

Welcome. Welcome to all who need hope, seek strength and restoration to health. Welcome to those who suffer from addiction, family and friends, and those who are healers of this disease. Welcome to new and old friends alike. You are all welcome here regardless of age, creed, race, gender, sexual orientation, color or ethnicity. Welcome to believers and questioners and welcome to questioning believers. Welcome to everyone. These next few days we seek to live into the love, peace and justice of God. When you walked through the door today you walked in as a friend. We love you and there is nothing you can do about it! So enjoy yourself!

I am Rev. Kevin Cross, on behalf of Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church I would like to officially open our meeting and welcome you to the 2012 Gathering. Before I proceed any further I would like to ask you to join me in offering thanks to the Diocese of Southeastern Florida for their commitment, and their time and effort to lovingly pull together this wonderful gathering. Thank you. Thank you very much!

Also I would like to take this moment to acknowledge and thank our outgoing president, Rev, Michael Ryan for his leadership and inspiration over the past year. We were very much in a state of transition and rebuilding during this time period and Michael's warmth and gentle manner helped us navigate turbulent waters with calm and aplomb. Thank you, Michael. Just so all of you know, Michael is not going away, he continues to serve on the board and as past president as a member of our executive committee.

We come here today as a unique voice in the field of recovery. We acknowledge and support the primacy of the 12 Step journey to recovery and the foundational role of

our church in the life of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of our own, Rev. Dr. Samuel Shoemaker led the American chapter of the Oxford Group, an international Christian movement in the 1930's-40's, and he was instrumental in the formation of AA. Shoemaker is generally regarded as the spiritual mentor of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the words of Bill W, "*The early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Group and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else.*" We as a church and as an organization have much to live into as we follow in Sam's footsteps and prophetically proclaim "*this is where the church belongs.*" The mission of God's people is to bring Christ's message of peace, reconciliation and healing to the world. To paraphrase our Shepherd from the gospel of Luke "*I did not come for the healthy, I came for the sick...*" (Luke 5:31) The mission of our organization is to be the embodiment of this mission to those who suffer from the disease of addiction.

We know that the disease of addiction is one of the most deadly diseases known to humankind. That may sound like a bold statement when it is put up alongside diseases like cancer. However, we know that addiction is indeed unique in that it directly and immediately attacks the very essence of who we are. Addiction most certainly is a complex disease with genetic, biochemical and psycho/social components. However, at its core addiction is a disease of the spirit. From the onset its impact is life extinguishing, its objective is to take out and own one's soul. In time relationships with family, friends, God and even with a clear sense of one's own self are pushed aside and replaced by an all consuming relationship with one thing: the addictive substance, habit

or behavior. This is why, Bill W identified the development of awareness and surrender to a high power is so critical to recovery from this disease. It is also why completing the entire journey, getting to the 12th step, caring for others is critical to health and recovery. It is only in reintroducing healthy relationships that real recovery can truly take hold.

We, the church have generally been quite good about making room for A.A. in our basements. For many in A.A. that is the closest relationship they want to have with organized religion. However, I wonder sometimes if we have been self limiting about making room for those in recovery beyond just giving them some space in the basement. It seems obvious to me that Jesus would have been hanging out with those who are addicted. He likely would have been hanging around the basement. He would not have left those suffering from this disease alone in their need for radical welcome and relationship in recovery. We should question ourselves in exploring if there a role for us to not only support those in recovery finding health and wellness through participation in a 12 Step program, but also to create a bridge between the basement and the upstairs. To create an environment so that if some wish to explore what is going on upstairs they feel welcome.

I would like to share a true story with you. This is a story I heard during my time up in Canada. It is at once a story about what society sees as a classic case of addiction and what we accept as all too normal patterns of life that also are forms of addiction. Think about it, aren't the lines between so called normal lives and lives of addiction often blurred in today's world? Steve came from a good background; he held a job in office services and cared for his aging mother who suffered from Alzheimer disease. A couple of years after she died, his business suffered from the financial

