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Should AA "Count Noses"?

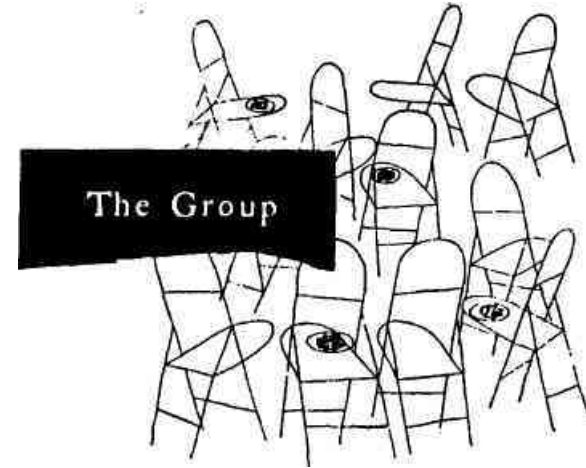
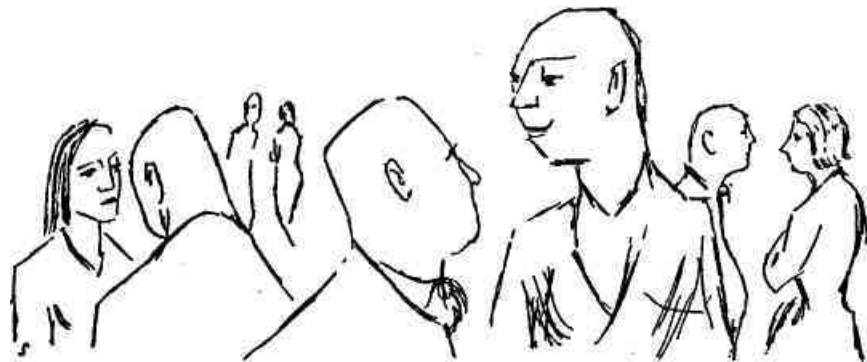
AN EXPLORATORY DISCUSSION OF
THE PROBLEM OF KEEPING TRACK
OF AA MEMBERSHIP GROWTH

WHO is a member of AA? Most AAs undoubtedly subscribe to the standard which was first enunciated by Bill and which underlies Tradition Three, that a person is a member of AA whenever he or she says so.

But this question—*who is a member of a given group?*—is subject to almost as many different answers as there are groups.

Some groups count as a member anyone who shows up with some regularity, even though he may do the same at meetings of other groups in the area. At the opposite extreme are those groups with such rigid standards and qualifications that members may be expelled, put on probation, or otherwise regimented to conform with group membership standards.

In between these two extremes are dozens of other methods and ap-



proaches to "counting noses" in AA, with some groups holding to the idea that the principle of anonymity rules out the keeping of membership records entirely. Last year, in fact, some 500 groups indicated no membership figures at all on their registration cards sent to General Service Headquarters for listing in the annual Group Directory!

Nevertheless, for the past few years an annual AA "census" has been taken and published, despite the innumerable difficulties encountered in compiling the record and the heroic effort required for even an approach to accuracy.

Is the Directory an accurate record of AA membership figures? How reliable a guide is it to AA's actual growth during the past few years? Why is it desirable to have a "census"? How can the groups help in the compiling of a reasonably exact accounting

of the size of membership? Should there be any general guides in determining membership *in a group*, as distinct from the fellowship of AA, for census purposes?

To answer these and other questions frequently raised both in correspondence and in conversation, *The Grapevine* talked with the "census-takers" at General Service Headquarters, studied the Directory figures of the past few years, and heard some of Bill's ideas on the subject.

The most important idea garnered in this research is this: membership figures in the Directory represent *group membership only*, as reported to General Service Headquarters by the groups themselves, plus the addition of lone members and Internationalists (seamen) from Headquarters records. The Directory was never intended to reflect the total of the undoubtedly vast num-

bers of alcoholics who are now, or who have been, sober through contact with Alcoholics Anonymous and the application of its principles to their drinking problem.

