

CHAPTER ONE: THE GROUP

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1:1 Group Meetings (This is being reviewed by Committee 1 – Conference 2011)

The Traditions have these words to say on Groups in AA.

Tradition 3 (Long Form). Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

Tradition 4 (Long Form). With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighbouring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

Types of meetings

Although a Group is free to determine its own format and structure, our experience has shown that Groups working within AAs Traditions and Guidelines seem to work best.

The most common types of meetings are:

The Group Meeting is for alcoholics only, or for those who think they may have a drinking problem. The Group meetings are limited to members of the local AA group or visiting members from other Groups. Usually these are informal discussions devoted to members' problems and questions, the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, the Twelve Concepts, topics suggested by articles in the magazines *Share, Roundabout and Grapevine* etc. Many other formats are used but common to all meetings is the sharing of the experience, strength and hope of its members, with the purpose of affording them an opportunity to discuss particular aspects of their alcoholic problem.

In many meetings it is the practice for the Chair to introduce speakers who relate what they were like, what happened in their lives and contrast this with what they are like now. Group meetings are of particular value to the newcomer since they give him or her an opportunity to ask questions which may be troubling them and to hear 'older' members' experience of the recovery programme. In this way they may be offered hope for the possibility for their own personal recovery. These meetings are usually conducted informally and members are encouraged to share in the discussions.

The Open Group Meeting is one which non-members of AA (partners, friends and other interested members of the community) may attend. The Chair and speakers are, of course, all members of AA but non-alcoholics may take part in any subsequent discussion, with the approval of the Group conscience. Non-members should always be made aware that those attending the meeting do so anonymously.

A typical Open Group meeting will usually have a leader and other speakers. The leader opens and closes the meeting and introduces each speaker. With rare exceptions, the speakers are AA members. Each, in turn, may review some of his or her drinking experiences which led to his or her joining AA. Or they may give their interpretation of the recovery programme and suggest what their sobriety has meant to them. All views expressed are purely personal, since all members of AA speak only for themselves.

Open Speaker Meetings usually consist of a few members (often from another group), who tell what they were like, what happened, and what they are like now, as the Big Book describes 'sharing'.

Some Groups feel it is important to balance the programme, making sure both men and women are heard, newer members and older. Sometimes an announcement about the importance of anonymity in the public media is read aloud. In many places, the presiding member emphasises that 'anything you hear at this meeting is the opinion of the speaker, and does not reflect the AA opinion, since no one person speaks for AA.'

Beginners' Meetings are usually smaller, more intimate question-and-answer sessions to help newcomers.

Step Meetings Since the Steps are the basis of our recovery, many groups devote regular meetings to a study of each Step in rotation, perhaps two or three at a time.

'Big Book' Study Meetings Since the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* - commonly known as the 'Big Book' - contains the basic text of the AA recovery programme, many meetings focus on reading the book and discussing in detail its suggestions and experience as they affect individual members' recovery and sobriety.

The Multi-Meeting Group is an AA Group that accepts responsibility for providing more than one meeting per week. The General Service Conference has recommended the establishment of such groups where favourable circumstances exist and the Group conscience approves. Examples of such circumstances are where:

- premises are already shared by Groups or where a number of Groups meet in the same area
- Group conscience has decided that the Group has developed to a point where further weekly meetings are needed and could be maintained
- there is a shortage of Group officers - e.g. in rural areas with a number of small groups. Because multi-meeting groups require a fewer total number of officers they are also an effective means of freeing members to become involved in other service activities.

The meetings that constitute the multi-meeting Group are assisted in fulfilling the needs of the Group by a Steering Committee comprising Group Officers and representatives from the meetings belonging to the Group. These Steering Committee Officers - Chair, Treasurer, Literature Sec. etc. as set out in 1.2 *Group Officers* below - are elected from members of the Group's meetings at a Group Conscience meeting attended by members or representatives of all the meetings in the Group.

To protect the unity of the multi-meeting Group and to ensure that each constituent meeting of the Group accepts and implements decisions made at the Group Conscience/ Business assemblies, it is vital that all of the constituent meetings be represented at these assemblies.

