

May 2011

61st General Service Conference Workshop
How to Increase Participation in A.A. – Striving for Self-Support in All our Affairs

Wednesday morning Conference members divided into groups for workshop discussions based on the topic selected by the 2010 Conference "How to Increase Participation in A.A. – Striving for Self-Support in All our Affairs." Following are questions and a summary of responses from those discussions.

1. What are the benefits of participation in A.A.?

The benefits of participating in A.A. include the opportunity to be of service; service in A.A. is a way to give back; a way to be mindful of others; a way to connect with others in A.A.; a way to become a part of a group; the best chance possible to stay sober; service relieves us from alcoholism. There are many avenues of service in A.A., such as sponsorship; engaging in Intergroup and central office activities; participating in the home group; maintaining engagement with A.A. members outside of one's own home group; being responsible to others; encouraging self-support in all my affairs; and being a role model. It is also beneficial to study the A.A. Traditions at meetings. The Seventh Tradition teaches us how to sacrifice and trust and is more about spirituality. The Seventh Tradition is not a means to an end. Other aspects of service include reading the "Green card" and participating in the Birthday plan. My service sponsor introduced me into service early in my sobriety. My service sponsor was important to my recovery. The highest form of service sponsorship is staying sober, reading the Grapevine, working in my home group and A.A. as a whole, and (slowly) involving others in service. Service needs to be made attractive. Introduce service gently and be sure to greet the newcomer. Invite young people to become involved. Embracing the newcomer is their invitation to come back. The principles and concepts of A.A. have found their way into my life, business and home. Service in A.A. has filled my life. We are grateful for those who brought us into A.A.; and grateful for their example. Our groups also get healthier through service work.

Other benefits of participation in A.A. are that we are able to enthusiastically and passionately deliver the message, whether face-to-face or through newsletters. Grapevine/La Viña subscriptions can make a big difference in our sobriety and we should encourage others to subscribe. We have fun doing service work, such as giving out Grapevines and La Viñas. Group subscriptions are also a way to reach potential readers. Give away and subscribe to the Grapevine and La Viña for each year of your sobriety. The Grapevine and La Viña can be used as a meeting tool. Perhaps have Grapevine workshops on how to write stories.

The benefits of participation in A.A. also include contributing to “the basket.” There is a sense of ownership from contributions to A.A. Contributing money is an expression of “right of participation;” albeit the power of the purse. Money and service – we learn that it takes only a little and much of what we take for granted is being done by others. The power of transformation allows me as well as A.A. to benefit from my service to give it away and keep it. My home group made me aware of the importance of contributions.

Groups donate to the district, areas and to the General Service Office (G.S.O.); I don’t know if I could belong to a group that didn’t do that. Once a month I write a check to my home group because sometimes I don’t have cash. We put the cost of a drink in the basket. We lay a dollar out on the table. The benefit of participation is to develop a desire to be more useful; to learn about where the money goes and why. Society taught me to be money-oriented and A.A. taught me more about spirituality. The spiritual connection of the dollar in the basket; helps me to shift my attitude; it helps me change; it helps us to look at ourselves.

The number one benefit, however, of participating in A.A. is that we get our life back. Additionally, we get to feel “a part of” as we start to understand that we need each other. Feeling “a part of” and the lesson of giving back helps us to feel gratitude; the benefit of which is immeasurable. Of course, there is the ego deflation and increase in tolerance of others and their points of view that come when we realize that there are many ways to view and interact in the world. We gain the ability to accept ourselves, and others, through our vulnerabilities. We get a chance to work our program more, as we have some conflicts with ourselves, and others, as a result of being in a community. We can disagree without resentment. We learn self-restraint and dignity. These experiences add to our emotional growth. There is also an element of resocialization for many who have been isolated and without much human interaction as a result of our drinking days. We gain esteem and fulfillment as we start to experience more purpose in our lives. Purpose that comes from showing up and being a part of something larger than each of us individually. Our sense of security also increases as we experience that we have enough by giving freely of what we thought we have and might lose if we relinquish it. We gain the insight from others about gifts that we have that we might not have realized before. These things become not just theory – they become experience and therefore, more real.

Newer people in our groups have started sponsoring and receiving the benefits of staying sober. The whole point of A.A. is to get to the Twelfth Step; through sweeping floors, making coffee, doing service work for the group, funding delegates to attend Conferences, and more. Other benefits are to live the Traditions; improve relationships; learn to be without expectations; help others; peace of mind; humility; and deeper sobriety. Family, community and employers benefit because we become better persons. We receive much more than we give. We learn the value of giving; and what we put into something is what makes us who we are. Participation in A.A. teaches life skills (e.g., budgeting and learning to take responsibility). We can’t imagine life without participation in A.A.

