

AN AWARENESS AND MUCH MORE

A History of the Alcoholism Awareness Program  
in Affiliation with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service

1984

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AN AWARENESS AND MUCH MORE:  
A HISTORY OF THE ALCOHOLISM AWARENESS PROGRAM  
IN AFFILIATION WITH WISCONSIN LUTHERAN CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICE

"It is estimated that there are about ten million alcoholics in our country today. Since each alcoholic's alcoholism affects at least four other people we can easily say that about fifty million Americans are affected by alcohol abuse, either as the abuser or the ones abused by the abuser. That amounts to about one person out of every four or five in our country." This startling statistic was expressed by Rev. A.H. Siggelkow in his paper, "Alcoholism: Sin, Disease, Morality." When you consider alcoholism and its effects on society, you are perhaps first of all amazed at the great numbers of people whose lives have been devastated because of their drinking. The writer also wondered to what extent is the Wisconsin Synod involved, both positively and negatively. On the negative side, one must realize that the Wisconsin Synod is not immune to the dilemma of alcoholism. But on the positive side, what is being done in our own circles for those directly or indirectly suffering from alcoholism?

On April 12, 1984, the Alcoholism Awareness Program in connection with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service celebrated its fifth anniversary. For five years there has existed a program attempting to reach out to those who must personally deal with the effects of alcoholism. This program has greatly increased an awareness of the seriousness of the subject. It also provides scriptural comfort and strength. The writer will briefly review the past five years of the program's

existence, summarizing the program's structure and results.

### Early Beginnings

The establishment of Alcoholism Awareness has as its catalyst the relationship between Rev. Paul Sullivan and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Zimmerman. At that time Rev. Sullivan was serving Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Grafton, Wisconsin. The Zimmermans were members at Our Savior's. Paul Zimmerman is a recovering alcoholic who together with his wife Susan had been attending A.A. and Al-Anon, the national organizations offering help for those involved with alcoholism. Pastor Sullivan was against the Zimmerman's participation in these organizations. He opposed the joint prayer practiced by all in attendance at the meetings. Pastor Sullivan also was opposed to A.A.'s reference in their program to a higher power, "a power greater than ourselves," who assists the individual in his/her efforts to change thought and practice. Many a WELS pastor has opposed the same anti-scriptural procedures found in A.A. and Al-Anon. Yet it is also true that the organizations provide much needed support for the alcoholic and his family. The Zimmermans found this same support. In fact if it weren't for A.A., Mrs. Zimmerman attests, "One of us would be dead." Therefore Paul and Sue would not give up their participation in A.A. and Al-Anon. In search of a program in line with Scripture, Pastor Sullivan approached the Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service.

Prior to Alcoholism Awareness at W.L.C.F.S., there was a limited amount of work in the field of alcoholism. Counseling in the area was not that great in number. Involvement was limited

to occasional awareness speeches addressing the problem of alcoholism. However, it was very obvious that the need to deal with the issue of alcoholism was great. There was and is a tremendous need to serve the alcoholic.

Pastor Sullivan's inquiry culminated in the program's initial organizational meeting held at W.L.C.F.S. on May 18, 1977. Seven people were in attendance. Two of the seven were representatives of W.L.C.F.S., Assistant Executive Director Rev. James Berger and counselor Bill Bertram. Rev. Paul Sullivan and his brother, Rev. John Sullivan of Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church in Mequon also attended. Susan and Paul Zimmerman were in attendance. One other gentleman was there, Mr. Chuck Engelhart, at that time the executive director of the Ozaukee Council on Alcoholism. The first objective of that meeting was to break ground on a program that would incorporate the Christian outlook throughout under the guidance of God's Word. The format to use was obvious. The well-known 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous worked. The proposed program would be for both the alcoholic and those close to the alcoholic. In place of the organization A.A., there would be a recovery group for the alcoholic himself. In place of the national organization Al-Anon, whose purpose is to serve those affected by the alcoholic, would be a support group. It was the group's conviction that the clear adherence to Scripture would certainly enhance and strengthen the program.

