

Country-to-Country Sponsorship:

Carrying the A.A. Message Worldwide



Country-to-country sponsorship is a worldwide action of A.A.s helping to carry the message to countries where A.A. is new and developing. The information presented here is compiled from the collective experience of those efforts.

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)

As one World Service Meeting (W.S.M.) delegate from the U.S./Canada put it, “In all A.A. service, we offer other alcoholics the same opportunity for hope that has led us to the miracles in our own lives... It is in this same spirit of service that one country looks to the needs of the suffering alcoholics in another country. We understand that A.A. will probably get there someday;



we know that, once started, it will probably take hold, and, given time, will grow on its own to become a marvelous force for good among their lost and hopeless drunks, just as it has in our own country. We also know that the timetable for this process can be advanced by the application of a few simple actions.”

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. In A.A.'s pioneering days, sober members

in the armed services carried the message as they were deployed to far-flung places. Seagoing A.A.s, or “Internationalists,” as they came to be called, carried the message as they traveled the globe; and members employed in overseas countries, the early “Loners,” all helped to spread A.A.'s message around the world.

“Sponsorship is basically the contact of one alcoholic with another,” says a past W.S.M. delegate from Poland, “and this is the basis of country-to-country sponsorship. Success depends on the zeal and the persistence of both parties... We can visit different countries, take part in numerous conventions organized by A.A. members in many of them. But such a journey in itself is not worth much if it does not give anything to the A.A. community. The most important thing is to maintain these contacts across time.”

Another Polish W.S.M. delegate adds, “The opportunity to hear the experience of our sober friends from neighboring countries is the greatest reward for all those who feel responsible for A.A. unity and for carrying the message of A.A. to other countries. The Twelve Step program is a program of spiritual development and stems from love and a sincere heart. That is why borders, cultural differences and language are no obstacles in country-to-country sponsorship.”

Developed over the years as countries have reached out to one another, shared experience points to a few essential conditions that form the basis upon which A.A. can be built, take root and grow wherever in the world it may be: one alcoholic sharing with another the life-changing message of A.A.; cooperation with nonalcoholic professionals in order to reach more alcoholics; and participation at world service and zonal meetings to encounter solutions to problems faced in the course of carrying the message.

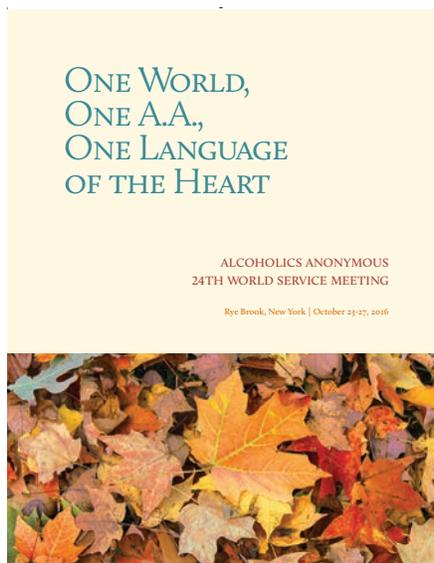
Our Common Bond

“For some time in this program, I tried to go it alone,” shares a former W.S.M. delegate from the U.S./Canada. “‘Just don’t drink and go to meetings’ was my recipe for this approach to disaster. It took a little less than a year and a half, but eventually I reached out to a sponsor for help in navigating the world as a sober alcoholic. He taught me by example: I learned to do as he did by spending time with him as he took the actions that helped him to pass through each day with dignity and confidence... He guided me to think things through for myself, giving me a priceless lesson in logical consequences I have never forgotten. Along the way, I also learned that I could feel better about what was happening in my life when I actively sought to be of help to other people around me. This deceptively simple motivation first prompted me to enter into A.A. service work.”

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 Dowling, a Jesuit priest who became our co-founder Bill W.’s spiritual advisor, helped drunks get sober in A.A. A social worker in The Netherlands helped start the first group there. In Toronto, a temperance worker 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.

These are just a few examples of the involvement of nonalcoholic “Friends of A.A.” in the vital collaboration that has helped A.A. flourish around the world. Additionally, 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 countries involved in



country-to-country sponsorship have helped to create service committees consisting of A.A. members and nonalcoholic professionals. These committees get in touch with professionals in different fields who often work closely with alcoholics, 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 has its roots in a trip to Europe Bill W. and his wife Lois took in 1950, where he visited A.A. groups in seven countries. It struck him that these countries were experiencing many of 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, yet 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.” This vision became a reality and in an article titled “No Borders in A.A.,” Grapevine painted this picture of the W.S.M. as it evolved: “Picture thirty-nine A.A. members, delegates from twenty-four countries, gathered at the end of a four-day-long World Service Meeting, a time filled with hard work and shared experience. As the meeting ends, delegates rise and say the Serenity Prayer in their native tongues. ‘God grant me the serenity...’ ‘God, geef me de sereniteit...’ ‘Mon Dieu, donnez moi la serenité...’ ‘Gott, geb mir die gelassenheit...’ ‘Dios, concédeme la serenidad...’”