difficulties of the 1980's recession. Steve was laid off. Steve tried to find work but the market was glutted with laid off workers. His severance package sustained him for a while but then with no income he lost his home, he lost his dignity, he lost his friends, He lost his way. His life slowly dissolved into a life of desperation and alcohol and drugs – if fact any kind of escape from the harsh realities of life. He ended up living on the streets of Toronto. At night, he would try to catch a few hours sleep in the vestibule of a bank that housed the ATM machines. Days went by spent trudging through the streets searching for the next free meal in church basements, catching a wink or two in coffee shops, furtively watching out for those who took advantage of the downtrodden and seeking the next fix. Eventually Steve found his ways to a church community called appropriately enough “Sanctuary.” He initially went there for a free meal. He had heard on the street that this was a different kind of place. It was there that Steve was received with love and acceptance. It was there that he found a place where he felt he belonged. It was there that he found recovery amongst a community of haves and have nots, of addicts and “normies”. It was there he discovered a new talent, painting. Moreover, it was there that he found a new passion - he loved teaching youth about art and about life. Through the generosity of others, Steve had uncovered the essence of who he was created to be. The Spirit moved in the air of the Sanctuary.

Mathias came from a similar background as Steve. However, Mathias seemed blessed by getting all the right breaks in life. He held an executive position in banking; he had a wife, children, and a nice home in the suburbs. Mathias came to the Sanctuary community around the same time as Steve. He came expecting to serve the homeless. At mealtime, he was invited to take a seat but he held back not wanting to

take the food, someone else really needed. “Oh, just sit and eat,” he was told. “You need this at least as much as anyone else here.” He didn’t understand but he sat and shared in the meal. He enjoyed the fellowship and came back repeatedly. The phrase “You need this at least as much as anyone else here” resounded in his ears. Mathias felt an acceptance there that he had not known before. Here no one cared what he did for a living, no one asked him how much money he made or seemed to care at all about how important or busy he was. Here he was welcomed simply because he came through the door. Despite all his worldly success Mathias had been feeling alone, he had lost his way in a life that seemed all too perfect. He had it all but he felt as if he had nothing. He had all too frequently found himself in the middle of the night awake and weeping from the sense of loneliness that increasingly engulfed him – ever more so as he moved up the corporate ladder in a world that cared more about productivity and wealth than community and fellowship. It was a world that sucked him in and replaced relationships with a life out of balance, a life that cart wheeled from one form of escape to another, from one addiction to another. Not the typical addictions of alcohol and drugs but those of dysfunctional behaviors and habits that deadened his life.

As it turns out this unlikely pair, Steve and Mathias became the best of friends. They both found what they needed - a place where they were valued for who they were not what they were. A community of people who lived the gospel everyday of their lives. In community, Steve and Mathias learned that in community there is no longer rich or poor; there is no professional or street person, there is no addict or non-addict, there is only the body of Christ and through the body of Christ we are all one.

I tell you this story today to present to you a vision of what church, what we as an organization of the church can be in its best form. We can be a force of prophetic advocacy and education. We can vigorously support 12 step programs. We can also be a voice of radical welcome. Our mission of support, advocacy, education and healing ministry for those suffering from addiction can be a transformative agent in the broader church and our communities. We can help make our church communities, the R.M. organization and our own lives into places of healing. I am sure you all know the definition of church: Church is not the building; church is the people, the community. Often our idea of church is the Sunday service. If we limit our focus to simply offering paths into our worship service, we miss the true definition of church just as if we were defining it as only the building. Church is indeed the people but more precisely it is the people living in community.

Our Treasurer, Shannon Tucker, recently wrote a piece posted on our Through the Red Door blog. In it he explores the relationship between the A.A. group that meets at a Memphis church and a Lenten Waffle Shop where the church offers a weekly lunch prior to a midweek service. It is a place where two groups, those attending services and those attending A.A. cross each others' paths. He writes, *"I do trust that God smiles on both of us, on the recovery meeting and on The Waffle Shop and preaching series, but today, I want to say thank you to the men and women of that meeting who welcome us into their space, their basement. I want to remember that for me, the spirituality and the love and the acceptance I feel upstairs in the Nave and over in The Waffle Shop would not be possible without the meetings through the side doors that helped open my heart*

spiritually.” It seems to me that this church, this community has built a bridge that if crossed, offers opportunity for communal and personal transformation.

I think this presents a good focus for RM going forward. Beyond providing good education, advocacy, pastoral support and inclusive liturgy let’s challenge ourselves to find new ways to build communal bridges, and inclusive communities where a Steve and Mathias might meet and find hope. A place where one’s brokenness is not a societal or personal barrier but a door to a richer life in God’s kingdom.