

CONVENTIONS & A.A. GATHERINGS

HOW AA'S MAKE THEIR GET-TOGETHERS ENJOYABLE AS WELL AS EFFECTIVE IN CARRYING THE AA MESSAGE OF RECOVERY

WHY AN AA GET-TOGETHER?

It's clear that AA gatherings beyond the group level have become an established part of AA life. The General Service Office and CSO websites and newsletters around Australia show how many Regional Forums, Area Conventions, Young People's Conventions, Rallies, 'Round-ups' and other AA events are being held by AAs throughout the country.

One reason for holding rallies/get-togethers/'AA events' is that it is a natural thing to do. Almost any association of people likes to take time out now and then to observe some phase of its own development. But in AA, such an event is far more than a routine cause for celebration. A get-together also sets up a useful opportunity to share the AA experience in a broader way.

What makes an AA event click for its participants? Well, it's probably not style or form that matters so much as the spirit and feeling behind it. As one member puts it, the best AA rally is "just a darned good AA meeting blown up big." Just watch members at any enthusiastic AA event and you'll get what he means. The atmosphere alone is worth the trip. Here you'll find fellowship, laughter, warmth, and understanding – "heaped up, pressed down, and running over".

But get-togethers require a lot of preliminary work and planning, as well as smooth direction while they are in progress. Now that AA has come of age, Regions and Areas may have Conventions and Forums attended by dozens to hundreds, so a get-together can actually be a major enterprise involving lots of people and money. Today, North American International Conventions often hosts tens of thousands. This Guideline has been prepared to offer suggestions for making AA get-togethers as enjoyable and as effective as possible. It retains its North American form, with some minor changes where our systems or language differ.

GET-TOGETHERS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES

As we see it, an AA get-together is almost any AA rally beyond the Group-meeting level. These range from special meetings of one evening's duration to longer events – Area or Region-wide weekend conventions. In Australia we usually distinguish between service meetings which have a service work focus and get-together meetings, which have an identification focus. Service meetings are usually referred to as 'Assemblies' or 'Forums', such as 'Area Assemblies', 'Public Information Forums' or 'Regional Forums'. See "Australian AA Service Manual": "The Area: - *Area, Regional & National Conventions*" and "*Regional Forums*". The term 'Conference' is usually kept for the annual Australian General Service Conference in Sydney.

The term 'Convention' most often refers to the annual Australian AA Convention, a major, international, networking and sharing event, hosted by different Regions in turn, but an occasional Area Convention is held. For information about the Australian National AA Convention see Guideline GL-15: "*The National Convention*".

AA get-togethers will, most likely, be one of the following:

1. The Special Open Meeting:

This kind of gathering can serve several useful purposes. It will, of course, bring together the AA members in a city or area. But it also provides a good opportunity to invite interested friends of AA to the meeting. Certainly, it is proper on such occasions to send special invitations to members of the clergy, doctors, lawyers, social workers, public health officials, and others who may have a special interest in AA. Formal or informal meals may be involved.

2. The One-Day Session:

This might include several general meetings throughout the day. For a start, there's a "welcome" meeting in the morning, followed by other activities. There may be another open meeting in the afternoon, while the main open meeting with the featured speaker is saved for the windup meeting in the evening. If the get-together is held in a school, civic hall, or other building with additional rooms, it's likely that the program for a one-day session can also include AA workshops and panels, service meetings, assemblies, and closed meetings. (Usually Member-catered) informal barbecues, or shared meals may be included.

3. The Dinner - Dance

In North America, many Intergroups or Central Offices now sponsor annual banquets, often to help support their office operations. Some Groups and Areas also have banquets as anniversary or gratitude observances. These are often held on a Saturday night or Sunday afternoon, sometimes in conjunction with a larger AA convention. The meal often features an after-dinner speaker or some other program of interest to AA members. In Australia, banquets, dinners or dinner-dances are less common than barbecues and less formal gatherings, being most frequently associated with National Conventions, Regional Forums, Area Conventions, significant anniversaries, and Public Information events for the local professional community, or fund-raisers to support bigger AA events or objectives.

