

Agape History
40 Years of Meetings
1979 to 2019
By Richard Preis, et al

THE MOTHERHOUSE, the EARLY YEARS:

In December of 1979 the first AA meetings were held. This was in the Mother House of the school of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the North East corner of the intersection of Charles Street and Bellona Avenue in Baltimore.

At that time there was only one meeting room with meetings held every day at noon and 5:30 PM. Every time a new meeting was started a copy of the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous was passed around to be signed. Those early meetings were generally attended by approximately 20 people.

The first meetings were smokers meetings. Some people wanted to have a nonsmokers venue, so a second meeting room was obtained. Agape now held smokers and nonsmokers meetings at noon and 5:30 every day.

Other special meetings were also started at the Mother House as part of the Agape Group. Those special meetings included: Agnostic meeting Friday nights 8:30 PM and an Archives Speakers meeting.

That was one co-ed bathroom in the hall with a rotating sign out front which indicated whether men or women were using the bathroom. The rooms were classrooms with a table in the middle and folding aluminum chair set around the outside. The steps and traditions were permanently painted on the blackboard.

The Mother House also rented some space for the storage and display of the Maryland General Services archives. Located in the same building were the MGS archives, not part of the Agape Group.

Major issues the Group Conscience had to deal with were:

- Whether or not the Group would sign court slips. In a letter to the Baltimore area InterGroup office the Group Conscience indicated that “We would not want to refuse to sign slip but we would not want slip holders dedicated to Agape as a slip-signer Group “ (letter dated May 2 1981 to InterGroup from Agape Group by Edgar Bartholomew).
- The location of the smoking versus the nonsmoking room was debated. Since the nonsmoking meeting was the larger, the nonsmoking meeting was moved to the large room.
- Meeting secretaries would have to take the basket collections, count the money, fill out a deposit slip and carry the money with deposit ticket to a bank down the street and throw the deposit into a deposit box. They were also authorized to sell whatever literature the Group had on hand. These funds were would also be put into the basket for deposit.

As the Group continued to grow new meetings were added to the schedule. There were midnight meetings on Friday and Saturday nights and 9 AM meetings on Saturdays and Sundays. Regular 7 AM and 7 PM meetings were also added. With the increased number of attendees, often leading to standing room only at many meetings, the sisters of Notre Dame were again approached. The Group procured use of their school chapel for meetings. This Chapel was the original location of the orange chairs

In late 1988 the sisters advised Agape that they were selling the property and that all Agape AA activities at that location would eventually be terminated. The Group had to decide whether to disband or find a

new location. A new location for a Group of Agape's size required signing a lease and entering into necessary business transaction to make a new home.

After considerable study in consultation with AA World Services, the Agape Group endorsed the formulation of Meeting Place Foundation. This Foundation was, and still is a 503C not for profit Corporation, formed by Agape members to secure a Meeting Place for the Agape Group. The legal papers forming Meeting Place Foundation were drawn up and they set up a search committee to find the Group a new home.

THE ROGERS AVENUE HOUSE

The Group needed a building of a certain size, in roughly a 3 mile radius of the Mother House location. We also needed at least 50 parking spaces. Many sites were considered and rejected. Finally an understanding was reached with the University of Baltimore which had an unused house on this athletic field at 2027 West Rogers Avenue.

With the new location secured, the sisters allowed the Agape Group to remain in the Mother House until the preparations of the Rogers Avenue house were completed. Under the leadership of Richard Preiss the Group settled into a massive volunteer effort to get the place fixed up and ready to use. The effort took about 4 months to complete.

On Friday March 30, 1989, at 5:30 PM, the last Agape meeting was held at the Mother House. Immediately after the meeting many Group members stayed to help move chairs, furniture, signs, coffee pots, and books over to the new location about 4 miles away down Charles street, across Lake Avenue down falls road, across northern Parkway and up Rogers Avenue.