It has been found that there is unity in multi-meeting Groups providing that the application of the principle of rotation of steering-committee officers is observed in order to avoid personalities becoming established at the expense of the Groups' welfare: also, that regular Conscience and Business Meetings are held.

Disadvantages have been found when Group Conscience has permitted personalities to compromise Unity or where geographical location has compromised close liaison.

The Group Conscience and Business Meetings are sometimes overlooked but they play an important part in our Group progress.

The Group Conscience meeting normally takes the form of a group inventory. An informed group conscience implies that all relevant information has been carefully studied and that the views of all members who wish to contribute to the discussion have been heard before the Group makes its decision.

Some Groups schedule these meetings several times a year: whatever their frequency, it is important that they are held regularly. Depending on the wishes of the members, they may precede or follow the normal meeting or separate sessions may be arranged.

In order to achieve true representation of Group Conscience, it is suggested that participation is limited to those members who attend regularly or who regard that group as their Home Group.

Business meetings provide an opportunity for Group officers to report on such matters as progress, to seek group guidance (see *Tradition Two*) for the future, Intergroup matters and the financial position. The Group may also take this occasion as an opportunity to appoint its officers and to conduct a Group Conscience meeting.

The Home Group Meeting is the group for meetings in which members feel most at home. In such Groups they accept service responsibilities, sustain friendships and celebrate anniversaries.

The Public Meeting places emphasis on informing the general public about AA. These are speaker-type meetings. Invitations are issued to persons who may have a specific interest, such as doctors, social workers, spiritual leaders and others who may have cause to refer to AA in the course of their daily work. As well as the Group members, often a guest – usually a friend of AA, whose professional work involves them in the field of alcoholism, or an AI-Anon member - is invited to speak. The

Service Manual of AA Great Britain gives excellent suggestions for arranging such a meeting. Such a meeting is an excellent way to celebrate group anniversaries.

The Shared Platform Meeting is an AA meeting where non-AA speakers are involved and should be chaired by an AA member. Tickets and programmes should include a statement as to whether Al-Anon/ Alateen speakers are involved.

THE ANONYMITY TRADITION

At open, public and shared platform meetings, it is considered advisable to stress the importance of AA's *Tradition 11* on Anonymity as a precaution, should any members of the press or other communication media be present.

AA members remain anonymous in public for two reasons:

- our promise of privacy to the still-suffering alcoholic and to the family
- a spiritual reason summed up in *Tradition 12* or in the word "humility".

PARTICIPATION

The sole purpose of an AA Group is to carry the message of recovery to the still-suffering alcoholic offering sobriety through the teachings and practice of the Twelve Steps. To help achieve this aim as many members as possible who wish to take part in the discussions and service should be encouraged to do so.

The meeting most likely to attract and keep members is the one which starts on time, which has its stock of literature well displayed, where the seating is ready and where members of an unofficial "welcoming committee" are ready to help pass the message, each in their own way. There will be a warm welcome for all comers and in particular for the newcomer, ensuring that the newcomer is made aware of the possibilities and promises contained in the programme. Ultimately, the strength of any meeting depends on the support and involvement of the entire Group.

WHERE TO FIND AA

Where to Find AA is the national meeting directory for Great Britain and the Continental European Region and as such is an invaluable source of information for the new member and the travelling member. In order to ensure that it remains accurate, Group secretaries are requested to keep the General Service Office informed of any changes in the address of the meeting place, the starting time of the meeting or the telephone contact numbers for the meeting.

Members whose names appear in the *Where to Find* should be prepared to take full responsibility as contacts and delegate where necessary. This implies that such a telephone number will be freely available within the Fellowship and that the contact is prepared at any time to:

- accept a call for help
- give information to a professional e.g. a GSO number
- guide a family member to the right source for help e.g. to Al-Anon
- speak to members of the Fellowship enquiring about meetings.

Where to Find may also be found on the AA website, where names and personal numbers are not shown.

On local, Intergroup or Regional *Where to Find* listings, the following statement may be useful: "Alcoholics or those who think they might have a problem with alcohol may go to any of the meetings listed. 'Open Group Meetings' are for friends, family and other interested people, with the consent of the group."