4. The Weekend Convention or Forum

This is an ideal form for a Regional or Area Forum or Convention or a Public Information (service) Forum. Members often arrive for an opening meeting session or "coffee and conversation" on Friday evening. Additional meetings and workshops – as well as other activities – continue through Saturday, usually up to Sunday lunch time. The meeting may include relaxation opportunities such as a banquet, luncheons, special breakfasts, barbecues, Saturday-night dancing and entertainment, and perhaps a spiritual meeting on Friday or Saturday night or Sunday morning - possibly visiting a local AA Group.

THE GET-TOGETHER BEGINS WITH A PLANNING COMMITTEE

Once a get-together has been scheduled, it needs a planning committee. For, unless it's a very small affair, the work in setting up a get-together is too much for any one person. He or she may need at least a dozen assistants, and frequently more.

One convenient method of forming the committee is simply to appoint a general chairperson who then completes the committee by finding able volunteers to chair the various committees.

Another method – popular when a number of Groups is sponsoring a get-together – is to send a committee representative from each Group. Once in session, representatives can elect a chairperson and receive assignments to specific committees.

In some cases, the get-together may be the responsibility of the General Service Committee from the Area(s). In others, the event committee may be organised separately. Either method works well if it corresponds to the wishes of the AA Groups in the Area. In Australia most large events are hosted by local committees set up for the purpose, 'one event at a time'. The roles are similar to those in North America, but the committee sizes and the scope of activities are typically smaller.

Once assembled, the Event (often referred to as the 'Host') Committee is usually organised along functional lines, with each convenor or coordinator responsible for a role in the planning. Here's how typical committee roles and responsibilities might be arranged:

1. Chairperson

(assisted by either Co-chairperson or Assistant Chairperson if any)

- Runs the entire convention;
- Co-ordinates the work of sub-committee chairpersons;
- Keeps informed on the progress of all the arrangements;
- Calls committee meetings when they're needed.

2. Secretary

- Keeps all written records, including minutes of the committee meetings;
- Also sends out notices of committee meetings and other mailings to committee members;
- Sends invitations to speakers and panel members who lead various meetings.

3. Treasurer

- Is, of course, responsible for all money, including revenues from registration and banquet tickets;
- Early in the planning period sees that an auditor is appointed who may be asked to advise on the setup of an appropriate financial records system, GST etc. (See also Guideline GL-15, Appendix IV);
- Pays all bills;
- Usually advises the chairperson on cash supply and income flow as well as rate of expenditures.

(Experience indicates it's best if the Treasurer is a person with four or more years sobriety and some solid business experience. Each cheque usually calls for two signatures.)

Most Event Committees require a complete report from the Treasurer within a month or two of the get-together. Some committees have the report audited as a further safeguard for Convention funds.

4. Program

Since this is often a very complex job, its objectives are discussed under the separate heading "*What Makes a Good Convention Program?*"

5. Registration

Supervises the printing and distribution of all tickets, giving special attention to the task of bringing in the collections.

6. Public Information

Has the sensitive task of encouraging a large attendance without abandoning AA's principle of "attraction rather than promotion." Publicity efforts can be kept within the dignity and spirit of AA through the following means:

- a) Preparation and distribution of material about the intention, time, and location of the get-together (perhaps including map of area, if necessary). Most events now use websites, email, CSO newsletters, Regional magazines and flyers to advertise. The publicity material should also be sent to the press, radio, and TV outlets in the immediate area. (The "Public Information Workbook", available from General Service Office, gives useful advice on approaching the media.)
- b) In Australia, internal advertising for the National Convention and any associated fund-raising events must be held back until after (or during) the preceding National Convention. The National Convention and certain other service events can be advertised on the national AA website. See Guideline GL-26: "*Operation of the National AA Website www.aa.org.au/*". Smaller scale events are usually promoted in the relevant local (usually CSO) newsletters and websites. Dates and location of the event, with a mailing address or other contacts for information or registration, should be sent three months in advance.

In line with Tradition 11, if you are using social media groups to provide information on your event, ensure that any pages are set up as secret pages; that anonymity is not compromised and that the page is accessible only by members who have elected to join the group. Members should not be added without their prior permission.

