

SPONSORSHIP –
A VITAL STEPPING-STONE TO SERVICE & SOBRIETY

The 91 delegates to the General Service Conference listened as the question was asked: “How many of you came to service in A.A. with the help of a sponsor?” Essentially, all 91 delegates raised their hands in assent.

Past trustee Al H., of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada vividly remembers that moment in 1978. “We sponsor as we have been sponsored,” he says. “I was taken to my first service meeting barely three months after I became sober and I’ve been active ever since.”

Like so many members, Al early absorbed the miracle of Twelfth-Step work—that sharing the A.A. message with other alcoholics helps to keep us sober. Thanks to alert sponsorship, he then learned how such one-on-one help in the Fellowship can be stretched to include an ever widening range of twelfth-stepping—from becoming active within one’s group to serving at the local intergroup or central office, on institutions committees, and finally in “general service.” This term embraces the myriad activities within the Conference structure that are carried out by G.S.R.s, area committees, delegates, trustees and the G.S.O. staff. They affect A.A. as a whole and are crucial to our unity and survival.

Al points out that “a lot of A.A.s—not just newcomers, either—don’t know enough about A.A. and how it works.” He believes that “God smiled on us when he led us into the Fellowship. The hand of A.A. was there for us and if we want it to be there for your kids and mine, I think we need to be active ourselves in service and help the newcomer to do the same. Frankly, I don’t even know how to sponsor anyone who doesn’t get involved in service. I’m a great admirer of Dr. Bob, who said that if we fail to acquire a spirit of service, we will have missed the greatest gift A.A. has to offer—the ability to give our sobriety away and so keep it.”

Al, who travels hundreds of miles to attend service meetings, recalls visiting a new group several years ago with a sponsee. An 18-year-old newcomer had been given the task of slicing pickles; spotting Al, the sponsee quickly took the young woman aside and informed her that she was talking to a trustee. Undaunted, she retorted, “The pickles need slicing.” Al sliced.

Missouri delegate Rita J. says she sponsors new people into service early. “I introduce them to the Traditions,” she declares, “and take them to G.S.R. and state assembly meetings. A number of them get into service.” It’s not always easy, Rita admits, “but I just hang in. Of course, when I called for a group conscience meeting not long ago, hardly anyone I sponsored showed up. I couldn’t exist without a sense of humor!”

Past trustee David A., of Dallas, Texas, says that “everyone I’ve sponsored has gone into service. It’s not mandatory, I tell the newcomer, but it’s more than a suggestion. I also tell them that the Twelve Steps are just one-third of our legacy; there are the Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts of World Service. It’s a 36-point program.” He further suggests that they read the Big Book (“you’ll find yourself”) and A.A. Comes of Age (“you’ll love A.A. so much you won’t leave—you’ll want to stay and grow”).

“I was brought to service by a former delegate who wanted to go to the Bill W. Dinner in 1967,” David relates. Bill himself autographed my copy of As Bill Sees It; I met people in service and went back and back and back. I was G.S.R., D.C.M., delegate, area chairperson, area GvR, you name it. I served as alternate in each of these offices, too, before becoming a trustee-at-large, U.S.A. And I’m even more active now than when I started. I attend the state conferences, do meetings on the Traditions and Concepts and, of course, try to get newcomers interested in service whenever I can.”

Past trustee Ruth H., Hollis, New York: “When I took the G.S.R. role, my sponsor said, ‘You don’t want that, it’s political.’ Nevertheless, I became active on the Southeast New York Conference Committee. The other officers took me under their wing and gave me an appreciation of service. Today, I do the same with those I sponsor—I try to make them aware of A.A. as a whole. Whenever I see members working the Steps and Traditions, I make every effort to interest them in service beyond the group. Service is integral to my recovery; without it, I doubt that I would have stayed sober these past 28 years.

Past trustee George D., Tiburon, California: “When I first came to A.A. I slipped a lot. After I finally stopped drinking, my sponsor and other old timers told me I was the kind of drunk who had to be active to stay sober. I took them at their word and have continued to do so for 26 years. Service is a part of me.”

For the first 11 years, George remembers, “I was active in every aspect of service except general service, perceiving it to be full of basic service club types. My closest A.A. friend was active in general service and I just figured it was an eccentricity—otherwise he was a nice, cosmopolitan guy. Finally, he dragged me along with him and I eventually became a delegate in 1975. In a discussion with the late Bob H., who was retiring at the time as G.S.O. manager, I questioned my motives in doing service work—was it love of A.A. or a need for recognition and approval? Bob then quoted what Bernard Smith, a nonalcoholic trustee and former chairperson of the General Service Board, once said about Bill W.: ‘Never in history have so many great things been accomplished by a man with such doubtful motives.’ With Bob’s help I realized that if I waited to be ‘pure’ before getting anything done, I’d wait a lifetime.”

George believes that general service may not be for everyone. “Instead of pushing people into it,” he suggests, “I think we should lead them by example. We need to treat each other in service with the same sensitivity we bring to recovery.”

Past trustee Dick D., Springfield, Massachusetts: “My late sponsor got me to intergroup and area institutions when I was still fairly new to A.A. He did the same with another Springfielder, Margaret C., who also is a past trustee. Then I sponsored a couple of

A.A.s who later became delegates, and they've sponsored just as actively in turn. We have a living chain of service activity in this area.

Dick encourages people he sponsors to participate in service work, but notes that "much depends on the individuals, their family problems and other factors." Importantly, he notes, "I don't just send them to service meetings at the beginning, I take them myself."

He feels that the young people coming into A.A. today are motivated to get into service work. "Many have come to our program before hitting the bottom of the barrel. They're dedicated and grateful enough to pass it on."