

Organized for Service: The Historical Role of Intergroups in AA

By Linda R.

A fellowship without rules and regulations

Bill Wilson, AA's co-founder, wrote this in the July 1946 Grapevine:

So long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our Recovery Program, even anti-each other — these rampant individuals are still an AA Group if *they think so!* (Italics in the original.)

The founders and early members of AA had a vision of a fellowship without rules, regulations, conformity and dogma. They had the confidence to believe that AA's lack of organization would ensure its endurance. This is why AA has Tradition Three: the only requirement for memberships is a desire to stop drinking. This is why AA has Tradition Four: each group functions autonomously by following its own conscience.

The spirit of AA is deeply anti-organizational and that is by design, not by accident or by an oversight that now needs to be corrected. That is why Traditions Eight and Nine explicitly define the role of service centers, boards and committees as providing **service**, rather than exercising any form of governance. Service centers, such as Intergroup / Central Offices, with their boards and committees, have no authority to impose rules or regulations on AA groups or individual AA members.

In an editorial "On the Ninth Tradition" published in the August 1948 Grapevine, Bill W. writes:

AA has always violently resisted the idea of any general organization. Yet, paradoxically, we have ever stoutly insisted upon organizing certain *special services* (italics in original); mostly those absolutely necessary to effective and plentiful 12th Step work. If, for instance, an AA group elects a secretary or rotating committee, if an area forms an intergroup committee, if we set up a Foundation, a General Office or a Grapevine, then we are organized for service.

Traditions Eight and Nine remind us that the organized part of AA ought to be no more organized than is minimally necessary to maintain a service structure. We are not organized to impose governance, but we are **organized for service**.

The spirit that shaped Traditions Eight and Nine has often been threatened throughout AAs history, usually by fear. Often, during the development of Traditions Eight and Nine in the 1930s and 1940s, there were arguments, sometimes contentious and boisterous. Many were fearful and sometimes became fearful to the point of preferring the certainty of rules, regulations, conformity, and dogma to the simplicity of a few basic principles and traditions. Those who were fearful pointed out that every nation, political party, church, corporation, benevolent association, in fact every form of society, had to have a government administered by human beings. The power to direct or govern was at the heart of all the organizations they saw everywhere. They asked whether it was even possible to have a

fellowship that couldn't enforce obedience to rules and regulations, especially when the world around them demonstrated that every other organization gave authority to some of its members to impose obedience upon other members to follow rules and to expel offenders who violated the rules.

In spite of the fear that AA would fail without rules and regulations, the anti-organizational spirit of our founders and early members triumphed, and in July 1950 the first AA International Convention voted to adopt all Twelve Traditions. Thereafter, AA moved forward, in unity, understanding that as difficult as it might be to implement, our lack of organization was much preferable to its alternative.

The history of Intergroup / Central Offices is intertwined with the development of the Eighth and Ninth Traditions. These service centers are based on the **organized for service** principle outlined in these traditions. It is not only fascinating to read about the history of these service centers, but their history deserves a closer look, both by newcomers and outsiders alike, and occasionally even old-timers, who could benefit from knowledge of the minimally organized part of AA necessary to maintain a service structure.

History of Intergroup / Central Offices

The first forerunner to today's Intergroup / Central Offices, the Central Committee, was established in Cleveland Ohio in October 1939, four years after AA's co-founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob met. At that time a committee of seven – five men and two women – began meeting in Cleveland once a month. In addition to being the first Central Committee, this is said to be the first example of rotation in AA since one man and one woman dropped off each month to be replaced by the next in line according to seniority.

Cleveland's Central Committee was established only five months after Cleveland's first AA group started on May 11, 1939. This AA group is considered group number three, forming as an offshoot of AA group number one in Akron (AA group number two was in New York). Clarence S., along with his wife Dorothy, and a group of about 11 others had previously been traveling regularly to Akron to attend the meetings of AA group number one. This group of 13 began meeting in the home of Abby G. and his wife Grace and by September membership had grown to 38, at which point the Central Committee was formed. "It's really functioning," Dorothy noted in her October 1939 letter to New York. "They appoint leaders, discuss tendencies, and arrange social affairs, and they are thinking of a masked dance for Halloween," she said. (*Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers*, Chapter 15)

At this point, Clarence S. came across Elrick B. Davis, a reporter for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and persuaded him to write a five-part series of articles about AA, which appeared in the latter part of October 1939. The articles were printed in the middle of the *Plain Dealer's* editorial page, along with additional positive articles by the editors themselves every three to four days. The newspaper's switchboard was deluged by requests for information about AA. The requests were relayed to Clarence S and his wife Dorothy and from them to members of their AA group. The volume of 12th step calls was tremendous, and the small group of AA's scrambled to meet the demand.