2. How do I communicate the benefits of striving for self-support in all our affairs?

We communicate the benefits of striving for self-support in all our affairs by being an example, and we talk about self-support. We report what the total contributions are and let our group members know where the money goes. We communicate what we provide with the money, explain in a simple way, Conference delegates—areas—districts—groups, translate and pass along information to Spanish language groups and districts.

We also answer the questions of “why” we provide each service. We share financial information with all groups, especially those who do not participate. We communicate the financial aspects of G.S.O. openly and extensively. We communicate the effect of devaluation/inflation. We report what happens at the area level through the newsletter. Trusted servants must ask for money to meet expenses. We support our trusted servants regardless of financial needs. We provide written report to home groups about finances.

We give announcements and challenge group members to give. The challenge is to communicate the spiritual aspects of the Seventh Tradition. Communicate by talking about the Traditions; and history of A.A. We hold Tradition meetings. We study the Seventh Tradition and describe the purpose of the Seventh Tradition at our meetings. We use/read the "green card" at home groups. Self-support keeps A.A. united because without money we can't carry the message. We bring up the topic and share personal experience. We tie the benefits of being of service and participation in A.A. to our personal experiences, when telling our stories. We communicate the benefits of self-support in all our affairs. We practice what we preach; we “walk the walk”; we act by example. Through sponsorship, we learn to be a living and breathing example. We humanize the numbers to convey the need. We remember that gratitude needs expression. We emphasize “I am responsible” and “Responsibility begins with me.” It's not simply money but action. Time is also a valuable component of self-support. We talk about this to everyone we can. Emphasize that self-support is self-determination. It is not a burden. Money is not power for us it is freedom and a way to be dedicated to our primary purpose.

One member reported being the announcement guy. Others felt that it works much better by extending personal invitations to serve, especially if that is coupled with encouragement that the person being invited will bring something valuable. Sometimes people need to be asked, invited, and/or assigned “jobs.”

We also communicate the benefits of striving for self-support in all our affairs by giving the Grapevine and La Viña to newcomers. A.A.s don't realize how far reaching the Grapevine is beyond the individual subscriptions. Make sure people know about the Grapevine and Birthday Contribution plan. Some frustration associated with lack of involvement from some A.A. members can sometimes be offset by remembering to do what we can and turn the results over to our Higher Power. Some members don't get the bigger picture of why we give money – why we support the U.S. and Canada and world-wide services. Speak about the spiritual significance of “corporate poverty”.

We need more groups to participate in sending whatever the group can afford. Other ways to participate include giving a can of coffee speaking at the podium, and sending to the Grapevine stories about spirituality. Self-support begins with me, at my home, and in my home group. The home group is vitally important in encouraging participating. Service has brought a full-life to me and watching others get well is the gift.

3. Share ways to encourage participation in A.A.

Emphasize that it isn't a big sacrifice of personal life. Don't complicate service too much. Our Steps Three and Four suggest we be willing, decide to be willing and leave it up to our Higher Power. Experience is that fear is unwarranted. Participation in A.A. is a learning process.

Take newcomers to meetings as it is heartwarming to see sobriety in others. Show the newcomer a good time. Fun, fun, and explain they are part of a movement. Encourage young people to participate and communicate information to them. Form linguistic districts. Be tolerant, patient and accepting as participation in A.A. is my insurance for sobriety. Provide meaningful sponsorship. Try to help people work through their Steps, especially the Fourth Step – this seems to help people feel “a part of” and get more “out of self.” Speak more about the opportunity and benefits of A.A. participation, smile more, make it more personal. Drop the martyrs in favor of enthusiasm. Tell our story connecting the dots between what we were like, what happened (participation in A.A.) and what we are like now. Show the “before and after” picture. Define participation in the broadest terms. Don't tell anyone what to do – show them! For example say “Get in the car we are going to an assembly, a meeting, a workshop, or a Twelfth Step call.” Basic Twelfth Step calls are a way to participate. We can also do PI/CPC work on a personal level and in schools, etc. Involve non-alcoholics in our social gatherings. They may become friends/potential friends of A.A. If not by money, be of service through other activities such as coffee commitment or carry “stuff” around – newsletters, literature, etc. Carry the message and “drive the drunks.”

Ask who is not participating and why? Visit groups who do not participate. For those not participating emphasize that we need to share the benefits of service and be service sponsors. Ask what can we do better? Do we need to be more inclusive, welcoming and tolerant? Keep time demands low and make sure we don't ask too much of servants, even trustees. Use alternates. Too many area meetings make service difficult. Show humility in service and do not use A.A. insider language and acronyms without explanation. Be an ambassador to service and not a bleeding deacon.

Groups need to be communicated with re: prudent reserves, group celebrations, trips, etc.; create ways to communicate through illustrations, charts, information, educate the Fellowship at large about how each arm of service works and who provides services.