

Our Groups' Lives

Thirteen General Service Conferences reviewed, changed, and reaffirmed the AAWS pamphlet *The AA Group*³⁸ since its first release in 1965. The 1963 Conference proposed revisions to a service piece titled "Partners," assisting in the *AA Group* pamphlet's development. Until then (and since then), AA resources describing Group activities, structure, and outreach could be found in *the Secretary Handbook* (until 1954), the *Third Legacy Manual* (now the *AA Service Manual*), AA's Twelve Traditions, and in articles of the *AA Grapevine*. The *AA Group* pamphlet underwent a major revision in a Conference Literature Committee Advisory Action of 1992, adding text from the long form of Tradition Three and the Twelfth Concept's Sixth Warranty, where "...much attention has been drawn to the extraordinary liberties which the AA Traditions accord to the individual member and his group."³⁸

Over time, careful considerations to meet current needs have driven the pamphlet's changes. The 2003 Conference recommended that the Trustees Literature Committee initiate a comprehensive review of the pamphlet for future Conference consideration.

The current pamphlet answers the question:

"What is an AA group?"

As the long form of Tradition Three clearly states, 'Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA

³⁸ *Advisory Actions of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous 1951-2001*, 2002 printing (AAWS catalog M-39), recommendations from the Conference Literature Committee, used with permission of AAWS, Inc.

³⁸ *Twelve Concepts For World Service by Bill W.*, 1962, page 74 and 75, used with permission of AAWS, Inc.

membership ever depend upon money or conformity. 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.”

“Further clarification of an AA group may be found in Warranty Six, Twelfth Concept:

- no penalties to be inflicted for nonconformity to AA principles;
- no fees or duties to be levied—voluntary contributions only;
- no member to be expelled from AA—membership always to be the choice of the individual;
- each AA group ought to conduct its internal affairs as it wishes—it being merely requested to abstain from acts that might injure AA as a whole, and finally
- that any group of alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group provided that, as a group, they have no other purpose or affiliation.”³⁹

The conduct and activity of 1940s’ Illinois AA meetings pioneered the differences and improvements that remain in many of our twenty-first century groups. We carry the AA message of recovery, service and unity with few changes since our beginnings, and the changing “face of AA” in our groups today reflects our inclusive outreach toward all suffering alcoholics. The experience written into the Twelve Traditions provide our groups the framework of the “extraordinary liberties” described by Bill W. in 1962’s Twelve Concepts.

The growth of Illinois AA groups holds stories of humor, danger, vital need, and an ongoing development of AA unity. Rather than efforts of trial and error, the groups of Northern Illinois Area 20 matured in a fortunate combination of experiment and success.

³⁹ *The AA Group...Where it all begins* (catalog P-16), page 15 of 61 pages, April 2003 printing, and used with permission of AAWS, Inc.

Many recollections of longtime AA members in Northern Illinois Area speak of the spirit of the early groups. Taped interview efforts for the NIA Archives have taken place since the mid-1980s, but no names are included with the anecdotes reported here. Audiocassette recordings, located in the NIA Archives, provide more details of each early member's story.

"You must save that evening, and you must be there. In between, every day, you were to contact one or all of the people who were there at that meeting, either by phone, or by dropping in and having coffee, or at their office, or wherever they were. But you must keep in touch with them. We used to ride around in the evening to see if they were all home (laugh) and in good shape. The friendliness and the love that was given was what bound them together...It continued on there until we got 25 members, and we couldn't get them all in."⁴⁰

Early members of Illinois AA groups shared a mixture of enthusiasm and concern. In the full, taped recollection above, members held a concern that "no one really knew if AA was going to work." Friendly telephone calls between early members many times began with the cordial greeting "Are you still there?" The growth at Illinois' first AA group, from six to twenty-five members in three months, proved the opposite. Evanston, Illinois has a much larger population than Sterling, Illinois, but the slow and steady 1940s growth at Sterling, NIA's earliest group, and rapid growth in 1940s Rockford, showed the end result of outreach, enthusiasm, and attraction for AA recovery.

The first groups in the northern "section" of Illinois began in members' homes. Group members later provided more ample meeting space in their business offices, in local hotel rooms, and banquet halls. Community centers also met the need for more

⁴⁰ Transcript excerpt from a 1985 interview with an early member's wife, who participated in Illinois' first AA group, meeting in her home in Evanston. Courtesy of the Chicago Area 19 Archives Committee.

room. Churches, in the 1940s through today, consistently provided meeting space for AA in their friendly partnership as landlords to groups. The homes of early AA members reflected the same hospitality shown by our Fellowship's pioneers—newcomers often stayed briefly in AA members' homes, and AA travelers rarely needed to reserve accommodations at local hotels. In a classic example of AA hospitality, one Rock Island AA couple became close friends and traveling companions with Ebby T., whom Bill W. called his sponsor, beginning with a 1948 talk Ebby gave in Davenport, Iowa. Local AA members and out-of town visitors were welcomed in their Illinois home at all times of the day and night.