It was soon evident that a scheme of personal sponsorship would have to be devised for the new people. Each prospect was assigned an older AA, who visited him at his home or in the hospital, instructed him on AA principles and conducted him to his first meeting. But in the face of many hundreds of pleas for help, the supply of elders could

not possibly match the demand. Brand-new AAs sober only a month or even a week, had to sponsor alcoholics still drying up in the hospitals. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 20-21)

The Central Committee was utilized "to coordinate efforts regarding hospitalizations and sponsorship," according to Clarence S. "We met once a month, and then we decided to open an office," Clarence said in later years. "Up to then, we had a post office box and telephone." As Dorothy recalled, "When those articles hit Cleveland, people simply besieged the place. Our phone never quit ringing for about a month, and I did nothing but sit by the telephone and take inquiries." (*Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers*, Chapter 15)

Cleveland's response over the next year was the first example of how a service structure can be effectively utilized when it's impossible for individual groups in an area to handle all aspects of twelfth-step work alone. It also started the shift from individual A.A.'s seeking out alcoholics one-by-one, as was previously the case in Akron and New York, to one where alcoholics seek out AA in large numbers. The number of Cleveland AA members quickly grew and their meetings multiplied rapidly. In contrast, the membership numbers in New York and Akron remained relatively flat.

We old-timers in New York and Akron had regarded this fantastic phenomenon with deep misgivings. Had it not taken us four whole years, littered with countless failures to produce even a hundred good recoveries? Yet there in Cleveland we saw about twenty members, not very experienced themselves, suddenly confronted by hundreds of newcomers as a result of the *Plain Dealer* articles. How could they possibly manage? We did not know.

But a year later we did know; for by then Cleveland had about thirty groups and several hundred members. Growing pains and group problems had been terrifying, but no amount of squabbling could dampen the mass demand for sobriety. Yes, Cleveland's results were of the best. There results were in fact so good, and AAs membership elsewhere so small, that many a Clevelander really thought AA had started there in the first place. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 21-22)

A month before the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* articles were printed, Liberty magazine, a national publication, had printed the article "Alcoholics and God", by Morris Markey.

The article generated 800 inquiries to AA "headquarters" in New York, which consisted of a post office box in New York and a small office in Newark, shared by Bill W., Hank P and nonalcoholic Ruth Hock. All of the inquiries were responded to, almost singled handedly, by Ruth, who would later become the first AA National Secretary. Ruth wrote letters back to each of the individuals who had requested information about AA. She also maintained a list of these individuals, and would provide the names to members of AA who were traveling to an area where these individuals lived. The traveling AA member was expected to make 12th step calls based on the names on the list and help to start AA in that area. For example, when one of the New York members, Ray W., went to San Francisco in 1940 to take a sales course, he was given a list of inquiries from that area and asked to contact each person on the list:

Ray had been an atheist and he still stuck to it. Nevertheless, he had been sober a couple of years and was broad-minded enough to take the AA book to San Francisco with him. We handed him a list of inquiries from that area which had been contacted by

mail only. When he got to San Francisco Ray began calling up these people, and a few of them gathered at his hotel. He said to them. "Now, boys, this AA is great stuff. It really saved my life. But there's one feature of it I don't like. I mean this God business. So when you read this book, you can skip that part of it. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* Pages, pp. 87-88)

How an AA member performed their 12th step work was strictly their own business. The role of headquarters in New York was to arrange the 12th step call, but not to oversee or direct the content of 12th step work. A similar example occurred in the Philadelphia area. Jim Burwell, an atheist and the AA member credited with the origination of the phrase "God as we understood Him" in the Big Book, was dispatched by headquarters on a 12th step call to Philadelphia. George S., a resident of Philadelphia, had read the *Liberty* article and written to New York. His name was given to salesman Jim B., who traveled that territory. Jim B. held the first AA meeting at George's home, and that's how AA started in the City of Brotherly Love – with an atheist's 12th step call. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 17-18)

In March 1941, the *Saturday Evening Post*, another national publication, printed an article on AA, written by Jack Alexander, a well-respected journalist. This article generated 6,000 inquiries to AA's post office box in New York. Ruth answered these inquiries in the same way she had answered the inquiries generated from the *Liberty* article in 1939: writing letters and sending AA members on 12th step calls to these individuals.