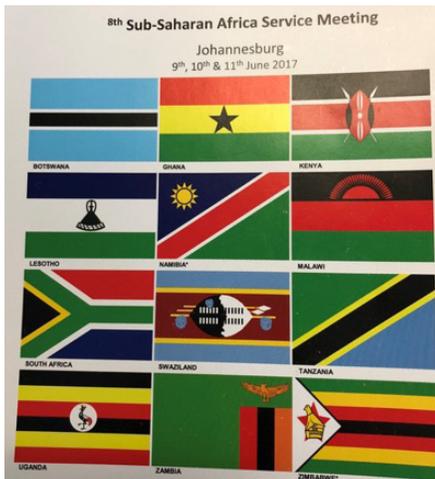
Held every two years, alternating between New York and another city, the W.S.M. brings together delegates from A.A. service offices and boards around the globe to talk over common problems and share common solutions to help carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous wherever it is needed.

Today, A.A. is estimated to exist in approximately 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 W.S.M.s, maintain continuity between meetings and offer help to A.A.s where no structure has been set up. Held in alternate years in cities around the world, these events provide forums for countries to share their experiences about sponsorship



Tables set for the 2017 REDELA in San Jose, Costa Rica.



Some of the nations in attendance at the 2017 Sub-Saharan Africa Service Meeting.

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 these service meetings and delegates from countries where the Fellowship is firmly established or where it barely has a toehold offer progress reports, laced with warmth and humor, on how they are carrying the message. Just as at regular A.A. meetings, they share their experience, strength and problems — and frequently return home armed with some very workable solutions.

Meeting the Needs of Developing A.A. in Individual Countries

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.

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 healthcare 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."

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.



Signage at the 2017 Asia-Oceania Service Meeting in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

How It Works

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.

As noted by a former W.S.M. delegate from Australia, over the course of its more than 60-year history, "A.A. Australia has received numerous requests for assistance from fledgling fellowships in other countries. These requests are usually for support in the

form of information or shared experience or for the supply of small amounts of literature. We have received such requests from all over the world and not simply from within our own zone. We always honor these requests promptly and expect nothing in return apart from the joy of knowing that we may have been able to help in some small way."

A former Polish W.S.M. delegate describes some of the early help they received as A.A. was just beginning there:

"After World War II, Europe was so effectively divided that the A.A. Fellowship reached Poland 20 years later than other countries in the western part of the continent. Together with the foundation of the first A.A. group in 1974, the first single members of A.A. arrived in Poland from behind the Iron Curtain. They crossed the borders protected by the army, smuggling A.A. literature in their personal luggage. They were our friends from Germany, who brought the books, smuggled the paper necessary for printing the A.A. literature across two borders, and talked for hours about the program, the Traditions, and A.A. structure. The first to provide some money for printing brochures were the people from Finland, who showed alcoholics in Poland how to create A.A. groups in prisons. However, as a Fellowship, we still needed about ten years to start forming national, regional and intergroup service structures."

Says another W.S.M. delegate from Mexico, "First of all, we want to express our thanks to the U.S./Canada structure for the sponsorship that Mexico has



Members gather at the XXIII Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous in Bolivia.

received over the years since the message arrived in our country in 1946. Since that time, we have received sponsorship in the formation of our first groups, our first intergroup offices, our General Service Office and the whole of our service structure.”

This support, over time, has allowed Mexico to sponsor others. “We have the great privilege of communicating experiences via email with other Latin American countries, for example: Chile has obtained literature from us; Bolivia has asked for the TV and radio spots we use to carry the message in Mexico; Colombia has shared with us its broad experience in sponsoring a number of Latin American countries. We have had sporadic contact with Brazil, Panama and Uruguay; we have shared experience, mainly on structural issues, with Peru and Venezuela; Argentina and the Dominican Republic have accepted our offer to sponsor their attendance at the World Service Meeting.

“We have a formal sponsorship relation with Cuba. Since 1993, when the first groups were established in Havana, Cuba has allowed Mexico to be its sponsoring country. A work plan was subsequently implemented whereby A.A. members from Mexico would visit the island to help carry the A.A. message. Every three months, Mexican trustees and delegates would travel to Cuba to share experience on the Three Legacies, agendas, mechanics, training workshops and materials. The Cuban A.A.s have worked hard, with great love and intensity to help others achieve sobriety.”

Additional experience comes from Poland: “Carrying the message to other countries mainly relies on the contacts of individual A.A.s and common meetings, conferences or conventions during which we share our experience... Thanks to this, our delegates participated in conferences in Russia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus, where we could share our experience concerning the beginnings and development of the Fellowship in Poland.”

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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 websites 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.”

While modern technology has enhanced the sense of connectedness across distances once thought considerable, A.A. is about communication by whatever means are available, and these still include mail, word of mouth, and face-to-face meetings.



International Literature Fund

The explosion of A.A. activity internationally has created an enormous need for basic A.A. material and there is another variation possible in how country-to-country sponsorship can be done. In 1990, the 11th 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 contribute to the fund.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 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 the years since its inception, more than two million dollars has been contributed by multiple countries to the fund, directly helping to provide A.A. literature in more than 102 languages, among them Visayan, Arabic, Tagalog, Georgian and Serbian.

Looking Toward the Future

“I hope we can achieve a more dependable worldwide integration to make more effective use of the experiences accumulated in public information work, which may in turn lead to a quantitative and qualitative growth and improve our methods of carrying the message,” offers a past W.S.M. delegate. He goes on to express this further hope: “That a sponsorship plan may emerge, with the larger more established structures assisting the smaller emerging structures; and that a system of communication may be developed, easy to use, sensible and low cost, that will keep the spirit of service fresh, lively and in constant readiness, and that through this effort the spark will be lit that ignites the daily desire to serve.”

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.

You can also visit G.S.O.’s website at www.aa.org and the webpage “A.A. Around the World”: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/aa-around-the-world.