Husbands and non-alcoholic wives attended meetings, but the groups quickly separated the AA members-only sharing from the after-meeting socializing. Rockford's 1940s Saturday night Socials were open to husbands, their wives, and newcomers in recovery as Open Meetings. In the recollection that men and women stayed on opposite sides of the meeting room, wives would compare their family's recovery in the same way that the AA men would speak of their own current paths. As someone once "wanted to know if it was a Quaker meeting" (p.17), the monthly Socials were nonetheless lively and cordial.

Many AA men traveled together to participate at far-flung groups, as wartime gas rationing curtailed automobile use. The groups in outlying northwest Illinois averaged the shortest distance of over forty miles between locations, and on the different nights of meetings, the AA members rarely arrived alone. Passenger train lines, more common in the 1940s, provided inexpensive but longer trips than today. A train ride to the Tuesday "Big" Meeting in Chicago encompassed at least an entire day.

Women members in early Illinois AA were few, and originally were sponsored by men. The stigma of alcoholism in 1940s and 1950s America initially carried a greater burden on

women coming into AA. The first “Special Groups” in other sections of the United States began for women-only in the late 1940s. Of particular note, the first “Young Peoples Group” met at the Waukegan Alano Club in 1960, and a few “special attendance” groups began in Area 20 during that decade. The practice of naming groups other than the town or the night of the week changed in the late 1960s. The 1973 U.S. Directory record of AA groups in Northern Illinois Area listed many Women’s Groups, Men’s Groups, and Young Peoples Groups (p.119) for the first time.

AA groups started in many towns when enough members assembled for meetings. While some members traveled long distances to attend, local attraction and membership grew, and additional meetings were started on different nights in the same towns. The growth met the increased attraction to AA recovery—Rockford, the Quad Cities (with Moline, Illinois and Davenport, Iowa), Elgin, Batavia, Aurora, and Waukegan held multi-night meetings before 1950.

AA “Headquarters” in New York City printed the national directories every six months, but the first known Illinois AA Directory of 1954 also listed all Northern Illinois towns with AA groups. The same Illinois Directory included the contacts of “Delegates, Committeemen, and Groups of the Nine Illinois Areas.” Originals are located in the District 72 Archives with copies located in the NIA Archives. The “Area Committeemen” served in the same capacity as today’s District Committee Members (DCMs), but in a different manner: instead of chairing a regular “District” meeting, they served by traveling to each group, carrying AA news, and sought out the developing group consciences. The Area Committeemen and the Group Secretaries shared in the planning of celebration events, such as group anniversaries, dinners, and Open Meetings. The Committeemen helped arrange for group “business” meeting time to discuss “AA as a whole” in the activities of the Downstate Illinois AA

Conference meetings and the actions of the General Service Conferences. The attendance and participation from Group Representatives (GSRs and Secretaries) at weekend Downstate AA Conferences and Assemblies increased with the encouragement from the Committeemen. Minutes of the Downstate Illinois AA Conference Assemblies, our combined Northern and Southern Area meetings, were available to groups from 1954 forward.

1940s and 1950s articles in Chicago AA's *Here's How* newsletter, a short *Chit-Chat* newsletter from Rochelle, and the issues of the *AA Grapevine* highlighted and announced service news, ideas, and concerns much more frequently than is found today. The quarterly *NIA Concepts Service Letter* has served well in that capacity since 1982.

The Northern Illinois groups achieved success with private and published outreach. Many groups paid for small ads in the “personals” section of newspaper-classified sections, bringing inquiries from many areas. Announcements of Post Office box addresses changed to telephone numbers in the 1950s, but both telephoned and written inquiries by community leaders, clergy, active alcoholics' family members, and the alcoholics themselves, provided the opportunity to carry the message of AA recovery in person.

Two clergymen and a local doctor assisted with the startup of the Freeport Group in 1948. More than a few times, Kane County courts released chronic drunks to the personal custody of an AA member, a County Forest Preserve Ranger. In general, community support across northwest Illinois spread the news about where alcoholics could go for help—to the local groups of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Our AA groups' first “leaders” sometimes provided the opportunity for the start of new groups. “For whatever reason, one AA group *could* break away from another—without necessarily

endangering the old group or the new. As anonymous members have put it in unrecorded times: ‘All you need to start a new group in AA is a resentment and a coffeepot.’ ”⁴¹ In one group in the northwest suburbs of Cook County, one particular 1940s AA member, a barber nicknamed “the Colonel,” strictly forbid his group members from going to another AA barber, and he publicly ostracized any offender from further attending “his” group. In 1950s Aurora, a local leader, when hearing proposed group changes other than his own opinions, would demonstrate episodes of emotional grief, tears, and announce the impending collapse of “his AA.” A few Aurora AAs overreacted by slashing tires. In resentment from outside sources, the 1970s Carpentersville Group found the need to move its meeting location when the tires of members’ cars were repeatedly slashed in one season. A 1990s leader of a group in St. Charles actually took the coffeepot with him when members questioned the way the meetings were run and decided to break away—fortunately the old and new groups prospered. New groups broke away when its non-smoking members started “clean air” meetings at different sites, or more recently when smokers left facilities that established “no smoking” policies.