New York "headquarters" was not the only location affected by the *Saturday Evening Post* article. In the years 1937 to 1940, Chicago had formed a small nucleus of AAs, beginning with Earl T. and his wife Katie, later joined by several others. One of them, Sylvia, donated funding to set up an AA office, and provided the services of her nonalcoholic personal secretary, Grace Cultice, to respond to the large number of inquiries in the Chicago area.

As AA in Chicago slowly grew and prospered, Grace was continually at the business end of Sylvia's phone, and she became the group's first secretary. When the *Saturday Evening Post* article appeared in 1941, the traffic became very heavy. Sylvia's place became a sort of Chicago Grand Central and things were just about as rugged with Earl and Katie. So they rented a one-room office in the Loop, and secretary Grace was installed there to direct the stream of applicants for Twelfth Step attention, hospitalization or other help." (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 23)

Although Cleveland already had a Central Committee by 1940, Chicago's one-room office is often referred to as the first Intergroup / Central Office or organized service center.

Back in New York, a local service center began to be operated informally out of an AA clubhouse that had been established in 1940, on Manhattan's West 24th Street. While AA's "headquarters" in Newark responded to inquiries on a national level, this local service center responded to local inquiries.

In New York City, the AA Clubhouse on 334 1/2 West 24th Street was established in 1940. This was the hub of AA activity on the local level. In 1942, the first New York City Central Committee was formed to handle inquiries from new prospects. They hired two (2) secretaries who were responsible for answering letters and phone calls.

The New Jersey meetings were also using the Clubhouse on West 24th Street as their headquarters. Meetings in New Jersey, started by Hank P. began in 1936. Even though these weren't officially, AA meetings, AA grew in New Jersey until it was necessary to form their own Central Committee in 1944. (Mitchell K., *Growth of Central Offices*, <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blmitch19.htm>)

The New York Central Committee was eventually replaced, as membership grew, with what is now known as the New York Inter-Group. This Inter-Group was formed in 1946 by 23 founding groups from Brooklyn, Manhattan, Nassau County, Queens, Staten Island, Suffolk County, The Bronx and Westchester County. After the New Jersey Central Committee was formed, Hank P., who had argued vehemently against using the word "God" in the 12 Steps (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 166-67), served as the first full-time paid secretary of that office from 1944-49.

In Columbus, Ohio a service center was started in 1943, today called the Fellowship Intergroup. Los Angeles opened a service center a year later, in 1944. Colorado and Maryland opened service centers by 1946, followed by Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Wisconsin and—Canada's first—Alberta. At least 16 service centers existed by the time the first General Service Conference was held in April 1951. An Intergroup office in Akron, the birthplace of AA, was opened in April 1954.

Over time, many service centers incorporated as not-for-profits, similar to the New York Inter-Group. The naming conventions for these service centers changed over time too. Names like Central Committee or AA Association were replaced by the naming convention of Intergroup or Central Office. The term "intergroup" was first used in 1953 in Charleston, West Virginia. The term evolved from the association between AA and the first treatment center in the state, called the Alcan Center, Inc., which was founded in 1944. The terms Intergroup and Central Office are interchangeable. Currently, there are 757 Intergroup / Central Offices registered with AA's General Service Office; 514 are located in the United States and Canada.

Just as each AA group functioned autonomously from other AA groups, each service center functioned autonomously from any other service center:

Throughout the 1940s, AA Central Offices sprung up around the country as AA membership and the number of Groups grew. Each one had their own set of rules and regulations affecting local groups. Some areas even had rival Central Committees due to one faction not agreeing with the other one's rules. The long heard Rule 62 story probably came about as a result of all of these rules and regulations. If all the rules were put into effect by AA, no alcoholic would qualify for membership in Alcoholics Anonymous. (Mitchell K., *Growth of Central Offices*, <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blmitch19.htm>)

And indeed it was a service center manager that developed Rule 62. In those early days, one sober AA member decided to create a rule-driven service center.

