

Ward Ewing was the keynote speaker at the 2010 National Episcopal Recovery Gathering. His address was powerful and we would like to share it with you.

Recovery Ministries
Ward B. Ewing

Keynote Address
October 21, 2010

I am Ward Ewing, a friend of Alcoholics Anonymous and very pleased to be with you. This is an important work you are about, and I am grateful to be with you. Briefly, I will share some of my story so you have a sense of where I am coming from.

I first became aware of the destructive, paralyzing power of alcoholism when as a parish priest I accepted a position as Vicar of a small congregation in a working class area of Louisville, KY. Perhaps it was my age – I was in my early 30's – perhaps it was the differences I experience in the blue-collar culture, perhaps it was just growing older – whatever the reason, I began to see what I had denied previously – alcoholism was destroying marriages, destroying lives of peers and friends, and damaging the lives of young people in the congregation. I came to understand that I needed to know something about this disease. So I went to the experts – I started attending open AA meetings. I also attended seminars sponsored by the University of Louisville and took classes on addiction.

Then one day a member of the parish walked into my office – his name was Willie. “You’re the spiritual expert, right?” he began. I don’t think I answered. “I am out of touch with God. The last time I was out of touch with my Higher Power, I drank. If I drink again, I may die. I need you to put me back in touch with God.” And he was deadly serious.

I stopped what I was doing; we talked. We met again, and decided that what was needed was a group of members of AA who had at least five years sobriety and who would like to discuss the spiritual the issues in their lives.

For the next five years I met every Tuesday afternoon at 4:00 with that group and “the spiritual expert’s” life was transformed. I consider that group the single most important spiritual group I have ever been part of. I became immersed in the Twelve Steps; I learned new ways of thinking and approaching problems; my life changed. I have always considered Willie my first sponsor and am grateful for his intervention.

I have continued to stay involved with AA since that time and today am privileged to serve as a non-alcoholic Trustee and Chair of the General Service Board of AA in the U.S. and Canada.

I understand that the focus for this conference is to stimulate engagement with the church regarding the ministry of recovery. This is an important conversation, as the church can be a powerful and effective means for encouraging and sustaining recovery. Too often the church and those in positions of leadership are uninformed regarding what to do and how to reach out to those who suffer from addiction.

That was certainly true for me in early stages of my ministry. As a young priest in my first congregation, I got calls at 2:00 a.m. from parishioners who were upset over their husbands or their children or their financial situation. I would get dressed and go talk with them. I

believed I was being a wonderful pastor – so helpful. Only one problem: the next morning they had almost no memory of my wonderful advice and counsel.

So, you can see that I think it is very important that leaders in the church be better informed. In partnership with this community of recovering persons, the church could become more effective in reaching out to the millions who need to hear this message of hope. However, I would like to focus my remarks less on what the church could do for Recovery and talk about what those in recovery can do for the church. In other words, I want to take our inventory, not the church's.

I understand that many of you are ordained and most of you are active members of the Episcopal Church. So I know you know our Church is in trouble. Along with the other denominations referred to as “main-line Protestant Churches,” we suffer from decline in membership, conflict over issues of human sexuality, and concern with old buildings in poor locations that suffer from deferred maintenance. Across denominations the result in too many of our churches is a focus on survival over ministry. Our Church needs help. If it is to be an effective means for encouraging and sustaining recovery – not to mention other ministries – it must strengthen and nurture the spiritual foundation that is its heart and core.

So here is my thesis: Persons in recovery have a vital and living spiritual experience. That spiritual experience has changed their personal lives and the lives of those around them. It is an experience that leaves doctors, psychologists, and even social workers mystified. Professionals keep looking for medical, psychological, or social cures. The spirituality of the 12 Steps does what medicine, moralism, prison, legalism, analysis, and bitching cannot do. It brings health and recovery to those suffering from a cunning, baffling, and powerful disease. Personally, I find the 12 Steps the most powerful spiritual program available in our world today. That experience which has so dramatically changed personal lives can impact the church. <repeat thesis>

The first example I would like to share is the focus on mission. The church is concerned for many things: budgets, maintenance, property, liturgy, musicians, and the power of God to transform lives and social structures. Much of the strength of the 12 Step recovery programs is the focus on a single purpose. “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the [one] who still suffers.” This focus keeps our groups from running off in a hundred different directions – all good things to do, but dissipating the energy needed to strengthen and nurture the fellowship.

Keeping this focus is not easy. We are part of an organization in which the only ultimate authority is the will of a loving God as expressed in the group conscience. Differences are not resolved simply by focusing on our primary purpose. I don't know if any of you have ever been to an Annual Conference of AA; they are characterized primarily by long conversations. It takes hours and hours and hours to reach a group conscience among 160 former drunks from all across the U.S. and Canada. But here's my point – in those conversations over and over the issue is raised: “How does this decision support our primary purpose to carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic?” Over and over this question focuses the discussion, and mission remains primary.