Whether or not new groups formed out of personality or group structure difficulties, resentments appear as the exception to the rule reported by “anonymous members in unrecorded times...” Much more so, Northern Illinois AA members started new groups as a smaller, new meeting separate from a larger group, when facilities closed, new facilities opened, when meeting rent increased, “landlords” exerted too much control in the consensus of the group, or the group outgrew its meeting place.

⁴¹ The illustration of the Cleveland, Ohio group growth was repeated in only a few instances in Northern Illinois AA groups. Page 166, *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* (AAWS catalog No. B-8), and used with permission of AAWS, Inc.

Meeting formats changed since the 1940s, and no group has ever held fast to any written “rule” on how a meeting opens or closes. AA members across the Fellowship began to introduce their sharing with “...and I’m an alcoholic” in the 1950s. Around the same time, many groups began their meetings by reading the *AA Grapevine* “Preamble,” our Twelve Steps from the Big Book’s chapter five “How It Works,” the short form of the Twelve Traditions, or the first paragraphs of the Big Book’s chapter three “More About Alcoholism.”

The 1954 Hazelden Foundation publishing of its *Twenty Four Hours A Day* book contains an “AA Thought For The Day,” a daily meditation, and short prayer that many Northern Illinois and Midwest groups have used over the years at the start of meetings. The AAWS 1990 publishing of *Daily Reflections, A book of reflections by AA members for AA members* (AAWS catalog B-12) replaced the Hazelden reading in many groups.

An opening “quiet time” included an excerpt of “The Serenity Prayer” in relatively few AA meetings, but the practice of opening meetings prayers spread in the late 1980s, where today the majority of Northern Illinois groups (and Area 20 service meetings) recite the prayer.⁴²

The majority of groups usually closed their meetings with the “Lord’s Prayer” from the *Bible*’s New Testament, as originally practiced by the earliest 1930s AA groups. AA members added the exclaimed phrases “keep coming back!” in the late 1980s, and “it works if you work it sober!” in the mid-1990s. The friendly chants continue at the closing of today’s meetings, emphasizing AA’s spirituality rather than any endorsement of religion. Some groups still utilize only the quiet time at the start of

⁴² Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, author, 1932. The excerpt heard in AA and printed by the *AA Grapevine* is the first of a two-stanza Christian prayer “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

its meetings. Others close with the Serenity Prayer, other Step prayers, AA's "Declaration of Unity," or AA's Responsibility Statement and code "I am responsible...whenever anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to always be there. And for that, I am responsible."⁴³

The names of Northern Illinois groups today are a dramatic change from the original, simple designations of the night of the week, a group's town, its meeting site, or a numbered "Group A" or "Group B." Only a few special-attendance groups registered as women-only or men-only in the early 1970s, and a phenomenon of new names developed after the release of the Third Edition Big Book in 1976. A new awareness of our literature established names and new meeting formats of Big Book Study, Traditions Groups, Grapevine Groups, and Step Groups.⁴⁴ In Rockford, the Intergroup Archivist reported the 1980s start of Big Book meetings almost in a rebellion toward the "sameness" of the older groups' meetings, but more accurately as a stronger reflection of a renewed interest and trend to name a group after an AA book or an AA principle. The creativity of our membership's selection of group names shows, in today's District Meeting Schedules and the Eastern U.S. Directories.

Intergroups in Northern Illinois

AA groups began meeting at District Meetings on a regular basis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today, a District Meeting is considered a Service Group, with its own identification number assigned by the Records Department at the General

⁴³ 1965 Declaration first heard at the International AA Convention in Toronto, Canada, and used with permission of AA World Services, Inc.

⁴⁴ From annual General Service Conference Final Reports, membership increased 18% from 1979-1982 to one million AAs in 50,000 Groups. The percentage increases were the highest since 1940s AA growth. The 2002 Final Report estimated 2.1 million AAs meeting in 103,768 Groups.

Service Office. A different category of a Service Group met the need of Northern Illinois in the early 1970s: the Intergroup.