As he saw it, the right setup would require a very big building and would take an awful lot of money. On one floor there would be a club. On the next floor there would be a meeting room. On the next, a clinic and rehabilitation center. Upstairs, there surely would have to be a loan agency where the indigent alcoholic could borrow a little spare cash. Such was his vision of the new center! He was some promoter, this one, and he

actually sold the townspeople on his idea. He, naturally, was to become the general manager. His blueprint involved three separate corporations, one for the club, one for the clinic, and one for the loan department. Altogether, he wrote sixty-one rules, regulations and by-laws to make these corporations do their good work. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 104)

After a long interval, this man wrote to AA headquarters in New York, admitting the failure of his service center, and along with his letter sent a card, which he had already mailed to every AA group in the United States.

It was folded like a golf score card, and on the outside was printed “Group so-and-so, place so-and so. Rule No. 62.” When the card was unfolded a single pungent sentence met the eye: “Don’t take yourself too damned seriously. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p 104)

In contrast, most service centers were not nearly so ambitious. In a second Saturday Evening Post article about AA, “*The Drunkard's Best Friend*”, published April 1950, just shy of AA’s 15th anniversary, Jack Alexander describes how AA typically communicated with non-members and offered its services:

In most cities of any size the fraternity has a telephone listed in its own name. A nickel call will bring a volunteer worker who won't talk down to a drunk, as the average nonalcoholic has a way of doing but will talk convincingly in the jargon of the drunk. The worker won't do any urging; he will describe the Alcoholics Anonymous program in abbreviated form and depart. The drunk is invited to telephone again if he is serious about wanting to become sober. Or a drunk, on his own initiative or in tow of a relative, may drop in at the AA office, where he will receive the same nonevangelistic treatment. In the larger cities the offices do a rushing trade, especially after weekends or legal holidays. Many small-town and village groups maintain clubrooms over the bank or feed store; in one Canadian town the AAs share quarters with a handbook operator, using it by night after the bookie has gone home. Some of these groups carry a standing classified advertisement in the daily or weekly newspaper. If they don't, a small amount of inquiry will disclose the meeting place of the nearest group; a local doctor, or clergyman, or policeman will know.

While many of these offices maintained an “open door” to anyone seeking sobriety, others did not:

In those days AA wasn’t easy to find—and we kept it that way,” one old-timer, sober since 1940, remembers. “A carefully selected group of priests, judges and policemen knew about AA; our phone number wasn’t listed and could be gotten only from information. That way we knew that any newcomer who found us had generally made enough of an effort to guarantee the sincerity of his desire for sobriety.” In 1946 the Twelve Traditions were published, and the Third Tradition—“The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking”—raised the level of tolerance by rendering subjective judgment superfluous when it came to who was sincere and who wasn’t. (Box 459, News and Notes from the General Service Office of AA, *A Lot of History Enlightens Work of Intergroup / Central Offices Today*, February-March 2002, Vol. 48, No. 1)

At first the service centers were run solely by AA volunteers. However, in the 1940's many of the service centers, especially in large metropolitan areas, became so busy that full-time employees became needed as well. The question then became, are these employees being paid for doing Twelfth Step work? This question was eventually answered by the adoption of the Eighth Tradition in 1950, which states: "AA should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers."

The formulation of the Eighth Tradition began in October 1942 when Clarence S formed an investigating committee in Cleveland after hearing that Bill and Dr Bob were receiving royalties from Big Book sales and a weekly monetary stipend from the Rockefeller Foundation. Bill and Dr. Bob were asked to come to Cleveland to discuss the issue with the committee. Upon examining the certified audit of AA's financial records, the committee verified that both Bill and Dr. Bob were receiving \$30 a week from Rockefeller, and that they had been assigned royalties from Big Book sales. Bill was receiving \$25 a week in Big Book royalties, whereas Dr. Bob's royalties were temporarily being used to pay for AA office work. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 193-94)

The controversy stemmed from Clarence and the committee's resistance to the idea that Bill and Dr. Bob should be paid for their AA work, since an informal tradition had already been established on professionalism and paid workers. The informal tradition was that AA was to be non-professional, and no one in AA should take money for their 12th step service work. There was however another side to the issue:

But would this constitute professionalism, within our growing Tradition? Some members said this *would* [italics in original] make us professionals; we would be making money out of A.A . But our experience elsewhere had begun to indicate that this was not necessarily so. Our clubs were paying for caretakers, most of them A. A. members. They were not paid anything for their Twelfth Step work, but they were recompensed as janitors and cooks. We simply had to have their full-time services. Our New York Office had just engaged an alcoholic staff member, full time. Was she a "professional AA"? Obviously not. She was being paid for special services, as a secretary. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 194-95)

In this way the principle of special services, separate from non-professional 12th step work, was established. The principle allowed Bill and Dr. Bob to receive royalties from Big Book sales, because writing the Big Book was designated as a *special service* and not 12th Step work. It allowed caretakers and secretaries who worked at service centers to receive a weekly paycheck because they were not actually performing 12th Step work but were doing what any professional in their occupation would do. In the decades following the adoption of the Eight Tradition, a number of books and pamphlets were approved by the AA General Service Conference, and published by AA. World Service, Inc., whose purpose was to help AA members to understand the concept of non-professional versus professional work done in AA. For example, one pamphlet published in 1971 states:

But new questions arose as the membership grew, and the word of hope spread, sending thousands of alcoholics in search of AA. The first intergroups or central offices were usually manned by AA volunteers: now, most such offices are so busy that full-time employees are needed as well. Naturally, AAs are better suited to such jobs than are nonmembers - but are these AAs then being paid for doing Twelfth Step work? No. In the office, they are just paving the way for this work to be done. Arranging to get the

sick drunk into a hospital, telling a shaky newcomer where the nearest meeting is tonight, they are helping to make it possible for that alcoholic to hear the message “person to person and face to face.” (*The Twelve Traditions Illustrated*, AA World Service Inc.)

In addition to addressing the issue of “professionalism”, the Eighth Tradition also addresses the issue of “organization” by acknowledging the existence of service centers. The Ninth Tradition expands more fully on the service center concept, stating: “AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.” In an editorial “On the Ninth Tradition” published in the August 1948 Grapevine, Bill W. writes:

AA has always violently resisted the idea of any general organization. Yet, paradoxically, we have ever stoutly insisted upon organizing certain *special services*; [italics in original] mostly those absolutely necessary to effective and plentiful 12th Step work. If, for instance, an AA group elects a secretary or rotating committee, if an area forms an intergroup committee, if we set up a Foundation, a General Office or a Grapevine, then we are organized for service. The AA book and pamphlets, or meeting places and clubs, our dinners and regional assemblies –these are services too. Nor can we secure good hospital connections, properly sponsor new prospects and obtain good public relations just by chance. People have to be appointed to look after these things, sometimes paid people. Special services are performed.

The resistance to “any general organization” was based on several factors. One of these was knowledge of previous movements similar to AA which had failed, such as the Washingtonians. It was perceived that one factor in the failure of these movements was how they had organized. It was felt that by avoiding such organization, AA would avoid at least one of the pitfalls that had hampered these previous movements. But even more compelling than the historical facts surrounding the failed attempts of earlier sobriety movements was the hands-on experience of the early fellowship with its own membership. Based on that experience, AA decided to completely go against the traditional type of organizational structure so prevalent in the world we live in. This is described on pages 172-73 of AA’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions:

Well, let's see. Did anyone ever hear of a nation, a church, a political party, even a benevolent association that had no membership rules? Did anyone ever hear of a society which couldn't somehow discipline its members and enforce obedience to necessary rules and regulations? Doesn't nearly every society on earth give authority to some of its members to impose obedience upon the rest and to punish or expel offenders? Therefore, every nation, in fact every form of society, has to be a government administered by human beings. Power to direct or govern is the essence of organization everywhere.

Yet Alcoholics Anonymous is an exception. It does not conform to this pattern. Neither its General Service Conference, its Foundation Board * nor the humblest group committee can issue a single directive to an AA member and make it stick, let alone mete out any punishment. We've tried it lots of times, but utter failure is always the result. Groups have tried to expel members, but the banished have come back to sit in the meeting place, saying, “This is life for us; you can't keep us out.” Committees have instructed many an AA to stop working on a chronic backslider, only to be told: “How I

do my Twelfth Step work is my business. Who are you to judge?" This doesn't mean an AA won't take advice or suggestions from more experienced members, but he surely won't take orders. Who is more unpopular than the oldtime AA, full of wisdom, who moves to another area and tries to tell the group there how to run its business? He and all like him who "view with alarm for the good of AA" meet the most stubborn resistance or, worse still, laughter.