In my experience, in the church too often survival trumps mission. Those of us in the church need this focus on mission. Otherwise why bother?

On a couple of occasions as a guest preacher when the text and sermon made it appropriate, I have ended my sermon by asking the congregation to stand, hold hands and say

together an edited version of the responsibility statement – “I am responsible, when anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of Christ to be there. And for that I am responsible.” Following the service I always have a couple of members of AA comment – positively – but I also have had members of the congregation who are not part of any recovery group say that statement was for them the most moving and important moment of that Sunday morning. What if, instead of the dismissal, we ended our service with the responsibility statement? Just a thought.

The church needs our experience of a primary focus on mission.

This example leads naturally to my second example – the criteria for membership. It's really simple. If you have one primary purpose, then you have one criterion for membership – in AA, the desire to stop drinking. AA began in 1935, integrated in the 30's, included women in the 40's, and continues to be one of the most inclusive organizations in our world. A couple of years ago at Conference we were revising the pamphlet on “The Homosexual and AA.” I looked at the copyright of the original – 1988. The language needed changing, but the message was clear – gays, lesbians, bi-sexual, transgendered – all persons are welcome into the Fellowship if they desire to stop drinking. Period. One purpose; one criterion for membership.

Of course there are struggles around inclusion, but there are no questions about the criterion. In the Episcopal Church ever since I have been a priest we have struggled to become more inclusive, and today we find ourselves significantly divided over the issues of inclusion. 11:00 Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America. Perhaps if we were truly focused on our mission to reconcile people with God and with one another, perhaps if we understood that our personal spiritual growth depends on our unity, then the issue of who is welcome would take care of itself. What if we said clearly and without qualification that anyone who desires to grow in relationship with God and become a more loving and serving person is welcome, fully welcome. Just another thought.

The church could benefit from our understanding of what makes a person a member.

My last example is about the spirit of gratitude I find throughout the recovery fellowship. Within this fellowship I continually meet people who know their lives have been transformed, healed, and strengthened by the power of the God of their understanding. Many have a deep and personal relationship with God, working through prayer and meditation to improve their conscious contact with God. And the result is deep gratitude for this new life, openness to others, especially the newcomer, and a commitment to the primary purpose. After 35 years of involvement in AA, I continue to be surprised by the depth of gratitude and warmth I find in this Fellowship. I have experienced this gratitude in the church, particularly in working with small groups, but I would not say it is normally characteristic of Sunday morning.

Again, this spirit of gratitude could go a long way to improve the quality of community in our religious institutions.

I recognize, as Willie said to me, that for members of recovery groups, their lives literally depend on working the program. They are deeply aware that recovery is a matter of life and death, and they are grateful that today they have life. I believe my relationship with God has given me life that I would not otherwise have known. I was nurtured in this relationship by the church. I have also been nurtured in this relationship by this fellowship and the 12 Steps for recovery. And I am grateful for this life. But too often church members see the spiritual life and spiritual practice as optional, not as a matter of life or death.

There are other examples I could mention – like seeking spiritual progress not spiritual perfection, or anonymity as a correction to clericalism, or growth through attraction instead of promotion, or not allowing problems of money, property, or prestige to divert us from our primary purpose – but I trust you have gotten the message.

So what am I proposing?

I am not proposing that this Ministry take on the task of renewing the church. Recovery Ministries must stay focused on its primary purpose. This focus is necessary to prevent

dissipating the energy needed to strengthen and nurture this fellowship.

I am proposing that the spiritual experience known and lived through 12-Step recovery programs is an experience that can enrich and strengthen the church. You and others like you who have worked your program can be a source for the church to strengthen and nurture the spiritual foundation that is its heart and core.

Anonymity is at the level of press and public media (and I would add internet). Sharing your involvement in recovery in a private, one-on-one way is a personal decision. What if those present here simply shared their story with their rector or bishop – assuming such sharing is safe. (I know some ordained persons with whom I would not want to share a history of addiction.) But if appropriate let them know something about your story and the nature of recovery. That is what happened to me when Willie walked into my office, and that is how I got involved in AA and what transformed my life. It has had a major impact on my ministry.

I carry in my pocket a token from a parishioner – Judy. She gave it to me when I left Buffalo because she said my ministry allowed her to admit her powerlessness over alcohol and seek help in the rooms of A.A. I did not even know she was a member of A.A. More than anything else that token reminds me of the impact (often unconscious) the 12 steps have had – in my life, in the lives of members of my congregations, and in the quality of life in the congregation and at the General Seminary.

We are not called to renew the church; that is the task of the church by the Grace of God. But those in recovery fellowships have a spiritual experience that can strengthen the life and ministry of the church; that spirituality is a gift of God that we can offer to the church as it is being renewed.