Nearly two years passed before the first regular meeting of Alcoholism Awareness. That time was, of course, spent introducing the program's format and increasing the awareness of

the program's importance. The first of many informational presentations occurred at the Chippewa River Valley Pastoral Conference on May 24, 1977, at St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Rev. Berger and Paul Zimmerman gave the presentation.

The single event of most significance during the initial two-year span was the All-Day Alcoholism Seminar for Milwaukee Area Pastors on June 7, 1978. Paul Zimmerman introduced and coordinated the seminar. Thirty-five Milwaukee area pastors attended. Because of the program's location, it was vital to make those in the area aware of the need and purpose for the program. It was vital to begin to increase an understanding of alcoholism in general. The presenters at the seminar included Susan Zimmerman, Chuck Engelhart, Rev. Berger and four recovering alcoholics. The topics were the following: How alcoholism affects the community and work place, Alcoholism and the WELS, How alcoholism affects the alcoholic, How alcoholism affects the family, the Alanon program, the A.A. program. The seminar's informative goals were readily reached. Among the pastors that attended there were no adverse reactions to the program in the making.

In the beginning and throughout the program's existence the brunt of the work has fallen to the volunteer efforts of Mr. <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> Mrs. Zimmerman. She and her husband assumed the same responsibility for referrals from W.L.C.F.S. Together with Pastor Berger they conducted and put together the majority of the presentations.

#### What is Alcoholism?

Perhaps it would be good to briefly review one of the obstacles

the leaders of the program found before them as they tried to promote Alcoholism Awareness.

The initial touchy issue faced by the program was the definition of alcoholism, commonly known as the "sin-sickness question."

There are, in general, three different approaches in defining alcoholism. Is it strictly sin? Is it strictly a disease? Is it both? In their presentations, the proponents of the Alcoholism Awareness program could hardly try to dodge this question. For the best evaluation of the program's position the writer cites Pastor Berger's definition according to a paper he delivered at the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, January 19, 1976:

"I am not able to classify alcoholism as any of the three, but like many use a combination of all. First of all, over-indulgence in alcohol is a sin just like over-indulgence in eating is a sin. As a pastor, I must, therefore, deal with that in the alcoholic on the basis of God's Word....However, since I make a distinction between drunkenness and addiction, I am in no position to make a judgment of condemnation upon the alcoholic because he is an alcoholic."

Because of the complexity of alcoholism and its effects, Pastor Berger encouraged the WELS pastor to use a combination of all the available supportive services. He also made an appeal to the WELS pastor which is actually in keeping with the informational goal of the yet-unfounded Alcoholism Awareness:

"We will want to take a look at our own personal attitude toward alcoholism and the alcoholic and that we will then commit ourselves to seek an understanding of the stages of alcoholism,

the causes of alcoholism, the dynamics of alcoholism in the family and that we will consider seriously the need of some type of preventive approach within our own congregations. The end result, hopefully, will be that we have a greater desire both to help the alcoholic and to be a force in prevention of future alcohol-related problems."

#### The Program Officially Begun

The first open organizational meeting was held in the Bethany Chapel at W.L.C.F.S. on Saturday, May 12, 1979, almost two years to the day from that first meeting of those interested in forming such a group. Every Saturday evening there would be a meeting of the Alcoholic Recovery Group and the Family Recovery Group, also called the Family Support Group. Initial advertisement consisted of 100 posters issued throughout the greater Milwaukee area. That summer's printing of The Haven, the W.L.C.F.S. quarterly newsletter, explained the purpose of the program as follows: "To help alcoholics and families, through the group process, recover on the basis of the hope, comfort, strength and assurance of Christianity."