Clearly, AA's organizational structure, whether consisting of a service center, intergroup, central office, board or committee, is not meant to govern. But AA does need some organizational structure, and the reason for that is succinctly summed up on page 175 of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

Just as the aim of each AA member is personal sobriety, the aim of our services is to bring sobriety within reach of all who want it. If nobody does the group's chores, if the area's telephone rings unanswered, if we do not reply to our mail, then AA as we know it would stop. Our communications lines with those who need our help would be broken.

In early AA, the fundamental role of a service center was to be there when the phone rang, to help the still suffering alcoholic find a meeting or connect them to a sober alcoholic willing to do 12th step work. It's the bedrock. Of course, from the beginning, some service centers, for instance in Cleveland, included other special services, such as cooperation with hospitals, treatment centers or detox facilities. As time went on, some service centers in larger urban areas added even more special services. For instance, some developed committees to communicate with corrections facilities. Many developed committees to communicate with local media groups, government, educational, religious and other organizations. Many developed social committees to organize holiday alkathons, round-ups, picnics and other special events. Most began publishing their own newsletter:

AA's first newsletter was the *Cleveland Central Bulletin*. Its publication began in October, 1942. It was an outgrowth of the mimeographed "Bulletin to all Groups" as a way of sending information not only to the Cleveland, Ohio Groups, but to the Cleveland AA members serving in the armed services. The New York headquarters liked the Central Bulletin so much that they began publishing their own "meeting in print" in 1944 – *The Grapevine*." (Mitchell K., *Growth of Central Offices*, <http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blmitch19.htm>)

Later, the Intergroup / Central Offices also took on the task of selling AA Conference-approved literature. These offices proved to be an effective means of distributing materials published by AA World Services, Inc., and their role in distribution was considered essential to the growth of AA publishing.

This last [the dissemination of AA Conference-approved literature] is a particularly vital aspect of intergroup work, and all the offices are constantly looking for more efficient ways to deal with the vast amounts of material they handle. Dennis Manders, who served as AA's nonalcoholic business administrator/controller from 1950-85, says that "the enormous growth in volume of AA publishing in the 1970s alone would not have been possible were it not for the work of the intergroups and central offices." G.S.O., he explains, "had only to establish a network of warehouses from which to supply the local offices with literature in a timely fashion. It was this close partnership that led to the

Intergroup Seminars as we know them today.” (Box 459, News and Notes from the General Service Office of AA, *A Lot of History Enlightens Work of Intergroup / Central Offices Today*, February-March 2002, Vol. 48, No. 1)

Even today, many Intergroup / Central Offices rely on the revenue from the sale of publications from AA World Services (Conference-approved literature) and sale of publications from the AA Grapevine. Because of the Seventh Tradition, which restricts AA from accepting outside contributions, the only other sources of revenue for Intergroup / Central Offices are voluntary contributions by AA groups or AA members’ personal contributions or revenue from AA sponsored events.

As the AA fellowship grew larger in the 1950s and thereafter, AA groups in most major metropolitan areas banded together to establish local Intergroup / Central Offices to service the participating groups. With the growth of the internet in recent years, most local Intergroup / Central Offices added a website as part of their services. Besides providing an online meeting directory and listing its other services to alcoholic, such as a 24 hour help line, the sites often have information about the Intergroup / Central Office itself. For example, the site will often note if it has been incorporated as a non-profit organization, give the history of its formation, list its various committees and describe its organizational structure.

The organizational structure --such as how board members are selected and how local AA groups are represented-- can vary widely, depending on many factors. For instance, if it is incorporated as a not-for-profit, it may have developed by-laws to conform to operating guidelines required by the state under its incorporation. Factors such as the number of groups it services – group participation is always voluntary, rather than mandatory -- can also affect its structure. Typically each participating group has an intergroup representative.

