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*A presentation to the 28th
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trends and developments in
our ever-expanding
Fellowship*



How and Why AA Grows

THE GROUP is where it happens. "I got drunk, but *we* stay sober." That's why it's tremendously exciting to look at the records and see that in 1977, 2,595 new groups in the U.S. and Canada asked to be listed at AA's General Service Office in New York. During the same period, 1,337 groups became inactive. For comparison, in 1976, 2,175 new groups formed; 1,020 fell by the wayside.

AA is growing. Not only did it increase by 1,258 groups (net) in 1977, but many existing groups are bursting at the seams with new members. Some groups are running out of chairs and out of meeting room. One in southern California has four members with flashlight batons directing the parking of cars in a huge parking lot, and inside the meeting place, coffee is served at six stations dotted around the big hall, tended by pretty young AA hostesses.

AA is also evolving. Our program of recovery remains unchanged, and the language of the heart is the same in any meeting, anywhere in the world. But the number and variety of groups and meetings—today, compared with a few years ago—are astonishing.

What has happened in my own hometown, Greenwich, Conn., is perhaps fairly typical. When I came to AA seventeen years ago, the Fellowship was strong and active there. The Greenwich Group had open meetings on Friday night and three closed meetings during the week. Early on, a beginners meeting was added, before the Friday open meeting. Then a Step meeting began running simultaneously with the Wednesday closed, and later, there was another independent Step group on Tuesdays.

As members living on the outskirts of town became more numer-

ous, they started meetings closer to home. A luncheon meeting began, soon followed by another and another. The Greenwich Hospital permitted a closed meeting to be held inside on Thursday night, and later an open discussion on Mondays. Even a "smokeless" meeting was started by several Wednesday-nighters who found the regular closed meeting too crowded and too smoky. Now, nineteen meetings a week are listed by the Greenwich Intergroup Office (itself a new development). And *all* are well attended!

Greenwich, in microcosm, illustrates *why* new groups and new meetings are formed. It's an old cliché, of course, that all that is needed for a new AA group is a resentment and a coffee pot—and, indeed, many new groups begin just that way: as an offshoot from an existing group. If the new group fills a genuine need, it will survive and

flourish. If not, it will wither and die.

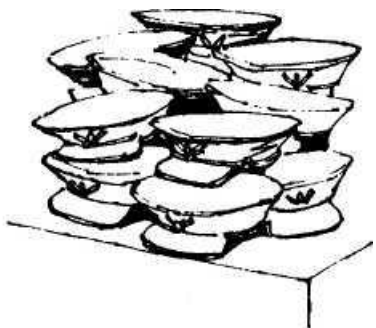
A healthy group often grows larger and larger until it becomes unwieldy, or until participation of members becomes difficult, or until it outgrows its quarters. Then, by agreement among the members themselves, it may divide into two groups—like an amoeba reproducing itself.

A new group may also be started to meet a need for a new *time* for a meeting. "Saturday night is a bad time for drunks, and we need a Saturday-night meeting." Luncheon meetings are in this category. When I came into AA, New York boasted a couple of luncheon clubs for non-drinkers, but no lunchtime AA meetings as such. Now, there is a choice of several every day in the week! Likewise, after-work meetings have sprung up and are popular.

A new group may be started to meet the need for a new *place*—like

the AA meeting that just "began to happen" at Grand Central Station in New York, and eventually a group formed. Meetings in the chapel at Kennedy Airport. The group at the South Pole. And the groups that are constantly being formed in the suburbs, reflecting shifts in the general population.

A new group may be started because a new *kind* of meeting is wanted. Step meetings start for this reason. Beginners meetings are different from regular closed meetings in both content and emphasis. Big Book study meetings have become popular in many places. Workshop meetings are sometimes held, without a speaker or a specific discussion topic—just free-floating, unstructured talk. There are Eleventh Step groups and, I'm sure, many other new kinds of meetings as well.



Finally, alcoholics may band together in a group because of some commonality in addition to their disease. Men's stag groups and women's groups are common examples, as are young people's

groups, gay groups, "slippers" groups, and doctors', lawyers', priests', sailors', etc., etc. groups. You may have heard of a new network of groups of this kind that are super-anonymous, for they consist of commercial airline pilots and other flight personnel and meet at airports. (These groups call themselves "Birds of a Feather.")

Some dedicated and sincere AA members deplore these so-called special-interest groups. They argue that such groups are divisive, a threat to AA unity. Yet some kinds of special-interest groups have been with us almost as long as AA has existed. And the Fellowship has proved remarkably resilient. If such a group is exclusionary—that is, if any drunk who wants help cannot go to that group and find help—then it is in conflict with the Third Tradition and possibly the Fifth as well. Otherwise, if the group conforms to the six points that define an AA group—i.e., if it is self-supporting, has no outside affiliations, etc.—then, by Conference action, the General Service Office recognizes it and lists it.

