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Clubs In A.A. Are They With Us to Stay?

By Bill

The club idea has become part of A.A. life. Scores of these hospitable havens can report years of useful service; new ones are being started monthly. Were a vote taken tomorrow on the desirability of clubs a sizeable majority of A.A.s would record a resounding "yes." There would be thousands who would testify that they might have had a harder time staying sober in their first months of A.A. without clubs and that, in any case, they would always wish the easy contacts and warm friendships which clubs afford.

Being the majority view, we might suppose that a blanket endorsement for clubs; we might think we couldn't get along without them. We might conceive them as a central A.A. institution - a sort of "13th Step" of our Recovery Program without which the other 12 Steps wouldn't work. At times club enthusiasts will act as though they really believed we could handle our alcohol problems by club life alone. They are apt to depend upon clubs rather than upon the A.A. Program.

But we have A.A.s, rather a strong minority, too, who want no part of clubs. Not only, they assert, does the social life of a club often divert the attentions of members from the program, they claim that clubs are an actual drag on A.A. progress. They point to the danger of

clubs degenerating into mere hangouts, even "joints;" they stress the bickerings that do arise over questions of money, management, and personal authority; they are afraid of "incidents" that might give us unfavorable publicity. In short, they "view with alarm." Thumbs down on clubs, they say.

Need for Clubs Established

Toward a middle ground, for several years now, we have been feeling our way. Despite alarms it is quite settled that A.A.s who need and want clubs ought to have them. So the real concern is not whether we shall have them. So the real concern is not whether we shall have clubs. It is how we shall enhance them as assets, how we may diminish their known liabilities; how we shall be sure, in the long future, that their liabilities do not exceed their assets.

Of our four largest A.A. centers, two are club-minded and two are not. I happen to live in one which is. The very first A.A. club of all was started in New York. Though our experience here may not have been the best, it is the one I know. So, by way of portraying the principles and problems we need to discuss, I shall use it, as an average illustration of club evolution, rather than as a model set-up.

When A.A. was very young we met in homes. People came miles, not only for the A.A. meeting itself, but to sit hours afterward at coffee, cake, and eager intimate talk. Alcoholics and their families had been lonely too long.

Then homes became too small. We couldn't bear to break up into many little meetings, so we looked for a larger place. We lodged first in the work shop of a tailoring establishment, then in a rented room in Steinway Hall. This kept us together during the meeting hour. Afterward we held forth at a cafeteria, but something was missing. It was the home atmosphere; a restaurant didn't have enough of it. Let's have a club, someone said. So we had a club. We took over an interesting place, the former Artists and Illustrators Club on West 24th Street. What excitement! A couple of our older members signed the lease. We painted and scrubbed. We had a home. Wonderful memories of days and nights at that first club will always linger.

But, it must be admitted, not all those memories are ecstatic. Growth brought headaches; growing pains, we call them now. How serious they seemed then! "Dictators" ran amuck; drunks fell on the floor or disturbed the meetings, "steering committees" tried to nominate their friends to succeed them and found to their dismay that even sober drunks

couldn't be "steered." Sometimes we could scarcely get up the rent; card players were impervious to any suggestion that they talk to new people; lady secretaries got in each others' hair. A corporation was formed to take over the clubroom lease so we then had "officials." Should these "directors" run the club or would it be the A.A. rotating committee?

Such were our problems. We found that the use of money, the need for a certain amount of club organization and the crowded intimacy of the place created situations we hadn't anticipated.

Club life still had great joys. But it had liabilities too, that was for sure. Was it worth all the risk and trouble? The answer was "Yes" for the 24th Street Club kept right on going, and is today occupied by the A.A. seamen. We have, besides, three more clubs in this area, a fourth is contemplated.

Start As Central Function

Our first club was known, of course, as an "A.A. Clubhouse." The corporation holding its lease was titled "Alcoholics Anonymous of New York, Inc." Only later did we realize we had incorporated the whole of New York State, a mistake recently rectified. Of course our incorporation should have covered "24th Street" only. Throughout the country most clubs have started like ours did. At first we regarded them as central A.A. institutions. But later experience invariably brings a shift in their status, a shift much to be desired, we now think.

For example, the early Manhattan A.A. Club had members from every section of the metropolitan area, including New Jersey. After a while dozens of groups sprang up in our suburban districts. They got themselves more convenient meeting places. Our Jersey friends secured a club of their own. So these outlying groups, originally spawned from the Manhattan Clubhouse, began to acquire hundreds of members who were not tied to Manhattan either by convenience, inclination or oldtime sentiment. They had their own local A.A. friends, their own convenient gathering places. They weren't interested in Manhattan.

