

AN INFORMAL HISTORY OF THE STRATFORD MEN'S GROUP

It's a cliché in Alcoholics Anonymous that "all you need to start a new meeting is a resentment and a coffee pot." The Stratford Men's Group is a proud example of that hallowed AA tradition.

On Easter Sunday, 1969, there were some chocolate bunnies at the 4 o'clock AA meeting held at Christ Church on Main Street in Stratford. After the meeting, the chocolate bunnies went missing and "Old Chris" accused a fellow-member, Joe Moran, of taking the bunnies and eating them. Enter the resentment.

Joe loudly denied the accusation and after simmering for a few days, he approached Monsignor Murphy, the pastor of the Saint James Roman Catholic Church - the church directly next to Christ Church - asking if he could start an AA meeting for men in the school basement on the following Monday. (Joe never attended the Sunday 4 o'clocker again!)

Monsignor Murphy agreed and on **April 14, 1969**, the second necessary element, a coffee pot, was found and the first meeting of the Stratford Men's Group was held.

Unfortunately, Joe had what's been referred to as "something of a reputation" in the local AA meetings, so people were not exactly flocking to the new men's meeting. In fact, if the oral history we have gathered is really true, Joe spent the first few Monday nights all alone in the basement with the coffee pot and his wife, Mary, who had come along to make sure that she would get her coffee pot back at the end of the meeting.

Finally, Joe enlisted several members and they quickly established the format and the style of the meeting. For one thing, the leader was rotated each week - with the 'chair' frequently being given to the person who was the 'thirstiest' or who had experienced the biggest problem during the previous week. From the beginning, the original members were not bashful about offering each other advice - either during their own 'share' or during someone else's 'share.' From the beginning, 'constructive' cross-talk was a hallmark of the Stratford Men's Group. In addition, the group was always dedicated to making sure that everyone who attended the meeting had a chance to speak. And finally, the Stratford Men's Group grew into a meeting with a strong tradition of sponsorship along with an equally strong emphasis on AA being 'a program of action.'

For the first few months, there were less than twelve members, all of whom sat around a single table in the grade-school cafeteria in the basement of the school behind Saint James Church. Early members included Joe Moran, Buddy Desrosiers, Meti Fecho, Harry "the Pipe", Chuck "Jellybean" Hammill, Joe Becker and Tommy "S.O.B." Sobalski. All seven of these men died sober.

The group immediately developed its own particularly flavor by establishing the practice of 'calling a spade a spade' and of asking people direct and difficult questions. It was not

unheard of for someone in the group to suggest that they take up a collection for some whining, thirsty member – so that he could go out and buy a drink.

It was that kind of a group.

Early on, the meeting developed a reputation for ‘tough AA’ and more men came by to see what all the talk was about. The group expanded until it began to fill the school cafeteria which – although it wasn’t the largest room in the school basement – somehow became known as ‘**The Big Room**’ meeting.

Sometime in the late 1970’s, several members split off and started to hold a meeting in the largest room of the school basement – a meeting that was quickly (and derisively) nicknamed “The Westport Room.” This meeting lasted until 1983 when it slowly dissolved as members abandoned it to return to the meeting in the Big Room.

Because of the group’s ‘tough’ reputation, sponsors were constantly sending newcomers to the meeting. This practice became so prevalent that they threatening to overwhelm the regular members. In June of 1974, a beginner’s meeting was started in a separate room – ‘**The Beginner’s Room**’ – which was for all members with less than six months of sobriety. (Jack F. and Brian M. were among the original five members of this group.) Newcomers were required to attend this meeting and, if you had less than six months of sobriety, you were not allowed to attend the regular meeting. From the start, the Beginner’s Room meeting was (and still is) strictly limited to new people except for the two regular members of the group (with at least five years of sobriety) who chair this meeting every week. In the beginning, these assignments for leading the meeting in the Beginner’s Room were for two months, but, in the mid-1980’s – as the membership and the sobriety level of the group grew – this chairing commitment was reduced to just one month.

But, even this group grew too large – there were regularly 50 newcomers in that meeting by early 1982 – and in the mid-1980’s, someone suggested that the Beginner’s Room be limited to people with less than 90 days of sobriety and that anyone with 90–180 days attend the newly organized ‘**Kitchen Meeting**’ – once again run by two members who have been sober for a minimum of five years. This meeting was based on the format that the newcomer with the most time in the kitchen became the speaker for the evening, telling their AA story – usually for the first time. This is always followed by a group discussion.

Shortly after the demise of the “Westport Room,” Brian M. proposed that the group establish a **Step Meeting** in the space that had been vacated by the “Westport” group. This was done and the group continues to this day with a number of very active members.

The final meeting within the group was formed when the Big Room got so noisy that it was literally impossible to hear people when they were speaking. After a number of ‘meetings on the meeting,’ King D. stood up early one Monday night in June of 1998 and announced that “anyone who wanted to attend a ‘quiet meeting’ should pick up their chairs and move out into the corridor.” Half of the members of that group did so and ‘**The Corridor Meeting**’ has been thriving in that long, narrow space ever since.

As noted, the Men’s Group has always had a strong tradition of sponsorship and this tradition is ably supported on the last Monday of every month when all of the different

meetings come together for **Anniversary Night**. This is a group tradition that goes back to the very beginning of the group when Joe Moran used to make sure that there was a whole cake available for each celebrant. It has also been a tradition that you can only be given a coin by your sponsor and only after he has had the opportunity to 'review' your progress (or lack thereof) in the past year. A number of members have served as regular moderators at Anniversary Night - with the most years of service coming from Forbes D., Bobby K., Dave C., and Rich C.

In 1978, the Men's Group held their first **Annual Christmas Party**. Always scheduled for the last Monday before Christmas Eve, this party attracts members (and several 'ringers') from all over and is always the largest meeting of the year. In the beginning, the party consisted of brief comments by members followed by a huge buffet dinner that was supplied 'pot luck' fashion by the members and their wives. But over the years, the festivities have grown to include entertainment - including the annual Stratford Men's Top Ten List (ala David Letterman; created by Jerry V. and Warren M.), the Annual Stratford Men's Achievement Awards (which change every year but almost always include "The Thirstiest Alcoholic Award" - a five gallon jug of Poland Spring water) and a visit from our own rather unique version of Santa Claus, who gives out presents and replies to letters that have been 'sent' to him by group members. In the past few years, we have also been entertained by a lounge singer just before dinner is served.

Old Bill
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