7. Entertainment

In North America, an Entertainment Chairperson will arrange for the dances and floor show if any. The chairperson hires the band and other performers (or arranges for taped or recorded music). This chairperson might also arrange to make sightseeing available for conventioners. At some events, the local AAs provide entertainment by putting on plays about AA groups, or putting together choruses and variety shows. In Australia, General Service Office has a script for the popular "*Traditions Play*" that has been approved as a service item by Conference. Events below National Convention level would not normally have entertainment on a large scale.

8. Hospitality

Serves as Host, for big events organising a committee that will greet out-of-town guests, arrange transportation for them when necessary, and see to any other needs they might have. Usually members of the hospitality/greeters committee wear special ID badges or garments such as Aprons or Waistcoats, so that they are visible, and ready to answer questions and provide assistance to participants.

9. Displays and Literature.

Is responsible for displays and posters and for having AA literature available for all. General Service Office provides literature on request, or will lend large banners (such as *The Twelve Steps*, *the Twelve Traditions*, *The Twelve Concepts*; Unity, Declaration, and Responsibility Pledge. They normally staff a sales table at large events such as National Conventions.

As a suggestion a table should be made available, for Flyers advertising upcoming Rallies, Roundups, Tag-A-Longs or AA events. Only material relating to AA events should be displayed.

PAYING THE BILLS

How the costs of a rally covered, and what can be done to make sure that the venture won't go deep in the red? Some events may involve spending many thousands of dollars, so the Committee must have a fair picture of the financial arrangements long before the event opens. There's no substitute for common sense here: the Committee must take a businesslike approach to finances and keep expenditure somewhere within a conservative estimate of anticipated revenues. It is suggested that a budget be prepared. Preparing a budget for any AA event is financially responsible and accountable. As for financing the event, several sound methods seem to be in general use:

1. The Underwriting Method for Local Regional, Area or District Get-togethers

For local events, the Groups in the Area, perhaps through their representatives on the event *Host Committee*, or the Area itself, agree(s) to underwrite the complete costs of the get-together. Since the registration fees can be established at a level sufficient to cover the total costs, this should result in no actual out-of-pocket costs to Groups. It's a good idea, though, to put the tickets on sale well in advance of the event and to know where the break-even point lies. Registration fees cover services. They are not collected to pay for AA meetings.

2. The Local (Regional Forum or) Convention Fund

One method of covering deficits, provided it is done with tact and sufficient explanation, is to take up a special collection at the Forum or Area or local PI Convention. But if the Groups have already been consulted and have agreed to underwrite the event, making up the deficit is their ultimate responsibility.

Most get-togethers, however, make a surplus. What's to be done with these surplus funds? Part may be held in trust for next year's event. Then the Committee uses the balance to help support local service offices or General Service Office. In accordance with our *Seventh Tradition*, only funds attending the event should be contributed to support AA activities.

Groups and Districts should be careful not to neglect their Group/District/area/ CSO and GSO in order to support Conventions.

3. The Australian National Convention

The underwriting system is different for the National Convention and the national Public Information Forum, as these are considered subcommittees of the General Service Board, which underwrites the event and receives any net surplus funds. See Guideline GL-15: "*The National Convention*".

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROGRAM?

1. The Meeting Theme

Often it's easier to plan the overall program by organising it around a simple theme.

This does not mean that the entire program must be devoted to the theme idea; it does, however, serve as a reminder *that an AA get-together advances the common purpose of AA.*

2. Main Features – Dinner-Dance; Open Meetings etc.

In planning a rally, program chairpersons usually schedule several large open meetings throughout the event, although not necessarily in immediate succession. A Saturday night dinner may also serve as an open meeting, with a speaker following the meal.

The large open meeting brings unity to the get-together and gives the opportunity for presenting certain matters – such as the selection of the next year’s event site – before the entire assembly of AAs attending. But too many open meetings in any single event can be tiresome; as a general rule, three or four such meetings are sufficient in a weekend.

3. Panels

Many program chairpersons schedule workshops and panel sessions to provide suitable activities without overloading the program with open meetings.

Workshops and panels may take a variety of forms. The session may be followed by a question-and-answer period

Try to make time for the Q&A, as it encourages involvement. Use a roving microphone.