That this figure is far greater than the actual reported membership is obvious, and, if those who sobered up in AA and went sober to their graves during the past nineteen years were added to the total, it would be a still greater figure.

It is the concept of *total recoveries*, probably, that leads individual AAs to quote membership figures which in some cases approach the astronomical. This, of course, is the individual's right, to have and to express a personal opinion as to how many alcoholics have found the AA road to recovery. Actual reported membership in groups, however, is another matter, and can easily be checked by reference to the latest Group Directory. Every group registered at General Service Headquarters receives a copy of the Directory, which is entitled *The Group Secretary's Handbook and Directory*.

In using the Directory, however, several facts should be borne in mind. First, as mentioned above, since no uniform standards for counting members exist, the figures reported by groups can not be regarded as an exact measure. Second, an unknown number of groups are in existence which have never registered with General Service Headquarters and hence do not appear in the Group Directory. Third, groups registered with General Service Headquarters which fail to provide up-to-

date information for each new Directory are listed with the last information available, which in most cases is obsolete. (If such groups do not respond to inquiries after two years of silence have elapsed they are, by approval of the General Service Conference, dropped from the Directory. Last year 234 groups were dropped from the active registration list for this reason.)

Fourth, of those groups registered, many do not give membership figures. Until recently, such groups were counted, for the sake of the record, as consisting of two members. In the latest (1954) Directory, however, a more realistic estimate has been reached through the device of projecting the average number of group members on these non-reporting groups. In other words, each group failing to report membership figures is assumed to have twenty members, on the basis of the average of members in those groups which did report membership figures. Total worldwide membership, as reported in the 1954 Directory, is 128,296 in 5,401 groups. Groups or lone members are reported from 58 countries.

The 1954 Directory, according to its compilers, comes closer, within the limitations outlined, to reflecting group membership than previous ones which sidestepped the problem of listing groups with "no" members. There are indications also of greater exactness on the part of groups in reporting active membership, since the inauguration, in 1952, of the system of listing group contributions to General Service Headquarters in the Directory. In this con-

AA Worldwide Membership Spring 1954*

GROUPS	MEMBERSHIP
4,159	Groups in U.S.A. 92,548
504	Groups in Canada 9,149
354	Groups outside U.S.A. and Canada. 9,359
151	Hospital Groups. 4,425
233	Prison Groups. 12,149
—	Lone Members. 168
—	Internationalists. 98
5,401	128,296

* as reported to General Service Headquarters for publication in
The Group Secretary's Handbook and Directory, April 1954

nection, it is emphasized that listing in the annual Directory does *not* depend upon contributing to Headquarters; all that is necessary is for the group to fill out a registration card. Also, it is pointed out, those groups who do contribute to the cost of General Service are by no means required to observe the full "\$2 a head per year" yardstick, which, Bill explains, was selected as a convenient guide for groups in apportioning their finances.

Those members who are amazed that the official Directory of Alcoholics Anonymous does not show some 200,000 members by now are advised to bear in mind the many loopholes and problems inherent in the whole question of "counting noses" in AA, and to take note, year after year, of the steadily growing numbers of *new groups* reported. In 1953, for instance, there

were 435 new groups formed and registered at Headquarters ... a good bit better than one a day!

To return to the question as to why a "census" is desirable and how the groups may assist in achieving a reasonably accurate one . . . during the first years of AA's existence there were no problems relative to size of membership. Practically everyone could crowd into an old-fashioned kitchen. As AA grew it fortunately did not employ a host of professional sociologists intent on numerical data instead of AA's spiritual objective. As a result, figures as to AA membership have not, as explained earlier, been compiled in accordance with rigorous scientific methods.