As was stated earlier in this paper, the basic format of the program is the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Founded in 1935, A.A. has more than 500,000 members in more than 22,000 local groups in the United States and abroad. The organization strongly denies any religious affiliation. Yet it calls itself a spiritual program. Because this paper deals with the WELS alternative/supplement to A.A., the writer will briefly summarize some of A.A.'s glaring weaknesses. This list was gleaned from

Rev. K.A. Spevacek's, "The Christian's Approach to the Twelve Steps of A.A." In connection with Pastor Sullivan, the use of joint prayer and a deistic "higher power" were mentioned. All religious backgrounds are invited to A.A., including atheists, Christians and Jews. Some of the literature contains questionable statements supporting man's cooperation and work-righteousness. Some of the A.A. leaders may easily abuse their position of leadership by adding their personal religious views into the group discussions.

Clinging to the truth of Holy Scripture, Alcoholism Awareness avoids the spiritual pitfalls of A.A. The Group Welcome, read every time a new individual attends the program, lists the four main differences from A.A. and Al-anon:

1. When we speak of God, we mean the Triune God with Jesus as our Savior.

2. We are affiliated with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service rather than with A.A. and Al-anon groups.

3. Pastors, teachers, seminary students and their wives may attend the support group if they are interested in learning more about alcoholism.

4. The Support Group and the Alcoholic Recovery Group get together for a short devotion after the meetings.

Therefore those who attend Alcoholism Awareness do so with a clear understanding of the religious premise on which the program is based. It is only the Triune God of Holy Scripture who can nourish the souls and bless the lives of those in attendance.

An Alcoholism Awareness meeting begins with all participants



together. They join in what is called the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Upon breaking into the Recovery and Support Groups, the Group Welcome is read by the secretary of the group, should there be any new people present. Then one of the 12 steps of the program is discussed by one member, whose assignment was to prepare the step. Each member, if he or she should so choose, then has a chance to speak in regard to the step up for discussion that evening. This is followed by a free time when anything pertinent to the purpose of the group can be brought up by any of the members. The Recover and Support Groups then join to conduct any general business. The evening's schedule closes with a brief devotion by one of the pastors present.

It is noteworthy that no professional counselors are present in the group, nor is Alcoholism Awareness a Bible study group. These people share with each other similar problems and offer encouragement to one another on a very common level. The secretary merely serves as the coordinator so a schedule may be maintained and so things can be done in an orderly fashion.

#### Gradual Growth From Year to Year

The first anniversary of Alcoholism Awareness was marked with great thankfulness to God for his blessing the efforts of the program. Over 525 people attended the weekly sessions the first year of the program's existence. It is necessary to understand that this figure of those in attendance does not specify 525 different individuals. Each time a person came

to the meeting, he or she was marked among the year's total attendance. Therefore on an average there was a little better than ten people at a meeting. By the end of 1980, 864 people attended the meetings, raising the average to over 16. Yet this nucleus was certainly thankful for the program. A certain enthusiasm was in the air. That enthusiasm was put into writing in the brief, one-page newsletter issued the 20th of May, 1980, "It is a real joy to see lives that are changed by the power of the Gospel, and the kind of strength that Christians can give to one another." Pastors throughout our Synod began to call on the program for information and advice on how best to help the alcoholic.

1981 was a big year in the program's development, both in regard to organization and expansion. One of the big purposes of the program is to attempt to educate the public on the issue of alcoholism. Nine informational presentations were conducted throughout the state of Wisconsin. Paul Zimmerman also published in December of 1980 a tentative 12-month schedule of open meetings for 1981. One of the weekly meetings each month is considered an open meeting. This meeting has a greater emphasis on the educational aspect of the program, open for anyone and everyone to attend. The agenda for an open meeting includes films emphasizing different aspects of alcoholism and/or presentations by chemical dependency counselors and recovering alcoholics. Open meetings existed from the beginning, however, 1981 marked the first time a tentative full year schedule of open meetings was published for distribution to the public. The writer feels

this fact is noteworthy because it is one of several ways Alcoholism Awareness was increasing its public exposure.

The effort to reach out and inform the public took a great step forward in the 1981 fall publication of The Haven. Pastor Berger feels that it was at this point that they finally had enough courage to publicize the program to such a degree. Almost two pages of the W.L.C.F.S. quarterly publication were devoted to alcoholism and Alcoholism Awareness. The article used as an introduction a hypothetical story about "Morris," who had a certain "problem": he drank too much. The article addressed a few pertinent questions concerning the definition of alcoholism, its cause, and help for the alcoholic. An explanation of the program followed. Some time during the same year a brochure containing the same information as the Haven article was produced, which may be the most comprehensive informational tool for the program.