On the subject of panels, we would like to say a word about general service. Experience has shown us that topics such as “How the General Service Office Works” or “Why GSO?” attract only a small audience and therefore do not carry the message in a satisfactory fashion. We find that GSO staff members can best be used as speakers on regular panels – where their familiarity with AA worldwide can add an extra dimension to the presentation. In Australia, such service topics are usually reserved for Regional Forums and other service meetings, and at larger meetings General Service Office staff are more often than not invited to speak about the role of General Service Office. Unlike North America, we usually find this to create great interest and increased understanding: much needed in our rather decentralised situation.

Any one of our dedicated Trustees (especially your own Regional Trustee) would be invaluable on such topics as “*AA and Responsibility*”. They are in a crossroads position where they are aware of our Fellowship – particularly on the public level – and at the same time have an overall perspective on our purposes, strengths, and weaknesses. They can be of great value in helping us learn more about worldwide AA.

Also, don’t forget your own GSRs, committee members, and Delegates. From their work in carrying the message outside their own Groups, they’ll have lots of ideas on such panel subjects as “*Is AA Changing?*”, “*AA at Work, Then and Now*”. Again, we suggest you avoid putting these people all on one panel; many other AAs – old-timers and not-so-old-timers – have worthwhile information or thoughts on such subjects.

Here are some suggested topics appropriate for workshops and panels:

CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

TREATMENT CENTRES

PUBLIC INFORMATION

CO-OPERATION WITH THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

SPONSORSHIP

SERVICE

GSRs

TWELVE TRADITIONS

TWELVE CONCEPTS

INTERGROUPS

CENTRAL OFFICES

ANONYMITY

SINGLENES OF PURPOSE

PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

PREDATORS IN AA

'Balance' and 'flow' are to key words in the planning of a program, particularly in setting up the panels. It's important that the program flow smoothly, with one feature following another in a pleasant, logical series. It's also important that the panel topics and participants be balanced, so as not to give the audience too much of any one subject, too many speakers from one area, or too many panel participants of similar experience and viewpoint.

One effective way to ensure maximum interest and participation is to farm out each meeting, workshop, or panel to a different Group or Area within the rally's territory. Thus, the Groups themselves plan and organise the meetings, always working closely with the general program chairperson to assure balance in the overall planning.

4. Care of Speakers

Many larger events these days feature speakers from out of town, sometimes AA members living a thousand miles or more from the convention site. This means that program chairpersons have a responsibility to see that certain important matters are properly handled on the speaker's behalf:

Most Members enjoy hearing speakers from other countries; however, using members' contributions to fund travel and accommodation expenses of such speakers to attend conventions and rallies in Australia requires careful consideration. This should include whether members knew before they donated that their contributions were to be used towards travel and accommodation for overseas speakers.

Ideally speakers from overseas should be selected from those already booked to attend, and who are self-funding. However if a committee believes that there is a unique speaker, they should put forward a valid argument to their group conscience.

The practice of individual members funding speakers to attend should be avoided, particularly if the group conscience has decided, for whatever reason, not to fund the speaker.

It is also worth reminding ourselves of the following statement which appears in our publication "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" under Tradition 12: '*we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as AA members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public*'.

Funding members to speak could be considered to be disregarding this tradition.

Should an Area or District invite a Trustee, (other than the Regional Trustee), GSO staff member/s, World Service Delegates or National Co-ordinators to attend an area or District event (excluding Regional/National forums and approved special events), the cost of travel, accommodation, meals and registration of the guest/s should be covered by that Area or District

Expenses

It should be clear, when the speakers are booked, what terms are being made for expenses. Unless it's otherwise specified, speakers have a right to assume that all their travel, meal, and hotel expenses will be paid for the entire trip. Speakers will also expect hotel or motel accommodations as a matter of course. If they're to be guests in private homes, this should be explained before their arrival.

Speaking Arrangements

Speakers should know when they're expected to speak and whether their presence is also required elsewhere in the program. (Some speakers may be unable to attend the entire event). No other commitments besides speaking should be made for speakers without their knowledge and consent. Most speakers will also appreciate knowing something about the conditions under which they'll speak; let them know whether there'll be a podium, public address system, etc. Apart from their exact role(s) in the meeting, they also, especially for prepared speeches, appreciate having the courtesy of generous notice as to the topic or theme and the duration of their contribution, together with details of that session's theme and any other speakers and subjects in the same bracket.