If a young person relates more easily in his early recovery to other young people, why not? If a drunken doctor is more likely to be reached by a peer than by a patient, who's to argue? Bill W. was very strong on group autonomy. In Tradition Four in the "Twelve and Twelve," he says, "very simply . . . every AA group can manage its affairs exactly

as it pleases, except when AA as a whole is threatened." And "Every group had the right to be wrong."

What incredible freedom and liberty we enjoy in AA! No wonder groups are proliferating like mayflies!

If we study where the new groups are forming, we can observe the following interesting phenomenon: Where AA is strongest and most populous, it tends to grow stronger, faster; conversely, where there are fewer groups and the AAs are not as numerous, growth is much slower and harder.

For example, in 1976, Minnesota reported 556 groups. Thus, it ranked eleventh among all the states in number of AA groups, although it ranks nineteenth in total population. In 1977, Minnesota added eighty-one new groups. California, with 2,454 groups in 1976, added 366 new groups last year. The province of Quebec, with 834, added 142. And so on.

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At the other end of the spectrum, a state that had only seventy-two groups in 1976 added eight more in 1977—a respectable increase percentage-wise, but small in actual numbers. Similarly, two other states, with seventy-three and sixty respectively, were able to add only fourteen groups between them in the course of the year.

This pattern of growth is probably

inherent in an organization that grows only on a one-to-one basis, as AA does. Where the Fellowship is sparse and spread thin—i.e., where members are few—there are just not that many people to make Twelfth



Step calls, AA is just not visible and available enough to attract the prospects who are still drinking.

In other localities, exploding with new AA meetings, teeming with members—there, enthusiasm and spirit run high; twelfth-steppers are running around like ants on a hot hill; and the poor drunk can't turn around without running into a friend who has found this new way of life.

A couple of times a year, I leave Greenwich, with its nineteen meetings a week, and travel to Idaho, where I have a farm in the Big Lost River Valley. When I do, I look up the Lost River Group of Alcoholics Anonymous. It meets somewhat irregularly, because its four members are spread out over sixty miles in



three small, isolated hamlets. One of the four members is a woman—but she works nights.

Although some of the Lost River members have long sobriety—and all seemingly have good quality of sobriety—they have a chance to do Twelfth Step work only very occasionally and perhaps only a two-person meeting to attract new members. So it isn't easy for a drunk to latch on to AA in that part of Idaho, and the Fellowship grows at a snail's pace—though I personally love and admire the members of that little Lost River Group.

How different it is in Moorhead, Minn., where I also visited recently. It's a town of 30,000 population—big in comparison with the Lost River Valley in Idaho, but not exactly a major metropolis, either. One of its AA groups (the Thursday Night Group) regularly draws 150 young, enthusiastic members full of love and joy and gratitude. Because so many of them are young, they attract *more* young people. Because so many of them are female, they attract *more* females.

Although scrupulously maintain-

ing traditional anonymity at the public level, AAs are a visible force in the community of Moorhead. So they are expanding at an increasing rate, and the Thursday Night Group has spawned several offshoot groups—also big and growing and full of enthusiasm.

This pattern of growth was observable in AA as a whole from the earliest days. It took four years to grow from two members to about a hundred; another two years, to reach 2,000. Today, we estimate conservatively that we acquire over 100,000 new members each year, worldwide. In the early days, recruits to AA were counted, triumphantly, individual by individual. While we still deal only on an individual-to-individual basis, there are just a whale of a lot more individuals involved!

Other extremely powerful factors have worked, as well, to encourage AA growth in the past five to seven years. Perhaps the most significant factor has been the proliferation of rehabilitation programs and treatment centers. Adding to the momentum have been court programs for

drunk-driving offenders, industrial programs for employees, and armed services alcoholism programs. The National Council on Alcoholism has also accomplished much in alcoholism education and efforts aimed at decreasing the stigma.

All this has caused headaches for AA, but it has also contributed to growth. Alcoholics came out of the woodwork. They sought help. They received it. And, although alcoholics can sober up in any of a myriad of ways, the only way they stay sober (to the best of my knowledge, anyway) is in Alcoholics Anonymous. No wonder we are bursting at the seams!

With growth have come growing pains. Groups in the vicinity of treatment centers have been inundated with busloads of patients. Young people bring with them the problems of other addictions, not to mention explicit language and free discussion of sex. Court-referred drunk-driving offenders want attendance slips signed. These and a thousand other problems have strained AA unity and rocked the serenity of many an old-timer.

The continuing miracle is that Alcoholics Anonymous weathers every storm and flourishes. One reason it flourishes is that it is girded about by the Twelve Traditions that protect our Fellowship from threats posed by a turbulent and changing society. Another reason is that our service structure—loose, anarchistic, based on responsibility rather than authority—seems to resist change at the core but to be amazingly resilient to temporary tempests that might tear apart other organizations

But the main reason AA flourishes, I believe, is simply that it works. Sick people get well here. "Don't drink, and go to meetings, and you'll get better," my sponsor told me. Today, there are a lot more meetings to go to, and a much wider variety of meetings to choose from, but when the newcomer gets there, he finds exactly the same recovery program, the same Twelve Steps, the same understanding and love and caring that I found and that every drunk has found in AA for forty-three years.

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