The first Agape meeting in the new location was held at 9 AM the next day, Saturday, April 9th. Rogers Avenue house had a large meeting room downstairs in the kitchen. There was also a lounge area with a payphone in an office. There was an open porch out front. And an enclosed porch on the other side. Most of the orange chairs were put in the downstairs room. Up on the second floor were 2 meeting rooms with a bathroom in between them and a small kitchen area attached to one of the rooms. On the second floor there was a meeting room above the porch and it had windows all around it. Finally there was a small meeting room up on the third floor.

With the additional rooms the Group was able to expand its menu of meetings. The 9 AM weekend meeting split up into 2 meetings, one upstairs and one downstairs. The upstairs Saturday meeting took on a split format with 3 different meetings. Downstairs meetings had no prescribed topic, just open discussion. One room upstairs was dedicated to steps. Another room upstairs was dedicated to promises. A weekend midnight meeting had to be discontinued because of security problems with opening and closing the house in the middle of the night. The meeting had been poorly attended and no one was willing to volunteer to secretary that meeting and take responsibility for the key.

There was a fairly contentious Group Conscience meeting to resolve the smoking issue. The majority of the Group favored making the whole building nonsmoking, and only allow smoking outside. There was a strong minority however who argued that there needed to be a smoking room. The compromise was that the small third floor room would be the smoking room. It was tried for several months but the room was so small that when people smoked, the ventilation was so poor, the door to the roof had to be opened. Plus there were complaints that the smoke odor was permeating the rest of the building. many smokers

just decided to come down and sit in the nonsmoking rooms and some smokers just stopped coming to Agape. In the end the Group Conscience revisited the smoking issue and voted to make the entire facility nonsmoking. Smoking was still allowed on the front porch.

Extra space and continuous access to the building allowed meetings from other fellowships to use the facility. The second upstairs room was used by a ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) at noon on week days. The outside porch was used by the AI-Anon meetings some week days at noon as well. The Group also had several special interest meetings:

- Agnostics continue to meet Friday nights
- Tuesday morning women's meeting
- Tuesday noon women's meeting
- Addition to 2 other noon meetings.
- Saturday afternoon (2:30 PM)
- Womens meeting and men's meets.
- Health care professionals meeting Thursday night up in the third floor room.

Business arrangement with Meeting Place Foundation was that the Agape Group would pay Meeting Place 90% of his basket receipts in rent. The Group would then use the remaining 10% to cover expenses. 2 safes were purchased by Meeting Place Foundation and the basket collections were put into envelopes which the needing secretaries then deposited in the safe.

It seems that the Group was on its way to another long and prospered stay, but after 9 months we received word that the Mount Washington community Association was concerned that the University of Baltimore was using its lease with Meeting Place Foundation to indirectly obtain a zoning variance. The community Association was concerned that all the traffic in and out of the parking lot and use of the building at all hours of the day during the weekends would somehow alter the status quo, residential zoning of the neighborhood. They brought pressure to bear on the University which in turn advised Meeting Place that the lease would be terminated at the end of the year. It was a very discouraging time. When Group members inquired about why they were being displaced, we were assured by Mount Washington members that there had no been complaints about our contact or noise level. It was strictly a zoning issue. Several members of Meeting Place then met with the directors of the community organization and the University of Baltimore. An agreement was reached.

The lease could be renewed provided that certain meetings be discontinued and the Group make a commitment to find a new location elsewhere. With written stipulation that this use of the property was not intended to be permanent, the community was satisfied that is residential nature was not being threatened. The Group was allowed to hold its noontime meetings at Rogers Avenue but nothing outside of the normal work week 9 to 5 would be allowed.

Meanwhile, Meeting Place Foundation had not been idle. Sheppard Pratt and Enoch Pratt hospital on Charles Street had just completed the building of a new Conference Center. The hospital was pleased to have Meeting Place Foundation as one of his first tenants. Agape could help many of Sheppard Pratt's clients. Thus, Agape Group went through a period of holding meetings in at 2 locations.

