Country-to-Country Sponsorship: Carrying the A.A. Message Worldwide

Country-to-country sponsorship is a worldwide phenomenon of A.A.s helping to carry the message to new and developing countries. The information presented here is compiled from the collective experience of those efforts, and how well they worked.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, sponsorship is about carrying the message — among individuals, groups, and countries big and small. It is a commitment that ripples outward with many new beginnings and no endings because, as A.A.'s Legacy of Service states, "We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven't been given the truth may die." (*A.A. Service Manual,* page S1)

When it comes to one country sponsoring another, experience points to a few essential elements: one alcoholic sharing with another the life-changing message of A.A.; cooperating with nonalcoholic professionals; and world service and interim zonal meetings.

How It All Began

It has been a long time since Ebby T. called on his old friend, Bill W., at his home at 182 Clinton Street, in Brooklyn, New York. That autumn day in 1934, Ebby laid out the way in which we transcend the alcoholic's isolation – he was carrying the message to another alcoholic.

Reflecting on A.A.'s growth, it is apparent that A.A. began spreading to other countries, not as the result of a decision by some faceless executive in a headquarters office, but rather by concerned and caring alcoholics, sober in A.A., reaching out to help suffering alcoholics elsewhere in the world. A.A. members in the armed services in World War II carried the message. Seagoing A.A.s, or "Internationalists," as they came to be called, carried it, and members employed in overseas countries, the early "Loners," all helped to spread A.A.'s message around the globe.

The Role of Nonalcoholic Professionals

In addition to one alcoholic sharing with another alcoholic, experience has indicated that nonalcoholic professionals have been instrumental in helping A.A. to get started around the world. In St. Louis, Father Ed, a Jesuit priest who became our co-founder Bill W.'s spiritual advisor, helped drunks get sober in A.A. A social worker in Holland helped start the first group there.

A temperance worker in Toronto passed the Big Book to the first Canadian to find sobriety through A.A. and, in 1942, an Australian psychiatrist became a proponent of A.A.'s methods and helped alcoholics to find sobriety in his country.

A.A. members visiting a country where Alcoholics Anonymous is just getting underway find it useful to make contacts and share information at hospitals, correctional institutions, and healthcare facilities – and, of course, by talking to the A.A. pioneers in that country. Some sponsoring countries have created teams consisting of A.A. members and nonalcoholic professionals to do this work. These teams get in touch with professionals in the different fields, while establishing contacts with the highest authorities of the country to share information about the Fellowship.

World Service Meetings and Zonal Meetings

The World Service Meeting (W.S.M.) has its roots in Bill W.'s 1950 trip to Europe, where he visited A.A. groups in seven countries. It struck him that these countries were experiencing the same problems encountered in the U.S. and Canada when A.A. was just getting on its feet – the need for A.A. literature in their own languages, obstacles to growth from outside and within A.A. itself, and fear of all kinds of calamities. Up to that time, the New York office had been the chief resource for countries where A.A. was just beginning. Bill believed that if representatives of A.A. internationally could get together and learn from each other, the day would come when the U.S./Canada service office would simply be the "senior service center among a number … around the globe."

"As a beginning," Bill wrote, "I propose a World Service *Meeting* – not a *conference,* since it would not be fully representative of world A.A. – to be held in the fall of 1969."

Held every two years, alternating between New York and another city, the W.S.M. brings together delegates from A.A. service offices and boards around the globe to talk over common problems and share common solutions to help carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous wherever it is needed.

A.A. is estimated to exist in more than 180 countries around the world, and delegates to the W.S.M. are from countries with a service structure, a national office, and in many cases, a literature distribution center.

Zonal meetings, which take place the year in between the W.S.M.s, maintain continuity between meetings and offer help to A.A.s where no structure has been set up. Held on alternate years in cities around the world, these events provide forums for countries to share their experiences about sponsorship across borders. The meetings include those for Asia-Oceania, Europe, REDELA (Meeting of the Americas), Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Western Africa.

Country-to-country sponsorship is a natural focus at the world service meetings and the zonal service meetings. At these meetings, delegates from countries where the Fellowship is firmly established or where it has barely a toehold offer progress reports, laced with warmth and humor, on how they are carrying the message. They share their experience, strength, and problems — and frequently return home armed with some very workable solutions.