OUR PRIMARY PURPOSE AND PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL

Tradition 5 (Long Form) quotes Bill W's words "Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity *having but one primary purpose* - that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers."

Where problems arise from the attendance of non-alcoholics at AA meetings, it is suggested that the above words are remembered and the following extract from the AA pamphlet *Problems other than Alcohol* is read out and, if appropriate, printed copies are distributed:

"Now there are certain things that A.A. cannot do for anybody regardless of what our several desires or sympathies may be. Our first duty as a society is to ensure our own survival. Therefore we have to avoid distractions and multi-purpose activity. An A.A. Group as such cannot take on all the personal problems of its members let alone the problems of the whole world. Sobriety - freedom from alcohol - through the teaching and practice of the Twelve Steps is the sole purpose of an A.A. Group. Groups have repeatedly tried other activities and they have always failed. It has also been learned that there is no possible way to make non- alcoholics into A.A. members.

We have to confine our membership to alcoholics and we have to confine our A.A. Groups to a single purpose. If we don't stick to these principles, we shall almost surely collapse, and if we collapse, we cannot help anyone."

Although these words were written by Bill W. in 1958 they continue to offer sound guidance on this difficult subject.

1:2 Group Officers

This Guidance is based on the pamphlet *The AA Group* which shows for new officers, new members and other interested AAs many of the good and proved-by-experience ways other members have used in their Groups to fulfil our primary purpose of staying sober and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety".

All sorts of jobs have to be done to service an AA Group and to keep it going; this is why we need officers. *Tradition 9* states that "A.A. as such, ought never be organised; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve." The officers or trusted servants needed within the Group are usually chosen by the Group members for limited terms of service. The jobs they do may have titles but titles in AA do not bring authority or honour; they describe services and responsibilities. These are ways of *carrying the message*. They are forms of Twelfth Step work an AA member willingly undertakes, primarily to help personal recovery. Many AA members have found Group duties an excellent way to strengthen their sobriety.

The various jobs or services requiring to be done to run a Group successfully can be allocated over the responsibilities of Group officers as set out and outlined below: two or more services may be combined under a single officer when the Group is a small one. For example, a Group may have the following officers:

- Chair
- Secretary
- Speaker Secretary

- Treasurer
- Literature Secretary
- *SHARE / Roundabout* Representative
- Refreshment Helpers
- Group Service Representative

Each Group, being autonomous, selects the officers its members feel are necessary for the smooth running of the Group. Group officers usually serve for a year, since the principle of rotation of officers is important in order that each member should be given an opportunity to serve should they be willing. Each nominee is usually approached by other members in the Group and, if he or she agrees, that name is put forward at a business/service meeting, so letting the Group conscience decide the election.

Qualifications for Group Officers

Most Groups make sure that their officers have had a known period of continuous sobriety, at least one year, and have shown themselves willing and available to give dependable service through regular attendance at meetings. It has generally been found that giving a member a job solely to help that member stay sober does not work. The Group's welfare is of primary concern in choosing officers and in this sense, a mention of *Traditions 1 and 2* is helpful at election times as is also an appreciation that familiarity with the *12 Steps, Traditions and Concepts for World Service* helps officers to do a better job.

Chair

Some Groups have no Chair because the Secretary serves as the Group's principal officer. In practice, it doesn't seem to matter which Group officer does which job as long as they all get done without confusion or conflict. It is however very important for everybody to understand who does what.

While one year's continuous sobriety may be sufficient to undertake some other duties, the

Group's principal officer, i.e. Chair or Secretary should have at least two years' continuous sobriety and have had other group experience.

- Co-ordinates Group activities, preventing confusion or misunderstanding in Group affairs
- Opens all regular Group meetings then turns them over to a speaker who is leader for that session only
- Has final responsibility for the smooth functioning of the Group and also conducts Group Conscience and Business Meetings.

