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GROWING PAINS HERE AND ABROAD

The founding of a new group of Alcoholics Anonymous is considerably more difficult and complicated than opening up a new roadside hot dog stand.

Although this fact is self-evident it does seem to be occasion for surprise and discouragement here and there as new A.A. groups get underway throughout this country and other countries. Frequently the enthusiastic sponsors of new groups become baffled to the point of despair when called upon to share in the growing pains of a new group. Some are apt even to become disillusioned when they learn that a new group cannot always be started with a merry wave of the hand, and that the first meeting does not necessarily set in motion a steady and serene growth.

Perhaps it is natural to expect that an idea as inspiring and demonstrative as A.A. can be planted easily, will take root quickly and will grow rapidly, almost without any further care and cultivation. In his own boundless enthusiasm, the A.A. whose anticipation runs this way is forgetting that although the idea he is attempting to plant and make grow is good, he is still dealing with alcoholism, which sprouts many tough weeds.

The proper A.A. mental stance by the would be sponsor or sponsors is the first step in the founding of a new group. The sponsor who realizes that new groups inevitably experience a variety of troubles will be prepared for them.

Differences of opinion as to policy, where to meet, what kind of meeting to have, how to pay the rent, what to do about "slips," and all of the other tribulations that pop up are to be expected.

A.A. is now enjoying its most rapid growth. New groups are mushrooming all over God's acres. The difficulties of starting new groups are therefore obviously not preventing the spread of A.A. throughout the world.

But, the difficulties may be minimized and the wear and tear on members who help start new groups will be lessened by a better understanding of the obstacles. Many will find much reassurance and guidance by directing their thoughts back to the story of how A.A. started. That the first group consisted of just two men. Then there was a third. For a long, long time there was only a handful. They had no money, no clubrooms, no publications to help them spread the word, no sympathetic audience to listen, no inspiring record to support them. They had no sympathetic public to help them and wish them well. The press didn't know them, nor did the ministry or the medical profession.

But out of that discouraging beginning, the whole of A.A. began.

No matter what the troubles of starting a new group may be today, they scarcely can compare to the troubles that the first A.A. group experienced. But it is not necessary even to go back that far to find comparative encouragement. For

example, it is indeed much less difficult to found a new group now in the United States where A.A. is well and favorably known from coast to coast and border to border - much less difficult than to start a new group in some other country where it is not known.

Below are excerpts from a letter received by a member here from the sponsor of the first group in Australia, or as he writes, the first group in the British Empire outside of Canada. After reading of the troubles they have been experiencing in Sydney, those encountered in this country may not seem as large. And it is most encouraging to note from the letter below that notwithstanding the difficulties, the new group in Australia - now 17 months old - is growing.

"After many false starts we eventually managed to get a branch of A.A. going in Sydney. This was about twelve months ago (as of Jan. 21, 1946). Now we have a group of about twenty. Some of our members relapse at times but many are much better than they were. It is becoming our experience that most of our members after being sober for some weeks are sure that they have the thing beaten, have one drink and then we have the devil's own job with them.

"It would seem that it takes one or two relapses to convince most members that they have no control over their drinking. This was probably your experience in the U.S.A.

"We also are finding out that as the group continues to grow, clashes of opinion occur amongst members as to policy. We are having many ups and downs but in spite of all of this we are making definite progress. If you could see the branch after 12 months you would heartily agree. Inquiries come in the whole time and inebriates themselves are beginning to turn to us for help. They know that they are beaten and we are the only ones capable of helping them.

"We are meeting many difficulties. In the first place none of our members yet know enough of A.A. This is the first branch formed in the British Empire (Canada, of course, excepted) and whilst we are full of enthusiasm our technique is poor. We still require much more experience.

"Americans are more religious than Australians and the religious side is the greatest difficulty our members face. This will come later but very gradually. In other words we have not yet learned how to interpret A.A. principles to suit Australians. We want guidance and often I have wished that your visits to Australia would be very frequent to keep us free from error and show us the right path. When one of your members can come to Sydney to spend a holiday he will be kept very busy explaining A.A. and showing us what mistakes we are making and why we lose so many prospective members.

"In the second place our greatest stumbling block is the drying out of members. Time and time again we are

approached by members, by relatives of inebriates to 'get them off the booze.' At the present time we can do nothing. I take a few home but this is unsatisfactory. Members are trying to get a home with three or four beds to nurse them but the house shortage is so bad that this is impossible at present. A syndicate of business men is flirting with the idea of starting a private hospital for the treatment of wealthy inebriates. This would solve some of our difficulties. Also the government may start a clinic to treat inebriates in hospitals instead of in gaol.

"Our third difficulty is finding club rooms...and office accommodations cannot be found in Sydney today.

"It was yourself that gave me the idea of A.A. and to you we feel eternally grateful. M_____got on the booze and was picked up dead in one of the lowest slums in Sydney - a tragedy that should have been prevented. But we hear of these things happening every day and we want to prevent them. Please God we will be able to do so in the near future.

"I certainly would like your version of the 12 Steps. I personally feel that in the rapid expansion during the past 12 months we tend here to lose sight of these Steps and that is why so many of our members have relapsed at times. We now intend to read the 12 Steps at each

meeting and to analyze and discuss them.

"I am looking forward to meeting you at some time in the future, perhaps in America, perhaps in Australia. Wherever you are rest assured of my good wishes and that I am ever grateful to you for your friendship."