



## *Does the Oxford Group Still Exist?*

Does the Oxford Group Still Exist? by Fr. Bill W.

Several years ago, I took a trip back in time. Physically, the trip took my wife and me to Switzerland – to a grand, hundred year old hotel known as Mountain House and perched high atop the steep cliffs overlooking Lake Geneva. But spiritually speaking, you might say we traveled farther still. The trip took us to that “4th dimension of existence” that the Big Book invites each one of us to find and explore.

We attended an Initiatives of Change Conference aptly entitled: “Tools for Change.” The eight-day conference attracted over 350 men and women from more than fifty nations. People came from South Africa and from Australia – from India and from Egypt. There were Hindus and Christians, Muslims and Buddhists while many claimed membership in no formal religion at all. Each came to share and to sharpen the very same tools that had launched the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous back in the late 1930’s; and yet, as far as I know, I was the only recovering alcoholic in attendance.

Prior to calling themselves Initiatives of Change, the group was known as: Moral Re-Armament, and before that they were: The Oxford Group, and before that they were: A First Century Christian Fellowship. From their very beginnings they had tried to live life as Jesus had lived his i.e. simply, and lovingly, and marked by a radical form of forgiveness. They strived for the same virtues he had demonstrated 2,000 years ago: Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love, and they talked candidly of the many times they fell short. When Bill Wilson was asked where those same four Oxford Group Standards were to be found in the 12 Steps he replied, “Why they’re in our Steps Six and Seven.”

For any number of good reasons, the first one hundred or so alcoholic members in New York and Ohio opted to leave their home within the Oxford Group and strike out on their own. It was a sorrowful parting especially for Dr. Bob and the newly sober families huddled together in Akron, Ohio. But while the Oxford Group wanted to change the world, Bill Wilson was interested only in changing alcoholics. Many of the people at the conference didn’t know much about the 12-Steps but they knew and practiced the very same principles that first shaped them. Bill Wilson once wrote that while AA could rightly lay claim to the authorship of Steps One and Twelve, “the other ten steps came directly from the Oxford Group....”

So, what did these people from around the world do for eight long days? Well, not unlike their counterparts in recovery, they held meetings and they told stories of spiritual awakenings – transformations that affected not only themselves, but that led also to changes among their countrymen back home. A group of indigenous people from Canada set up teepees and told us about the Prime Minister of Canada making amends to them for the many injustices done to their people. They wept as they shared - just like you might hear a new drunk weep for joy at his or her first meeting.

Another group from Sierra Leone told us how their country was just emerging from a very long and bloody civil war. The recent movie Blood Diamond tried to capture some of the horror of brother fighting brother – the chopping off of an enemy’s hands or feet and orphaned children being taught to hate. Eighteen Sierra Leoneans – some from different sides of the conflict were learning the spiritual tools they would need to change their own lives so they could then go back and change their wounded nation. The group quoted Gandhi’s advice that “we must first become the change we want to see in the world.” I was struck by their similarities to the 12-Step Fellowships but I was struck by their differences too.



- People learned the tool of telling the story of their own personal change – but not merely so they wouldn't forget where they came from but so that others could identify with what they had found wanting in themselves and hopefully begin the process of changing the darkness in their own souls as well.
- People learned the tool of taking responsibility for their own actions instead of blaming others - that way others might start taking responsibility for theirs and one by one the world might become a better place.
- People learned the tool of Two Way Prayer, being silent and listening to God or to their conscience or to what some called the Inner Voice – they wrote down the thoughts that came and shared them with a friend. Often what they shared helped the listener as much or more than it helped them.

In most 12 Step Fellowships, members are told that the Fellowship “has no opinion on outside issues.” No opinion on wars or on poverty; no opinion on corruption or the millions in Africa dying from AIDS. The Fellowships are dedicated to “a singleness of purpose.” They exist to bring recovery to those who still suffer from alcohol or from drugs, from food or from gambling. They limit themselves to whatever single purpose for which the Fellowship was founded. This is how it is - and this is probably how it should be. Had the little band of drunks not set off on their own it is very likely that millions would never have found sobriety.

Now it is many years later and the members of 12 Step Fellowship far outnumber the men and women belonging to Initiatives of Change. But how often have I heard it said by those in recovery, “Wouldn't it be grand if everyone in the world could have what we have!” God knows the world desperately needs to change – maybe even more so today than when the drunks departed back in 1938 on the very eve of the Second World War.

Attending the conference, I was reminded of Oxford Group leader Frank Buchman's response when he was informed that the New York and Ohio drunks were going to leave the Group. Buchman said he was saddened, “But I have a drunken world to worry about!” Looking down from that mountaintop the world is perhaps looking darker today than it ever has. I was grateful to see Initiatives of Change putting the principles to work to change it, “one life at a time.” Next year the teams will once again return to the mountain with more stories of change. Maybe next year there'll be more than one alcoholic among them.

Rev. 2.10.21

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