Increased exposure brings about increased awareness, both positively and negatively. There was and still is a common sentiment among some laity and clergy that A.A. and Al-anon are enough help for the alcoholic, or that Scripture alone is enough. Rev. Berger recalls a significant realization that occurred during the second presentation given for the Chippewa River Pastoral Conference at Stevens Point, September 14, 1981. The emphasis of their presentations from the start dealt with the sin-sickness question. On the 14th of September, the floor for the first time brought forward the term, "Christian alcoholic." Such an understanding was there previously, but this marked

the first recognition of the addiction the Christian may be struggling against.

The expansion of Alcoholism Awareness was certainly welcomed by the staff at W.L.C.F.S. Yet a glaring need for overall supervision was more and more evident. The first step to attempt to fill that need occurred in July of 1982. In June's brief newsletter the new A.A. counselor was introduced:

"As of July 12th, we will have on our staff a professionally qualified counselor for our Alcoholism Awareness program in the person of Mrs. Sue (Paul) Zimmerman. Both Sue and Paul were most active in getting the entire alcoholism counseling program started and have likewise been instrumental in assisting new groups to be formed in other state areas. Since the problem of alcoholism is such a factor in many family turmoil cases, we are certain that Sue will be able to provide the kind of personal attention and assistance so necessary to individuals and families as they seek a God-pleasing solution to their situation."

Such a position had been long overdue for the program. The ultimate goal was a full-time position. But Mrs. Zimmerman's availability at that particular time could not be passed over. The position to this date is considered part-time, about eighteen hours a week. In addition Sue and her husband still volunteer much more of their time. Mrs. Zimmerman's duties include ordering literature, sending out letters, answering calls and letters and a substantial degree of counseling. As a representative of the agency, Rev. Berger merely monitors Mrs. Zimmerman's

activities.

In the past 1 1/2 years three more meeting places for Alcoholism Awareness were begun. January 2, 1983 was the date for the first open meeting at St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran School in Watertown, Wisconsin. Eastside Ev. Lutheran Church in Madison opened meetings on the 12th of the same month. A third program began at St. Peter Ev. Lutheran School in Schofield, Wisconsin on May 20, 1983. Alcoholism Awareness once again hit the front page of The Haven in the fall of the same year. Perhaps this expansion was a little premature, for all three locations are presently inactive. On the other hand two events clearly appear more significant and help give the program a promising future.

On the cover of the January 15th issue of the Northwestern Lutheran appeared Mrs. Zimmerman explaining an aspect of alcoholism. The article inside the official magazine of the Wisconsin Synod was entitled, "Alcoholism--That Dreadful Word." The article centered on the testimony of a recovering alcoholic who was a former called worker in the WELS. Here was the greatest degree of exposure to date for the Alcoholism Awareness program. The staff tends to feel that this article opened the eyes of many to the fact that the problem does exist within the circles of our Synod. Letters from places as distant as Canada and as close as Oshkosh sought more information and expressed appreciation for the program's existence.

Included in the Northwestern Lutheran article was an advertisement for the first Recovering Alcoholic Individual/Family Retreat for Lutherans, held March 30-April 1, 1984. Open to

any active members of Alcoholism Awareness, Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon, the retreat offered a very unique opportunity for Christians to share their fears and joys. Outside of organizations like Alcoholism Awareness, there is very little for the family as a whole. This weekend enabled individuals, couples and families some precious time together.

The retreat was held at Holy Hill Retreat Center in the scenic Kettle Moraine area near Hubertus, Wisconsin. Fifty-one adults and seven children came from five states to participate in the retreat. Five counselors from Alcoholism Awareness and W.L.C.F.S. were present, making it possible for the sessions to be held together. Members of the Recovery Group were together with members of the Support Group. This promoted the luxury of hearing what the other side thinks and feels.