Each Intergroup / Central Office functions independently from each other and is free to define and provide services that are suited to their community. The GSO, in *The AA Service Manual*, provides a list of the typical services provided by Intergroup / Central Offices:

- Receiving, arranging and following up Twelfth Step calls.
- Answer inquiries about AA
- Establishing local public information committees.
- Maintaining information about local hospitals and recovery facilities for alcoholics.
- Publishing local AA meeting lists.
- Providing a newsletter.
- Ordering, selling and distributing AA Conference-approved literature.

(*The AA Service Manual*, 2011-2012 Edition, p. S42)

Most Intergroup / Central Offices service a specific geographic area. In a fundamental sense, service centers are intended to be a partnership among groups in a community – just as AA groups themselves are partnerships of individuals. However, communities do not have to be tied to a specific geographic location. Communities can be groups of people who share the same ideas and vision. And service centers can be created to service these communities, spanning geographical boundaries. An example of this is the Native American Indian General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous (NAIGSO), which

“functions to provide a vision of recovery, unity and service to the more than 500 sovereign Indian Nations in North America.” More information on NAIGSO is on their [website](#).

Another example of a service center that services a community of people, rather than a geographical location, is the Online Intergroup, a non-profit corporation, which “is a service entity established pursuant to Tradition Nine of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to operate on behalf of the participating online AA groups in accordance with AA's Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts.” More information is available at [Online Intergroup](#).

Committed to the AA Traditions

Carl Sandberg said: “Whenever a society or civilization perishes there is always one condition present; they forgot where they came from.” We must not forget our Traditions and how they were forged from the hard lessons of experience. We must not forget them because without them, AA would have perished long ago. If we don't live by them today, AA will wither and die.

The future of AA depends on our commitment to the Traditions.

We show our commitment to Tradition Three when anyone with a desire to stop drinking – even agnostics, atheists and freethinkers – is accepted into AA. As Marya Hornbacher put it in her book *Waiting: An Unbeliever's Higher Power*:

I've become aware that 12-step programs are home to people from every religion, denomination, sect, cult, political tilt, gender identity, sexual preference, economic strata, racial and ethnic background, believers in gun rights and abortion rights and the right to home schooling, drinkers of coffee and tea, whiskey and mouthwash, people who sleep on their sides or their stomachs or sidewalks.

The openness of AA to all is not a new phenomenon, recently discovered, but is deeply entrenched in our history. As noted in this brief history, Jim B., an atheist, brought AA to Philadelphia in 1939 and Ray W., an atheist, brought AA to San Francisco in 1940. These early members were insistent, especially Jim B., in maintaining that members could choose their own belief or non-belief. Keep in mind that while the short form of the Third Tradition is frequently used for brevity, the long form states:

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

The last part of Tradition Three is especially important to those who form new groups in AA. It tells us that members of AA do not have to conform to anyone else's belief or non-belief. It ensures that any group of people – even agnostics, atheists and freethinkers – can decide to meet regularly for the purpose of sobriety and call itself an AA group, and the group will *automatically* accepted as an AA group.

And it ensures that AA groups are independent from outside affiliations. One reason for this was that in the 1930s, when AA started, it had a tight affiliation with a religious organization, the Oxford Group. Based on their experience with the Oxford Group, the early members recognized that AA should be free from the influence of religious organizations especially since religious organizations inherently enforce rules, regulations, conformity and dogma. The early AAs would have none of it!

We show our commitment to Tradition Four when groups are free to choose the content of their own meetings, following their group conscience. It's a cliché in AA that "all you need is a resentment and a coffee pot" to form an AA group. In the history of AA there are countless AA groups that formed because someone decided that something was not to their liking in their current AA group, and they decided to form a new group of their own with other likeminded individuals. In some cases, the objection was to the religious content of the meetings. The first example of this was in 1939, when the Cleveland group split from the Akron group. Clarence S. recalls that on the way back to Cleveland from Akron, the Cleveland members who were Catholic would discuss why they were uncomfortable with the religious content of the Akron meetings:

The testimony given by members at the meetings seemed like open confession to them, and this was something they were not allowed to practice. Furthermore, the idea of receiving guidance didn't sit well. And to top it off, they [Oxford Groupers] were using the wrong Bible. As a result, I received a lot of flak on the way home. (*Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers*, Chapter 12)

Oscar W., an early member, writes that after Akron finally split from the Oxford Group, there was still resistance to the imposition of religious content, but this time from New York AA, rather than the Oxford Group:

