied air of piety or superiority. I don't sense them consciously leaning on God or each other. An alcoholic who goes to church feels inferior and incomplete."

He sat in silence for a while; then a smile began to crease his face. "It's a funny thing," he said at last. "What I hate most about myself, my alcoholism, was the one thing God used to bring me back to him. Because of it, I know I can't survive without him. Maybe God is calling us alcoholics to teach the saints what it means to be dependent on him and his community on earth."

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