This irked us New Yorkers not a little. Since we had nurtured them, why shouldn't they be interested? We were puzzled why they refused to consider the Manhattan Club the A.A. Center for the metropolitan area. Wasn't the club running a central meeting with speakers from other groups? Didn't we maintain a paid secretary who sat in the New York Clubhouse taking telephone calls for assistance and making hospital arrangements for all groups in the area? Of course, we thought, our outlying groups ought financially to support the Manhattan Club; dutiful children should look after their "parents." But our parental pleas were no use. Though many outlying A.A. members personally contributed to the 24th Street Club, nary a cent did their respective groups ever send in.

Then we took another tack. If the outlying groups would not support the

Club they at least might want to pay the salary of its secretary. She was really doing an "area" job. Surely this was a reasonable request. But it never got anywhere. They just couldn't mentally separate the "area secretary" from the Manhattan Club. So, for a long time, our area needs, our common A.A. problem, and our club management were tied into a trying financial and psychological snarl.

Clubs Separate Business

This tangle slowly commenced to unravel, as we began to get the idea that clubs ought to be strictly the business of those individuals who specially want clubs, and who are willing to pay for them. We began to see that club management is a pure business proposition which ought to be separately incorporated under another name such, for example, as "Alanon;" that the "directors" of a club corporation ought to look after club business only; that an A.A. group, as such, should never get into active management of a business project. Hectic experience has since taught us that if an A.A. rotating committee tries to boss the club corporation or if the corporation tries to run the A.A. affairs of those groups who may meet at the club there is difficulty at once. The only way we have found to cure this is *to separate the material from the spiritual*. If an A.A. group wishes to use a given club let them pay rent or split the meeting take with the club management. To a small group opening its first clubroom this procedure may seem silly

because, for the moment, the group members will also be club members. Nevertheless separation by early incorporation is recommended because it will save much confusion later on as other groups start forming in the area.

Questions are often asked: "Who elects the business directors of a club?" And "Does club membership differ from A.A. membership?" As practices vary we don't quite know the answers yet. The most reasonable suggestions seem these: Any A.A. member ought to feel free to enjoy the ordinary privileges of any A.A. club whether he makes a regular voluntary contribution or not. If he contributes regularly he should, in addition, be entitled to vote in the business meetings which elect the business directors of his club corporation. This would open all clubs to all A.A.s. But it would limit their business conduct to those interested enough to contribute regularly. In this connection we might remind ourselves that in A.A. we have no fees or compulsory dues. But it ought to be added, of course, that since clubs are becoming separate and private ventures they can be run on other lines if their members insist.

Club evolution is also telling us this: In none but small communities are clubs likely to remain the principal centers of A.A. activity. Originally starting

as the main center of a city many a club moves to larger and larger quarters, thinking to retain the central meeting for its area within its own walls. Finally, however, circumstances defeat this purpose.

Valuable Social Aids

Circumstance number one is that the growing A.A. will burst the walls of any clubhouse. Sooner or later the principal or central meeting has to be moved into a large auditorium. The club can't hold it. This is a fact which ought to be soberly contemplated whenever we think of buying or building large clubhouses. A second circumstance seems sure to leave most clubs in an "off center" position, especially in large cities. That is our strong tendency toward central or intergroup committee management of the common A.A. problems of metropolitan areas. Every area, sooner or later, realizes that such concerns as intergroup meetings, hospital arrangements, local public relations, a central office for interviews and information, are things in which every A.A. is interested, whether he has any use for clubs or not. These being strictly A.A. matters, a central or intergroup committee has to be elected and financed to look after them. The

groups of an area will usually support with group funds these truly central activities. Even though the club is still large enough for intergroup meetings and these meetings are still held, the center of gravity for the area will continue to shift to the intergroup committee and its central activities. The club is left definitely outside; where, in the opinion of many, it should be. Actively supported and managed by those who want clubs, they can be "taken or left alone."

Should these principles be fully applied to our clubs, we shall have placed ourselves in a position to enjoy their warmth yet drop any that get too hot. We shall then realize that a club is but a valuable social aid. And, more important still, we shall always preserve the simple A.A. group as that primary spiritual entity whence issues our greatest strength.