Described in the *AA Guideline on Central or Intergroup Offices* (AAWS catalog MG-02), an Intergroup carries out functions that are common to the groups supporting them: answering services, newsletters, literature sales, and service committee activity. Intergroups compliment and assist with each location's general service District and Area activities. Care is taken that Intergroup committees do not compete with the general service efforts of a District or Area, or duplicate the activities to carry the message through the service committees of Public Information, Treatment Facilities, Cooperation with Professional Community, and Correctional Facilities. *The AA Service Manual* offers a second description: "Traditionally, general service committees and intergroups/central offices have performed different functions. Central offices provide local services; general service committees maintain the link between the AA group and the AA General Service Board by means of the Conference. So, these two separate but vital service structures coexist in many areas in mutual cooperation and harmony."⁴⁵

In Northern Illinois, two Intergroups formed in 1974 and opened offices to serve local AA needs in the Quad Cities and in Rockford. The ILLOWA Intergroup provides services across the Mississippi River for the cities of Moline, East Moline, Silvis, and Rock Island, Illinois and Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa. It elected its first officers in May 1974, organized its first dinner, dance, and AA speaker event, and opened its first office in September. "Furniture was acquired and volunteers came from everywhere. Telephone service began in October with both Illinois and Iowa phone numbers, and its charter and non-profit status

⁴⁵ Page S37 of the 2002-2003 Edition of the AA Service Manual and used with permission of AAWS, Inc.

were established in early 1975.”⁴⁶ Today, ILLOWA Intergroup representatives are liaisons to the AA groups that also participate in District and Area general service. The office employs a full-time manager, publishes a multi-city meeting schedule, and makes Conference-approved literature available for purchase. Semi-annual AA Open events draw excellent attendance, and its monthly newsletter includes the separate meeting minutes of the Intergroup, NIA’s District 90, and Iowa Area 24’s District 9.

The Rockford Area Intergroup began with local answering services in 1974. Today, it provides Conference-approved literature and employs a part-time manager. As in the Quad Cities, many volunteers assist with keeping the downtown office doors open. The Rockford Intergroup publishes a newsletter, a city AA meeting directory, and also supports an AA Archivist with a display room in its office.

The third Intergroup in Northern Illinois began in 1983 in Galesburg, and unpaid volunteers staffed its office.⁴⁷ Answering services, a newsletter, and literature sales kept the office afloat until the mid-1990s. As local interest slowly declined, the Galesburg Intergroup closed its doors in the winter of 1995.

The NIA Group History Project

Many of the details in this chapter result from group responses to a 1998 launch of a survey sent to all NIA District Archives committees. Only a few group histories had been placed in the NIA Archives until that time, and the response to the NIA Group History Project was greatly aided by District Archives servants. Doubled from the general questions in the GSO Archives

⁴⁶ From *A Brief History of ILLOWA Intergroup’s Beginning* published in June 1989, courtesy of Iowa Area 24’s District 9 Archives and located in the NIA Archives.

⁴⁷ Details on NIA Intergroup histories added to this sub-chapter from a four-paged “Report On Intergroups” completed by NIA Alternate Delegate Barb B. and added to 1988 NIA Spring Assembly Minutes.

Handbook for Setting Up an Archival Repository published from 1982-1998, the 1998 NIA Archives outreach effort enlarged the focus to gather group histories by including participation in general services, Seventh Tradition contribution activity, and survey questions requesting details on current group practices. Many of the responses listed names of early members. All completed questionnaires can be found in the larger holdings of the NIA and GSO Archives.

The replies to current NIA group activities met one of the intentions of the Group History Project, to preserve the stories of each group's growth and practices up to the date of its response. Today's groups meet in members' homes, travel between homes as "Wanderers Groups," meet in prisons, churches, hospitals, clubhouses, and community centers. Every group reported its GSR rotation of every two years, and maintained its financial independence through self-support. Many group members during differing years served at District and Area levels, and all group problems, difficulties, and growing pains were resolved by the group conscience. The majorities of groups hold regular business meetings, maintain a group telephone list, and contribute funds to District, Area, and AAWS at GSO when possible.

A number of NIA groups hold many weekly meetings at one location but elect one GSR. Many more celebrate group and members' anniversaries with dinners, picnics, and Open AA Speaker meetings. The groups contribute books and literature to newcomers, libraries, hospitals, and jails. Group members volunteer their time on District answering services, visit jails and treatment centers, and as practiced across the AA Fellowship, hold a "First Step" welcoming session for first-time newcomers.

The response to the NIA Group History Project is ongoing, with the questionnaire currently posted and available on the Area website. 150 NIA groups participated over the past five years by completing the questionnaires. The input greatly assists our District and Area Archives effort to preserve early NIA history and provides details of today's NIA group activities. As stated in the questionnaire's closing and thank-you, "Your response will make a difference to the still suffering alcoholic who finds recovery with an AA group, who might also find this record many years from now."