THE ROGERS AVENUE AND SHEPPARD PRATT INTERLUDE

The Group Conscience approved the compromise which had been reached with Mount Washington and attempted to move as many of the displaced meetings as possible over to Sheppard Pratt. The division of meetings went as follows:

- 7 AM moved to Shepherd.
- 9 AM weekend meetings moved to Shepherd.
- Noon meeting could remain at Rogers.
- 5:30 meetings moved to Shepard.
- 7 PM meetings had to move to Shepherd.

As for the specialty meetings, those which occurred on weekends between 9 and 5, they could stay at Rogers Avenue. All of the other meetings had to go to Shepherd. At this time the Agnostics meeting decided to break from the Agape Group. They found a separate meeting place for themselves at Saint John's Episcopal Church on Kelly Avenue in Mount Washington.

The Sheppard Pratt Conference Center was very accommodating. They rented us 2 rooms downstairs. The large room number 55 and the small room number 30. The new configuration required some rearrangement of meetings. The 7 AM and PM meetings were small enough that they only needed the one small room. The weekend 9 AM meeting had to compromise. The general discussion meetings were held in the large room. The steps and promises meetings got divided with the promises on Saturday and the steps on Sunday. The 5:30 meetings continue to be held in both rooms downstairs, although often the meeting in the large room would not be well attended and everyone would overfill the small room.

As the Conference Center got more and more business and held more conferences which required them to rent their downstairs rooms, the Agape meetings would from time to time and with increasing regularity, be shifted to other rooms in the facility. Frequently the auditorium was used.

Then we got word that the Mount Washington Community Association had relented on some of the time of day prohibitions. They would allow some additional meetings at the Rogers Avenue house. Those were the 7 AM and PM meetings, as well as, the Saturday and Sunday 9 AM meetings. No format changes were required for the 7 o'clock meetings. The two Saturday meetings were merged into one with a format change. One week they would discuss the promises and then the next week they would talk about the steps. It became known as the steps and promises meeting. The second Sunday meeting was discontinued in part because of low attendance and it part because no one volunteered to be secretary. All specialty meetings were held at Rogers Avenue and the only Agape meeting still held at Sheppard Pratt was the 5:30 meetings.

THE GROUP WITH 2 MEETING PLACES.

Most Agape meetings were held at Rogers Avenue with only the 5:30 meeting held at Sheppard Pratt. There was no coffee available at Sheppard Pratt in those days because we had no fixed meeting room. The Conference Center was being used by more and more organizations and the Agape meetings were often held in the auditorium.

Group Conscience meetings were held the third Saturday of every month at Rogers Avenue. It became apparent that the issues which affected one location often did not affect the other. Shepperd meetings had difficulty keeping AA literature in stock. The Rogers Avenue location struggled with heat in the summer and keeping the rooms downstairs cool. Although the rooms had fans, often attendees

complained the fans were too loud. The secretary would turn them off and then people would complain about the heat.

The Group needed a single location. Meeting Place Foundation, with Agape Group assent, sought a grant from the state of Maryland. The state would grant Meeting Place Foundation \$250,000 to build a meeting place for 12 step recovery if Meeting Place Foundation could raise \$250,000 in matching funds.

There was a concern. Obtaining this grant would be a violation of the seventh tradition which states that every Group is “fully self-supporting, declining outside contribution”. The chairman of the Group Conscience Steering Committee at the time wrote to AA World Services in New York for guidance. World Services responded that Agape, as an AA Group, could not obtain funds from the outside without violating the seventh tradition. However, since Meeting Place Foundation was not an AA Group, and if the AA name was not used in any of its fund-raising materials, then Meeting Place Foundation was not bound by the traditions. Since the inception of Meeting Place Foundation, the Agape Group had a traditional operating procedure that Agape Group should always maintain its autonomy from Meeting Place Foundation. With these cautionary procedures in place the Agape Group did not object to Meeting Place effort to obtain the grant.