A summary of the participants' evaluations of the retreat provides an insight into the overall success of the weekend. Simple Christian fellowship was the most appreciated aspect of the retreat. Some people enjoyed the entire weekend with few critical comments. Some would have enjoyed more small group discussions. The facilities and staff were for the most part commended for a very enjoyable and inspirational weekend. The writer particularly appreciated the desire to worship revealed in the participants' evaluations. Their comments revealed a definite love of the gospel. There was more than one request for more devotions and the use of the liturgy in the Sunday service. A desire to hear the comfort God's Word has for the sinner seemed to be a common priority. Also a high priority

was the continuation of the annual retreat. Such a retreat has already been scheduled for April 7, 1985.

#### What Lies Ahead for Alcoholism Awareness?

This paper's tracing of the past five years of the program's existence reveals increased exposure<sup>ure</sup> and some significant steps in providing a Scripturally sound program offering help for the alcoholic and those close to the alcoholic. Quite naturally greater expansion and service is the highest goal for the future. At the present time, however, a few obstacles block the path to advancement.

Of the eight Alcoholism Awareness locations, four are inactive at the present time. In one case the apparent reason for failure may have been a misunderstanding of the basic format, namely the 12 steps. Other locations have had difficulty maintaining individuals who must serve as consistent contacts, always present at the weekly meetings. A certain continuity is missing, which must be present in order for the program to survive and be beneficial.

The answer to present problems and future growth may be in the installation of a full-time coordinator. Plans are in the making for such a position at the main office for Alcoholism Awareness at W.L.C.F.S. Paul Zimmerman is the heir apparent to a position that would be able to oversee procedure in all the other locations.

The writer feels it may be pertinent to take a look at the WELS pastor and his involvement with Alcoholism Awareness. In the aforementioned Fall edition of The Haven, 1981, there

was a section entitled, "Alcoholism Awareness--a personal perspective." One member expressed her views on why Alcoholism Awareness meetings were necessary. The writer will quote the third reason given by this individual:

"People are often reluctant to talk to their pastor about this problem. Few pastors fully understand or have any intensive training in dealing with alcoholism. Some people would also find the group less threatening. 'They are not alone with this problem.'"

This individual expressed a popular opinion of the pastor and his relationship to the alcoholic. It is true that the pastor has not been trained to understand the complexities of alcoholism. Therefore he needs Alcoholism Awareness to provide information and insights that may aid him in his work. Just as importantly, Alcoholism Awareness needs the WELS pastor. The program is subject to the Word of God. It looks to Scripture for guidance and strength. The pastor is to be the divider of the Word of Truth for those under his care and in the program. The pastor must also warn those who participate in A.A. and Al-Anon of the scriptural inconsistencies of those organizations. In March of 1983 some pastors in western Wisconsin put together a list of Bible passages in connection with the 12 steps which can be used as scriptural support for the individual going through these steps. Such invaluable materials can greatly assist the pastor in his care for the alcoholic.

In closing, the writer will quote from Pastor A. Siggelkow's paper, "Alcoholism: Sin, Disease, Morality":



"May God give us humility and repentance, coupled with an understanding of the alcoholic and his problem, so that we may, with the right application of Law and Gospel, help our fellow-sufferers as a result of sin in the world--the alcoholic and his family."

## REASONS WHY WE NEED "ALCOHOLISM AWARENESS" MEETINGS

1. No one understands an alcoholic or an alcoholic family as another person who has been through it can. The things a person will do under the influence of the drug, alcohol, are unbelievable; as are the reactions of the family. It usually takes other alcoholics to give the encouragement and hope to the drinker that he can break this addiction. He can almost never obtain and keep sobriety without this help - no matter how much he wants it, and even prays for it.
2. Encouragement, hope, ideas, strength, caring, sharing, support and love are exchanged at these meetings.

At "Alcoholism Awareness" our people will get the help they need within the framework of our Christian faith. Our religious beliefs and values will not be compromised. It will be a means of strengthening faith and families.