So what? Why is that important? AA has come a long way since those early days around a pot of coffee in Lois and Anne's kitchens. Today many

scientific organizations are interested in alcoholism and we welcome their cooperation as well as that of press and radio. From time to time we are asked for information, and rarely is our answer accepted that "AA keeps no records." The inquirer invariably urges "just give a rough estimate." Therefore we try to supply figures that are as accurate as we can compile with reasonable effort. Moreover, reliable figures are needed if we are to have any clear idea as to whether we are continuing to make adequate progress.

In addition to the inherent difficulties previously described, the local group secretaries, who are the chief source of information, are not likely to be trained statisticians; but even if they were they would need precise instructions as to what and how to count, so that the reporting would be consistent both geographically throughout all of AA's structure, and chronologically from year to year so that annual comparisons would have meaning.

To aid consistency of reporting, can there be, without violating the spirit of Tradition Three, some fundamental agreement about basic concepts such as "who is a member of AA?" and "who is a member of this group?" Printed definitions and suggestions setting forth answers to these questions, for census purposes only, could go a long way towards achieving a reasonable uniformity of reporting within a fairly short time.

We might try, by way of illustration, to see if we can develop some basic concepts that might be helpful in

achieving consistency in membership tabulation. Who, for example, is a member of AA ?

As suggested before, there is ample authority in the prepared literature for agreeing that a person is a member of AA whenever he chooses to say so. Elsewhere the statement is made that the only qualification for AA membership is an honest desire to stop drinking. This is one principle that might well be rephrased. Of the many thousands of present members of AA, about how many would you guess came in with an "honest desire to stop drinking?" About how many had no desire at all to stop drinking but were simply desperate or were casually "looking about" at some other person's insistence? The fact is that a substantial percentage, if not an overwhelming majority, need to be in AA for some time *in order to acquire* "an honest desire to stop drinking." The prior principle, then, at least for census purposes, is preferable: a person is a member whenever he chooses to say so.

That seems simple enough, but what about such statements as, "More than 150,000 men and women have found recovery (or a happy sobriety) in AA" ? What is recovery or happy sobriety? A problem drinker seeks AA's help today and accepts all his new-found sponsors tell him. Tomorrow he tells a dozen people he is in AA. He is. But has he really found sobriety? Isn't it a little too soon to tell? Should not the new member be dry for some period of time before he can be said to have recovered? A week, a month, three months? Some

groups set three months as a desirable preliminary to giving a talk at an open meeting, or going on a Twelfth Step call.

Suppose a person is dry six months or six years and has a slip? He continues, of course, to be a member of AA unless he decides otherwise, but should he not accumulate a reasonable period of sobriety, even as the newcomer, before being counted among those who have found recovery?

Being a member of AA and being a member of a specific group, as pointed out earlier, involve two quite different and distinct ideas. A person gets sober in Old Town and subsequently moves a thousand miles away to New City but never goes near the New City AA group. He surely cannot be counted with the New City membership. However, our transplanted member no longer maintains any connections with Old Town, either. How to get him into the AA census? There is a way, which will be described shortly.

Duplication of reporting can occur in those areas where there are many groups and where some members regularly attend two to four group meetings a week. Obviously each member should be counted by only one group. Each

member, it would seem, ought to have a group with which he clearly establishes this. Ordinarily, but not in every case, it will be the group in the community where he resides. To be considered a member of a group, should not a person attend the group's meetings at least occasionally, participate in group activity in some manner, take occasional Twelfth Step calls, and introduce to his group new prospects who live in the vicinity? It is hardly fair to a group with certain financial responsibilities involved in "carrying the message" to consider someone a "member" who attends one meeting in a year and drops a quarter in the collection box. Each case, of course, should be considered on its merits, but the total picture is bound to be confused when a secretary counts as an active member of the group a person who in fact is completely inactive and who has neither displayed any interest in the group nor in any way contributed to its welfare during, perhaps, the past six months.