In fact, Meeting Place succeeded in raising the matching \$250,000. They got a preliminary commitment from the state that the grant would be awarded if a site could be found and suitable plans drawn up. Meeting Place Foundation got a tentative agreement from the Towson University to sell Meeting Place a parcel of land adjoining the Sheppard Pratt campus. Meeting Place Foundation was prepared to go forward. At the last minute the Maryland State board of Estimates, which must approve all purchases of state property, refused to ratify the sale. The State Comptroller vetoed the \$150,000 sales price as being too low, stating that the property was worth \$800,000. The deal fell through.

Although Meeting Place Foundation could have appealed the decision, the Foundation decided to let the matter rest. For its part, the Agape Group Conscience thanked Meeting Place Foundation for their efforts and agreed to not pursue the matter because our name was being drawn into outside controversies. The grant no longer a viable possibility, Meeting Place Foundation contacted all the contributors to offer to return their money.

ALL AGAPE MEETINGS MOVE TO SHEPPARD PRATT

The Agape Group received official notification from Meeting Place Foundation that the University of Baltimore was not renewing the lease for the Rogers Avenue House. The University needed the space, either to house visiting faculty or as an annex to their athletic facility. Thus, the Group once again found itself looking for a home.

Meeting Place Foundation was looking for space. Numerous suggestions were made, explored, and ultimately rejected. Meeting Place negotiated a deal with Sheppard Pratt to provide the Group with a permanent suite of rooms downstairs in the Conference Center. The Group Conscience agreed to accept the Meeting Places offer to the Conference Center.

On a Saturday in July 1996, Agape Group held their last picnic and last meeting at the Rogers Avenue House. The following day a handful of volunteers cleared the furniture and supplies out of the house and moved all of Agape’s possessions, chairs, signs, comic books, and coffee pots into a storage warehouse

County donated by an Angel in Hamden. The Group did not need any of these supplies or furniture since for the next 6 months all meetings would be in the Sheppard Pratt Conference Center.

The actual arrangement was that Meeting Place would rent the Conference Center video studio, a sweet of 5 rooms in the facilities basement. This space however was still under lease to another tenant and would not be vacated for another 6 months. So in the interim, the Agape meetings would be held wherever the Conference Center had available space. As it turns out many meetings were held in the auditorium. This large space proved to be quite an adjustment for the regular Agape attendees who had grown accustomed to the intimate surroundings of the Rogers Avenue house. Attendees were never quite sure in which room their meeting was going to be held until they came in the front door and service sign indicating where they did be. After a short time. People figured out which room they liked and which rooms were always overcrowded. Most attendees realized that this was just a temporary situation and put up with the inconvenience.

Agape Group kept its location search committee in effect just in case the new permanent space at Sheppard Pratt did not workout. Strange is it may seem, no one in the Group had actually seen the new space, only Meeting Place Foundation board members had seen it.

Finally, the big day came. They got the Group moved to its permanent space which was in the Sheppard Pratt video studios, downstairs. As soon as the first members walked into the door they saw the worn, old familiar orange chairs...in an unfamiliar space. Conspicuously absent were windows. This was the first Agape location which did not have an abundance of windows.

The new space was composed of 5 rooms. There were two entrance doorways. Immediately next to the first, there was another doorway to a small room with sinks. This served as the coffee making or mess room. Agape AA meetings once again served coffee. Just past the small rooms were a set of stairs going down to the main level.

This used to be a video studio so the main large room had a whole series of 40 plug light fixtures hanging from the ceiling. Then there was a curtain track that wrapped around the whole room. There was a black curtain which was originally drawn all the way around the room, making the room very dark. After a few days, the curtain was taken down and it remained drawn back ever since. Next to the large room, through a doorway was a smaller room. Set up above the large room, behind a wide window was what once had been a control room for video equipment where operators could project and control activity in the studio. This became our office where the paperwork, coffee supplies, and extra literature was kept. A panel was put together over the window to establish a sense of privacy in the office.