In the devotions, God's Word becomes a wonderful source of comfort, strength and hope to us as seen through the eyes of a Pastor. The meetings also encourage seeking God's will and help. (Alcoholics and their families often feel that God has turned His back on them and no longer cares what happens to them.)

3. People are often reluctant to talk to their Pastors about this problem. Few Pastors understand or have had any training in dealing with alcoholism. Some people would also find the Group less threatening. "They are not alone with this problem."
4. It will be a referral source for Pastors, teachers and other concerned people who come across problems of alcoholism in a drinker or that person's loved ones.
5. It is cheap - freewill offering only; and it works!
6. There should be two groups - one for people with a drinking problem and one for people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking (called Support Group or Family Recovery Group, but not limited to family members.)

It is important to have a Support Group because:

- Family or friends usually realize there is a problem and seek help before the drinker is willing to do so.
- Children of alcoholics have at least a 50% greater chance of becoming an alcoholic, or of marrying one. We do allow children 10 and up to attend these meetings.
- Many alcoholics seek help after they see changes in their family members who attend meetings.
- An alcoholic who becomes sober, has a much greater chance of staying that way, if the spouse also attends meetings.

7. The purpose of "Alcoholism Awareness" is not only to have meetings for those whose lives have been affected by alcoholism, but also to get information and education to other people about alcoholism. (Education can help curb excessive use before it starts.)

## ALCOHOLISM AWARENESS RECOVERY GROUPS WELCOME

We welcome you to the Alcoholism Awareness Recovery Group. We are a group of Christian men and women who share our experience, strength and hope with each other, in our struggles against alcoholism, that we may solve our common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

Our Group is based on the same 12 Steps that AA and Alanon use, but has three main differences:

1. When we speak of God, we mean the Triune God with Jesus as our Savior.
2. We are affiliated with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service rather than AA.
3. This Group and the Support Group (comparable to Alanon) get together for a short devotion after the meeting.

Our closed meetings may be attended only by those who admit to, or who think they have, an alcohol problem, or those whom others may consider having a problem with alcohol. Anything that is said in a closed meeting is spoken in confidence, and should be treated as confidential. Keep it within the walls of this room and in the confines of your mind.

A few special words to those of you who haven't been with us long. Whatever your problems with alcohol, there are others who at one time or another have had them too. You will come to realize, as you listen to others, that there is no situation too difficult to be bettered and no unhappiness too great to be lessened.

We aren't perfect; we all have our own problems in living, but we all have a common goal. That goal is our sobriety and the sobriety of each person at this meeting.

We hope the welcome we give you may show the warmth and the Christian love we have in our hearts for you.

## ALCOHOLISM AWARENESS SUPPORT GROUP WELCOME

We welcome you to the Alcoholism Awareness Support Group. It was probably hard for you to come this first time, as it was for many of us. We have all been closely touched by the drinking problem of a friend or relative.

Our Group is based on the same 12 Steps that AA and Alanon are, but has four main differences:

1. When we speak of God, we mean the Triune God with Jesus as our Savior.
2. We are affiliated with Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service rather than with the AA and Alanon Groups.
3. Pastors, teachers, Seminary students and their wives may attend this Support Group if they are interested in learning more about alcoholism.
4. This Group and the Alcoholic Recovery Group get together for a short devotion after the meetings.

Here we learn that we cannot control the alcoholic. With God's help and by working the 12 Steps, the slogans and Serenity Prayer, reading the literature and taking part in the meetings; our attitudes and reactions will improve. We can find contentment and serenity and make improvements in our family life whether the alcoholic is drinking or not.

Everything that is said here and everyone who is seen here must be kept in confidence. In this way we feel free to say what is in our minds and hearts as we cannot do anywhere else.

We urge you to try our Program - it is where many of us got the help we needed.

In this Group, we share our FAITH, experience, strength and hope. We'd like to share it - with you.

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Much of the information came from W.L.C.F.S. newsletters and  
publications of The Haven from May 1979 to the present and from  
interviews with Rev. Berger and Mrs. Zimmerman.