

About AA

A.A.'s World Service Meeting: Helping A.A. Grow

A.A.'s Preamble describes Alcoholics Anonymous as "a Fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism." That process, at the heart of how A.A. works, happens between individuals, in groups at A.A. meetings, and indeed whenever and wherever sober alcoholics gather. And, since 1969, it has been happening regularly among countries, as a result of A.A.'s World Service Meeting.

Held every two years, alternating between New York City and an international location, the WSM 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.

In the Beginning

The WSM has its roots in A.A. co-founder Bill W.'s 1950 trip to Europe, where he toured A.A. groups in seven countries. He was struck by the fact that these countries were undergoing 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 and to run for three days. This meeting could be held in New York so that delegates would... have the opportunity of seeing a 30-year-old service office at work. To the meeting would come delegates from countries where the A.A. population was already considerable and where problems of growth were already present."



By the end of the three days, delegates were ready for more. They decided to meet again in three years, in New York, and after that, to choose different locations around the world for every other meeting. Since then, the WSM has been held in London; Helsinki; San Juan del Rio, Mexico; Guatemala City; Munich; Cartagena; and Auckland, New Zealand.

The 15th World Service Meeting, held October 4-8, 1998 in Auckland, New Zealand, was similar in many ways to that first one. Thirty-nine delegates from 22 countries enjoyed four jam-packed days of reports on A.A. in all the participating countries, presentations on key A.A. topics, meetings and workshops that explored communication between countries.

Perhaps most valuable were the open sharing sessions, where delegates could bring up anything they needed to. After some initial hesitation, delegates, who had quite probably at first felt somewhat isolated and estranged by their problems and reluctant to share, began, one after another, to frankly describe difficulties, dilemmas, defects and conflicts all relating to the operations of their service structures, and slowly began to realize that far from being an exercise in negativity, the sharing was a means of identifying, one with another, and thus an opportunity to tap into collective experience en route to a workable solution.

Zonal Meetings Reach Out

A.A. is estimated to exist in more than 150 countries around the world, and delegates to the WSM 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 WSMs, maintain continuity between meetings, and offer help to A.A.s where no structure has as yet been set up.

The idea for zonal meetings came out of the Fifth World Service Meeting in Finland, where the workshop on Communication Between Countries discussed setting up a European Information Office to foster better communication. At the same time, delegates

hoped that countries which had never participated in the WSM could become involved in the European A.A. community.

The Meeting of the Americas (originally called the Ibero-American Service Meeting) was the first of the zonal meetings to convene. Inspired by the meeting in Finland, Mexican delegates began sketching plans for a regional meeting, and the first, in Bogota, Colombia, in 1979, was attended by delegates from ten countries, including several who could not attend the World Service Meeting itself.

The European Service Meeting followed close on the heels of the European Information Office, gathering for the first time in 1981 in Frankfurt, Germany. Fourteen countries attended, including delegates from Malta and Poland. At the Ninth European Service Meeting, in 1997, delegates from 21 countries included first-time participants from Lithuania and the Ukraine.

The Asia-Oceania Service Meeting was first held in 1995 in Japan, and its success led to the second meeting in Auckland in March 1997, with six countries participating: New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, and Thailand. This newest regional meeting defined its area of responsibility by listing the countries within the zone, then dividing them into “neighborhood” groups, with the more established country in each group asked to take responsibility for sponsoring other countries in its own neighborhood.

The International Literature Fund

The explosion of new A.A. activity over the past ten or more years has created an enormous need for translation and publication of basic A.A. material. A.A. World Services, Inc. in New York holds the copyright for all Conference-approved literature, and the challenge of checking translations for accuracy, assigning priorities, and using A.A. money wisely has been tremendous. The overwhelming need was clear to delegates attending the 11th World Service Meeting in 1990, and they proposed the establishment of an International Literature Fund to help A.A.W.S. provide start-up literature for countries unable to finance their own translations. Since 1990, the Literature Fund has helped to defray the expenses of producing *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the Big Book) in 15 languages and the translation of other literature in 14 languages.

“You Are Not Alone”

Any suffering alcoholic who has ever walked into an A.A. meeting has been told, “You are not alone” – that’s how the message is carried, one drunk to another. Overseas, as in the early days in the U.S. and Canada, the A.A. message has often been carried by one alcoholic in need of another alcoholic, in order to hang on to a shaky sobriety.

In *England*, a visiting A.A. member obtained the names of three lone drunks from G.S.O. New York, got in touch with them on a 1947 trip, and the first group was started. A.A. began in *Norway* because a Norwegian immigrant who had found sobriety in Greenwich, Connecticut, discovered his brother was in trouble with alcohol and decided to go to Norway and carry the message to him. A.A. was carried to *Brazil* and *El Salvador* and *Iceland* by traveling A.A.s from the United States; to *Japan*, by a U.S. soldier serving with the occupation forces; to *Romania*, by an American couple.

Sometimes, one piece of literature has planted the seed. The founder of A.A. in *South Africa* went to a priest for help with his drinking problem. The priest said he could do nothing, but reached up to a shelf and handed his drunken friend what was probably the

only copy of the Big Book in the country, and from this fragile beginning, A.A. began to grow. In *Australia*, four nonalcoholics wrote the New York office for a Big Book, collected several alcoholics from skid row, set them up in tents, and started a group.

In more recent years, Bill W.’s vision of international exchange of experience has been realized, as established A.A. structures outside the U.S. and Canada have been instrumental in the Fellowship’s growth. Finnish groups secretly carried the message across the border to *Russian* alcoholics; Munich A.A.s met with and helped a *Czech* Loner; a German A.A. carried the message to *Hungary*.

At the 15th WSM in Auckland, an impromptu report recounted A.A.’s beginnings in Cameroon. A Cameroonian man, named Donatien, wrote to the Paris G.S.O. in 1986, asking for help, and after corresponding with the office for ten years, drinking again and again, finally wrote in 1996 that he had two months of sobriety but would surely slip if he didn’t do something. This time Jean-Yves, the WSM delegate for French-speaking Europe, replied, and told Donatien that in order to stay sober he would have to share his sobriety with others; he would have to form a group. Donatien worked as a prison guard, so he set about forming a group in the prison. Several months later, Jean-Yves received a telephone call from the prison director who said that, while he did not understand what had happened, a miracle had occurred. Donatien was now six months sober, and had helped some half dozen of the most troublesome inmates get sober, too. The first group was born.

Donatien asked Jean-Yves to travel to Cameroon and participate in the activities of the group, and with financing from the French structure, he was able to do that. The penal authorities were so impressed with what was happening that they had arranged for Jean-Yves to meet with a number of law enforcement, medical, and educational professionals, and a second group was formed in a large school. He was put in touch with local clergy, as well, and on Ascension Thursday, an important religious festival in Africa, the A.A.s were asked to have a meeting at the end of the three-hour service. A surprisingly large number turned up, and a third group was born. By the end of the week, six groups had been started, and in spite of some initial doubts, all survived and grew. Today, Cameroon boasts 16 A.A. groups with about 600 members, and the French G.S.O. has received requests for assistance from eight neighboring African nations.

Bill W. was once asked, “How does A.A. work?” and replied simply, “It works very well.” That plain statement, it would seem, holds true at every level, from two drunks sharing one-to-one to two or more nations helping one another by the strength of their collective experience.

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