Entire schedule of Agape meetings could be held in this suite of rooms between the large room and the small room. The only conflict occurred with the Tuesday women's meeting at noon requiring a third room because of the two regular meetings at noon. After some discussions, it was agreed that the Tuesday noon women's meeting should get a key to the control room (our office) for them to hold their meeting.

Then the Agape Group had the following meetings 7 days a week.

- One meeting at 7 AM in the small room,
- Two meetings at noon, one in the large room and one in the small room,
- Two meetings at 5:30 PM, one in the large room and one in the small room
- One meeting at 7 PM in the small room.

Then the following meetings, which did not meet every day of the week, were created

- One meeting at 9 AM on Saturday and Sunday, both in the large room,
- A women's meeting at noon on Tuesday which meets in the control room (office),
- A women's meeting at 10:30 AM in the small room,
- A women's meeting at 2:30 PM on Saturday in the small room,
- A woman's meeting at 7 PM on Sunday in the large room,
- A men's meeting at 7 PM on Sunday in the small room.

After being in the new location for nearly a year, Meeting Place Foundation approached the Agape Group with a proposition about changing the way the finances were structured. As previously stated, their agreement was that the Group give Meeting Place 90% of the basket collection. In light of the rent which Meeting Place was paying to Sheppard Pratt, the books indicated that Meeting Place had been subsidizing the Group every month. At the present trend, Meeting Place would have exhausted its funds within a year. Meeting Place Foundation suggested an arrangement be made by which Agape would pay Meeting Place a fixed rent. The Group agreed to this procedure and since January one of 1999 Agape started paying Meeting Place Foundation \$3000 a month in rent. The agreement was that Meeting Place provides the meeting space, coffee, general janitorial services. Agape Group is responsible for all the rest. Dick Weis, then Chairman of the Group Conscience Steering Committee, restructured how Agape handled its finances to get a bottom line understanding of how money is collected and spent.

When the receipts fell off, the Group had to ask its members to remember that we are now truly self-supporting through our own contributions. When there was a surplus, the Group Conscience gave the entire surplus to AA service organizations according to a set formula.

In 2003, the orange chairs were seriously worn out. A committee was formed to look at options for the orange chairs, including replacement. Many Agape members reacted emotionally about replacement saying they'd "gotten sober in those orange chairs". The committee's work was expanded to full Group Conscience meetings to participate in reviewing and selecting options. Options were identified and costed. Each was put to a vote. Refurbishment of the orange chairs was overwhelmingly selected.

Business for the Conference Center was growing. Sheppard Pratt needed space for additional kitchens to service large events. Based on their strong relationship with Agape and Richard Preiss, they offered three rooms (with less floor space) in the Gibson Building that could be dedicated to Agape seven days a week. The location did have the necessary parking for 100 cars, men and women's restrooms, large storage closets, and a kitchen area for coffee. A search committee was formed in May of 2003 by Agape Group Conscious Steering Committee to look for locations and bring proposals to Meeting Place Foundation for lease negotiation.

The geographic area searched was North Baltimore (called "the box")

- North of Northern Parkway
- South of Padonia Road
- East of JFX
- West of Loch Raven Blvd.

15 locations were physically visited, property managers interviewed by committee members. These included office buildings, shopping malls, churches, lodges, YMCA meeting rooms, a seminary, Rogers

Avenue (renovation repairs would cost too much), grade schools and a college. Highly public locations, like shopping centers, were eliminated because of anonymity concerns.

Meeting Place went into negotiations with one, nearby church that had large rooms and met all Agape requirements. They had a condition of no smoking on church grounds. The church elders parked in the Conference Center parking lot, watching meetings let out. They saw that members were smoking on a non-smoking property. They withdrew their offer.

Agape took Shepperd Pratt's offer and Meeting Place Foundation signed a new lease for the Gibson Building. Agape moved into the Gibson Building, with the orange chairs in October 2003.