"Most of us in Akron didn't like all this praying," said Oscar. "We had enough of it in the Oxford Group. I still don't like praying in AA. I don't like the Serenity Prayer. New York brought it in, and we resented it. We thought they were bringing back the Oxford Group." (*Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers*, Chapter 22)

In his April 1950 Saturday Evening Post article about AA, *The Drunkard's Best Friend*, the respected journalist Jack Alexander writes about the tendency of AA groups to disagree about "who is going to run the thing" and then split into new groups:

The usual intra-fellowship quarrel over who is going to run the thing inevitably develops and there are factional splits, but the splits help to spread the movement, too, and all the big quarrels soon become little ones, and then disappear.

Thus, our differences help to spread the movement. AA's First Tradition is about unity. It does not mean that we should attempt to squash differences amongst our members or our groups.

Our founders and early members meant for us to form a *fellowship*, based on unity of purpose. Fellowships are not the same as organizations. Organizations have rules, regulations, conformity and dogma. Whereas the AA fellowship "*ought never be organized*" as stated in Tradition Nine. Fellowships simply share a unity of purpose, and that is often what the early members meant when they said "Keep it Simple." They meant for AA's unity to mean a simple singleness of purpose: the desire to stop drinking.

Before the Traditions were published in 1946, early groups did, unfortunately, attempt to practice exclusion. Oscar W., an early member of the Akron / Cleveland groups who traveled across the U.S. in the early 1940s to spread AA, was surprised with what he found when he traveled back to certain locations:

"I came back to visit one group I helped start in my travels," said Oscar W., "and there were four ministers sitting in the front row." I said, "Isn't this wonderful? We have four ministers in AA." One of them stood up and said, "We're not drunken ministers. We are the screening committee for Alcoholics Anonymous, to determine who is fit for membership." (*Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers* Chapter 20)

Through these experiences, early members realized that written traditions would be required to guide the fellowship away from a "screening committee" or other such governance structures. These written traditions were based on a few simple principles, such as service, rather than rules and regulations. Hence the Ninth Tradition states: "AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve."

Service boards and committees are formed at various levels within AA and rightly so, because even though AA is anti-organizational, we recognize that we need some minimum level to provide service. The General Service Office (GSO), for example, provides the service of listing AA groups. The GSO does not screen or exclude groups from the list during the application process. It does suggest, in line with Tradition Six, that the new group avoid selecting a name affiliated with an organization, such as a correctional facility or treatment center or a church, and especially take care not to use an institution's name. (*The AA Group – Where it all Begins*, p. 21)

The GSO itself follows the Third Tradition: "Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation." Thus, the GSO accepts registrations from groups that call themselves "We Agnostics" or "Beyond Belief," and counts them as AA groups, just like any other.

And, just as everything else is non-rules driven in AA, an AA group is under no obligation to register with the GSO. Nor is a local Intergroup / Central Office regulated by the GSO or, for that matter, any other body, because AA is anti-organizational, and operates on the principles set forth in the Traditions.

Ironically, a local Intergroup / Central Office is even free to act in contradiction to the Traditions and define its own rules and regulations. That is the nature of AA's anti-organizational fellowship.

Bob Pearson, General Manager of the GSO from 1974 to 1984, tells us, however, that the Traditions are our strength:

If we stick close to our Traditions, Concepts, and Warranties, and if we keep an open mind and open heart, we can deal with these *and any other* problems that we have or ever will have. If we ever falter and fail, it will be simply because of us. It will be because we can't control our own egos or get along well enough with each other. It will be because we have too much fear and rigidity and not enough trust and common sense.

Bob is right about the Traditions. The Traditions have served AA well.

The history of AA demonstrates that all attempts to circumvent the Traditions by creating rules, regulations, restrictions, conformity and dogma have uniformly failed. Current and future attempts will also fail. We are here to serve each other in the serious business of staying sober. We cannot do this by attempting to govern or judge each other. Imagine, one alcoholic judging another! Our founders and early members learned this and have passed this knowledge along to us through the Traditions.

When we show commitment to the Traditions and are *organized for service*, rather than governance or judgment, we succeed and fulfill the vision of AA.

Linda R.

Posted on the [AA Toronto Agnostics](#) website on March 11, 2012