International Literature Fund

The explosion of A.A. activity internationally has created an enormous need for basic A.A. material. In 1990, the 10th World Service Meeting recommended that all participating countries be contacted for "the specific purpose of seeking cooperation in the task of raising funds for the current problem of providing start-up literature for those

countries unable to finance their own translations and acquisitions." This fund – called the International Literature Fund -- is used to offset expenditures for foreign literature assistance as well as to reimburse other A.A. entities for similar expenses. Countries that wish to can contribute to the fund.

A.A. World Service, Inc. manages the fund, and that helps insure the consistent interpretation of the A.A. message of recovery, and supports the management of copyrighted A.A. material through licensing arrangements. This also helps to preserve the integrity of the A.A. message. Over one million U.S.D. has been contributed to the fund, directly helping to provide A.A. literature in more than 70 languages, among them Burmese, Croatian, Greek, Hebrew, Shan, Slovene, and Turkish.

Meeting the Needs of Individual Developing Countries

Delegates to a zonal meeting determined that the following steps have been useful in helping countries carry the message more effectively: (1) Setting up committees to provide information about A.A. to health-care and other professionals; (2) working to form a service center with a telephone to speed distribution of A.A. literature, provide information, and function as a focal point for communication between groups and the public; and (3) helping people understand A.A.'s Seventh Tradition: "Every group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions."

Experience has shown that developing a sound structure is essential for effectively delivering services to A.A. groups and members. These A.A. services work best when adapted to the needs and capabilities of the country that is sponsored -- to reach the alcoholic through internal communication, community relations, and institutions work.

The Role of Technology

The Internet has proven itself a great tool for communicating the message of A.A., including from country to country. The Internet is being used for email among A.A. members, and for the posting on Web sites of literature, events, and public information. As one past World Service Meeting delegate noted, "Internet communication is fast and makes distances shrink by the speed of light. Plus, it's cheap."

A.A., though, is about communication by whatever means, and these still include mail, word of mouth, and meetings.

Looking Toward the Future

Some A.A.s regret that not all A.A. growth around the world will be the result of, as one put it, "the fruit of spontaneity," but instead comes from the efforts of another country's general service board and conference.

These A.A. members may oppose any formal efforts to carry the message, which they feel ignore the warning of co-founder Dr. Bob, who, near the end of his life, said: "Let's not louse this thing up. Let's keep it simple" [*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers,* page 343]. But as one A.A. member active in international service has said, "yes, we have to keep it simple — but to do away with such organized efforts by service boards and committees would lead only to complications and confusion." This work, which is a natural outgrowth of individual A.A. members carrying the message, means A.A. will more quickly reach the still-suffering alcoholic.

One question that comes up regarding country-to-country sponsorship is how exactly to proceed. Experience indicates that it is important to find out precisely what a country being sponsored requires. Challenges include the many different cultures in the world of A.A. and different stages of development of A.A. There may also be a lack of coordination among sponsoring countries, resulting in duplication of efforts in one country while another is neglected.

Regarding how to help new and fledgling groups understand A.A.'s Seventh Tradition of self-support, several delegates at a W.S.M. said their countries were trying to focus not so much on the financial aspects of group participation but, rather, on getting the members to express their support and involvement in the work that the service structure does on the groups' behalf. They found that when there was a sense of involvement and participation, the funds usually would follow, whereas focusing on the monetary aspect alone was less effective over the long run.

Conclusion

Just as a sponsee one day becomes a sponsor, so countries that have benefited from country-to-country sponsorship will be able to pass on the message of recovery to other countries. Poland, for example, which welcomed A.A.s from outside the country in the 1980s, is now in a position to help jumpstart A.A. in other Eastern European countries.

A delegate to the 17th World Service Meeting in Oviedo, Spain, in 2002, said, "After our experience with our Mexican sponsors, I can imagine an Angolan alcoholic receiving the message from a South African alcoholic. I can share the gratitude of a Venezuelan or Chilean for the literature coming from Colombia, or of a Romanian sponsored by a Belgian."

World Service Meeting Recommendations

In 1992, the Literature/Publishing Committee considered the suggestion that guidelines be developed on sponsoring the beginnings and growth of A.A. around the world. The committee agreed that its secretary should contact all General Service Offices to request that they share their experience sponsoring other countries.

Based on the report of these findings at the meeting in 1994, the committee felt that it was premature to develop guidelines. It was suggested, though, that if guidelines were ever to be drawn up that they be based on actual experience of what did and did not work.

In 2002, it was *recommended* that A.A. World Services consider the development of a pamphlet or guidelines containing this shared experience, in addition to information on resources available to help carry the A.A. message.

For additional information on country-to-country sponsorship, please write to: General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, Attn: International Desk; or email international@aa.org.