Can we, then, in view of what has been said evolve some general principles that may be helpful in achieving a reasonable uniformity of method when making membership tabulations? The following may be a beginning:

Suggested Guides in Determining Membership in The fellowship and in The Group for Census Purposes

1. A person is a member of AA whenever he or she chooses to say so.
2. When reference is made to those who have found recovery in AA, the figures quoted should include only those who have had a definite period of

uninterrupted sobriety at the time of tabulation.

The length of this period may vary from group to group, unless a general agreement could be readied on an approximate period.

3. An AA member should be counted as an active member of a specific group only if he displays some interest in that group and periodically contributes to its welfare by attending meetings or by carrying out other group responsibility at least on a minimal basis.

4. A member should be counted for census purposes by one group only, generally the group geographically nearest his home, unless he has established clearly defined affiliations with some other group.

5. In addition to active members affiliated with a local group, there may

be in the community persons who at one time were actively associated with AA and who are believed to be still affiliated with AA in spirit. They are believed to be sober and are not known to belong to any group. They might be termed inactive members, for census purposes.

In the community also may be some former members of AA who neither display any interest in the local group nor achieve any success at maintaining sobriety. There is no reason, it would seem, for including them in any *current* tabulation. If they really belong, time will tell and they can be included in a later edition.

Summary

In reporting membership for census purposes the secretary or other officer might use the following guides in arriving at the total number of members to be reported to General Service Headquarters:

(a) active members sober (for example) three months or more.

(b) active members sober less than three months (or whatever period the group decides).

(c) inactive members in the community who are believed to be affiliated with AA in spirit, who maintain sobriety, and who are believed not to be affiliated with any specific group.

These suggested classifications would be solely to guide secretaries in determining the group's size. They would not give us any new kinds of membership, nor set up any arbitrary membership "rules." *All are AAs exactly as be-*

fore. If observed, the classifications would merely facilitate counting and help to eliminate duplication. They are doubtless far from perfect and it is perhaps altogether impossible to devise definitions covering such broad concepts as "recovery" and "membership" to fit every case. Yet, if some definitions such as those given were used and if the groups were given an opportunity to become completely familiar with them over a reasonable period of time, more precise reporting of census figures would almost certainly follow. An individual group would know exactly where it stands today as compared with a year ago and with two years ago. The same could be said with respect to the movement as a whole or with respect to any geographical section, such as a city or a state.

What do you think ?

Group Membership in the U.S. and Canada*

UNITED STATES			
State	Reported	State	Reported
	AA Members		AA Members
Alabama	1,136	Nebraska	369
Arizona	560	Nevada	188
Arkansas	857	New Hampshire	248
California	11,020	New Jersey	2,256
Colorado	911	New Mexico	652
Connecticut	1,103	New York	7,223
Delaware	354	North Carolina	1,884
District of Columbia	543	North Dakota	443
Florida	2,309	Ohio	7,954
Georgia	970	Oklahoma	839
Idaho	395	Oregon	613
Illinois	5,271	Pennsylvania	3,150
Indiana	1,702	Rhode Island	234
Iowa	1,689	South Carolina	962
Kansas	1,537	South Dakota	560
Kentucky	773	Tennessee	633
Louisiana	793	Texas	4,511
Maine	694	Utah	1,040
Maryland	919	Vermont	290
Massachusetts	2,459	Virginia	1,743
Michigan	3,231	Washington	1,533
Minnesota	1,634	West Virginia	770
Mississippi	713	Wisconsin	2,103
Missouri	2,184	Wyoming	159

CANADA			
Province	Reported	Province	Reported
	AA Members		AA Members
Alberta	512	Ontario	2,764
British Columbia	1,453	Prince Edward Island	107
Manitoba	510	Quebec	777
New Brunswick	587	Saskatchewan	703
Newfoundland	68	Yukon	7
Nova Scotia	647		

* as shown in 1954 Directory. (See box on page 17 for totals.)