

## **Bridging the Gap: Faith and Recovery at St. Mary Anne's**

Across the country, churches of many denominations quietly open their doors to recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Al-Anon, and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). These meetings, grounded in anonymity, are often held in church basements with little connection to the worshiping life of the congregation. While churches faithfully provide space, the relationship typically remains at arm's length.

At St. Mary Anne's Episcopal Church in North East, MD. and Diocese of Easton however, that boundary has been thoughtfully and prayerfully bridged.

For many decades, St. Mary Anne's has hosted a Sunday evening NA meeting, along with a Thursday AA meeting and a Friday Al-Anon gathering in its Parish House. But when the Rev. John Schaeffer arrived as rector in 2016, he began to form relationships—stopping in, introducing himself, and listening. Those small gestures of presence would grow into something much larger.

As those relationships deepened, additional NA meetings were added on weekday evenings, reflecting both growing need and growing trust. What had long been a quiet hosting arrangement began to evolve into an active, shared ministry.

In 2018, St. Mary Anne's launched a monthly Faith and Recovery Service held on Sunday evenings. The service is intentionally simple and accessible: no vestments, a table set in the aisle rather than at the altar, and communion offered with grape juice. The liturgy draws gently from the 12 Steps and the Kenyon Eucharistic service, accompanied by praise music.

A powerful centerpiece of each gathering is the personal testimony, offered by individuals in recovery at various stages of their journey. These reflections are often deeply moving—honest, emotional, and filled with both struggle and hope.

The service is supported by a small ministry team, including the Rev. Jim Kamihachi, a deacon from St. Mark's Episcopal Church, along with licensed Eucharistic ministers from St. Mary Anne's. Together, they help create a welcoming and reverent space for all who attend.

Following the service, the community gathers for a shared meal in the Parish Hall before the NA meeting begins—an intentional time for fellowship that has become central to the ministry's life.

The partnership extends well beyond Sunday evenings. A local recovery house leader, who oversees multiple residences for individuals in recovery, encourages his residents to engage actively with the parish—not only as participants, but as contributors. Residents assist with major parish events such as the annual Garden Market, and they also take on special maintenance projects throughout the year—repairing roofs, installing fencing, removing animals from chimneys, and addressing other practical needs.

In turn, the parish supports the recovery community with meeting space, meals, and occasional financial assistance—an exchange rooted not simply in charity, but in mutual care and shared purpose.

The fruits of this collaboration are both visible and profound. Attendees from NA, AA, Al-Anon, and other recovery houses and meetings now participate regularly in the Faith and Recovery services. Several have taken significant steps in their spiritual lives: three adults and two children have been baptized, one couple has been married, and others have become active in parish life—joining the Christmas choir or attending Sunday worship.

Parishioners, too, have embraced this ministry. Volunteers provide meals on a rotating basis, and special celebrations—such as a festively prepared Christmas dinner—reflect a growing sense of shared community and belonging.

At the heart of this ministry is relationship: between clergy and recovery leaders, between parishioners and participants, and among individuals walking the path of recovery together. Anonymity is respected, but isolation is gently replaced with connection.

For Fr. John, this work is deeply personal. His commitment to recovery ministry was shaped decades earlier, when he accompanied his father to AA meetings in the late 1980s. His father, who struggled with alcohol addiction later in life and suffered from macular degeneration, could not drive. Though once active in church music, he never found a way to reconnect his faith with his recovery journey.

That experience left a lasting impression—one that would later inspire Fr. John to help bridge the gap between the “basement” and the sanctuary.

As Fr. John prepares to retire from full-time ministry this June, he and his wife Karen will relocate to Pittsburgh, where they previously lived for over two decades and where their children and grandchildren now reside. While he looks forward to this new chapter, he leaves St. Mary Anne’s with deep gratitude—and with a heartfelt hope that this ministry will continue to grow.

He also hopes it may serve as a model for other parishes. The need is great, and the hope of Christ in recovery is powerful. Clergy or lay leaders interested in developing a similar ministry are encouraged to reach out to Fr. John, who would gladly share more about this work and its impact.

What began as a quiet presence has become a living witness—where recovery and faith are no longer separate paths, but part of a shared journey toward healing, dignity, and grace.