Secretary

- Arrives some time before a meeting is due to start in order to arrange the room, usually with the help of other members and the refreshment helpers
- Encourages the meeting to start punctually
- Makes any AA announcements at the end of the meeting (e.g. news of conventions, new meetings, new literature)
- Practises *Tradition 7* by passing the pot and then asking the speaker or Chair to close the meeting with the *Serenity Prayer*
- Keeps a confidential list of those members willing to do Twelfth Step work and passes on any calls for help
- Ensures, with the Treasurer's help, that the rent is paid
- Helps the Treasurer to count and keep a record of the Group's collections
- Informs the Intergroup Secretary and GSO of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the Group officers, together with up-to-date Group telephone contacts and of any changes in these or in the Group's venue. In this way the correct information is always available for inclusion in *Where to Find AA*
- Provides safe keeping for such Group records and correspondence that exist, thus preserving anonymity at all times. In addition, the Secretary, as well as other Group officers, has a special responsibility for seeing that newcomers get help, are made welcome on arrival and receive a starter pack on departure

Speaker Secretary

- Finds suitable speakers for each meeting who have a known period of sobriety, books them well in advance and informs them of the time, date and address of the meeting
- Explains to the speaker the usual format of the Group, e.g. length of the share or discussion and what time the meeting ends
- Tries to visit other Groups in order to book ahead a variety of speakers who are able to present a good cross-section of AA recovery

Treasurer

- Collects the money obtained from passing the pot at Group meetings, counts this with a responsible member's help and enters the amount into a cash book or balance sheet in the Group accounts book
- Makes regular reports to the Group showing how money has been used. After paying the approved expenses, e.g. rent, refreshments and literature and retaining a prudent reserve of one month's running expenses, any surplus should be sent to the Intergroup Treasurer – preferably by cheque and without delay. Blank signed cheques should never be issued. This is a recommended precautionary measure taken on behalf of both the group and the Treasurer and applies to cheque payments at all levels.
- In effect, covers the cost of all legitimate Group expenses from Group funds, but does not use funds to reimburse members' expenses in relation to direct Twelfth Step work. The Treasurer should keep the Group's funds in a separate Group bank account, which requires two signatures on each cheque. AA experience clearly shows that it is *not* a good idea for a Group to accumulate large funds in excess of what is needed for monthly rent and bills. It is strongly recommended that, apart from a prudent reserve, all surplus money be sent promptly to GSO via the local Intergroup Treasurer.

Literature Secretary

- Ensures that the Group has available its own copy of the *Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous)*. Orders and keeps the Group supplied with books and pamphlets published by AA and available from GSO
- Puts together selected packs of literature for newcomers and makes sure stocks are replenished
- Ensures that literature is on display and available to members at Group meetings, encouraging members to buy from the collection
- Makes available the current edition of *The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain*, especially at business meetings
- Passes any accounts for payment of literature to the Treasurer
- Helps the Secretary to circulate *AA Service News*, convention flyers, notices from GSO, etc.

SHARE /Roundabout Representative

- Is responsible for promoting *SHARE/Roundabout*, by ordering sufficient copies for the Group members. Displays and sells copies as they arrive and encourages members to submit articles for inclusion in future issues

Refreshment helpers

- Many AA members have reported they get almost as much good out of coffee and conversation before or after a meeting as they do out of the meeting itself. AA members consider sharing over coffee at these times a vital part of AA routine
- Often AA members say they first felt they belonged when they began helping with the chairs, tidying the room, making the coffee and tea or doing washing up. Some newcomers find such activity helps them to talk to other members. For many of us this experience is our first contribution to AA service
- Any expenses for refreshments may be reclaimed from the Group Treasurer
- After each meeting the room should be left clean, tidy and in proper order

Group Service Representative (GSR)

The GSR's responsibilities are fully explained in 1:3 below. Bill W said "The strength of our whole structure starts with the Group and with the General Service

Representative that the Group elects. By choosing its most qualified man or woman as GSR a Group helps its own future and the future of A.A. as a whole.” To be chosen to represent a Group is to be given the opportunity to take part in AAs Third Legacy, that of service, and to have the chance to become a trusted servant. The GSR should have at least two years’ continuous sobriety and should serve for a minimum of two years.

The Traditions

While the above sets out how an ideal Group may operate, the conscience of each Group decides for itself how much it will do and the best way of getting it done. There are many ways of living up to *Tradition 5*, which says “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.”

Tradition 2 reminds us that “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.”