Speaker Hosts and/or Hostesses

Responsible members from the local group should be assigned the duty of being host to the visiting speakers and making sure that they have proper accommodation, as well as transportation, other conveniences and necessities such as appropriate meals.

GUARDING AGAINST ANONYMITY BREAKS

When AA conventions are being covered by members of the press, it's customary to begin meetings by asking their co-operation in protecting members' anonymity. Such an announcement might go like this:

“Our anonymity, like our sobriety, is a treasured possession. We ask the help of our guests – especially those representing the press of broadcasting media – in protecting the anonymity of all alcoholics present or mentioned here today.

We hope you hear something at this meeting which you can take away with you and use. We respectfully request, however, that you eliminate any mention of names in reference to Members of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Or this:

Anonymity Statement

There may be some here who are not familiar with our tradition of personal anonymity at the media level.

The public relations policy of Alcoholics Anonymous is based on attraction rather than promotion. We need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, and internet (chat room or Social) media.

Therefore we respectfully ask that no AA member be identified by full name or photograph in published or broadcast reports of this meeting.

It's hardly likely that any newspaper or broadcasting station these days will fail to co-operate with this request; not only is the AA principle of anonymity well known generally, but General Service Office has advised the press and broadcasters year after year of AA's position in this matter..

But it's possible that Members' anonymity may be violated through indirect methods. There's a likelihood, for example, that too much promotional zeal on the part of the Event Committee may lead them to reveal a great deal of information about speakers without actually disclosing last names. This means, in the case of some well-known individuals, that their anonymity is technically protected but actually broken, since their identity can be readily recognised by anybody remotely familiar with them or their work.

In one case, for example, a university professor had been invited to address a large AA banquet in the same state where he lived and worked. Only his first name, nickname, and last initial appeared on the announcement posters, but the name of his school and a previous academic connection were fully displayed. *The professor's actual identity couldn't have been more clearly revealed if his last name and photograph had been included!*

Is there a safe way to avoid making such de facto anonymity breaks? Well, one good procedure is to ask speakers how they wish to be listed on posters and advance notices. They'll know better than anybody else how much information about themselves ought to be revealed. In any case, whatever the speakers' feelings, the practice of using initials rather than last names should always be followed for the protection of AA, as well as the individual Member.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS ON GOOD EVENT MANAGEMENT

When your committee is discussing the get-together, consider contacting General Service Office about the 'learned from' database they keep for the National Convention; also go over the things you liked and didn't like at past events. Pay special attention to those matters that caused petty irritations and annoyances; most likely, they can be avoided. Here are a few closing suggestions:

1. Name Tags

AA rallies don't seem to be right without identification tags. See that they're in bold print or felt pen, large, dark-coloured print on a light background, so people can read them at a glance and at a distance.

At the same time, try not to subject guests to more than a few minutes' wait in registering for the convention and picking up their tags or labels. Organise the registration so the process will flow smoothly and quickly. It's really preferable to have a rego desk person do the writing – so it is not invisible!

2. Coffee

It's an essential feature – plenty of coffee and coffee sessions throughout the event. Don't forget, some AAs come more to talk to each other than to listen to speakers, so be sure they have lots of opportunity to gather round the coffeepot. Remember that some prefer tea, or non-caffeinated or herbal teas or coffee substitutes for health reasons. And all sorts of milk, and sugar and sugar substitutes!

3. Accessibility

At large rallies, it's sometimes necessary to hold some of the open meetings in buildings other than the one used as event headquarters. Don't forget to ensure that wheelchair access and bathroom facilities are available.

4. Hotel and Motel Registrations

Often, printed lists of local accommodation, giving prices and other information, are available from local tourist information centres or agencies. If possible, send these lists out with the registrations and give members a chance to make their reservations long before the convention.

Be sure to include the lower-priced hotels and cabins or tent sites in caravan parks, and Air B&B information, Youth Hostels and backpacker lodges.

5. Professional Assistance

Don't hesitate to avail yourself of assistance from local chamber of commerce officials and convention managers. They already know all about the problems you'll be facing, and they can give invaluable advice and assistance.

6. Literature

Event Committees can pass along important AA information in an attractive and painless way by using displays.

Consult the Literature Order Form for listing of other useful material, or consult General Service Office for suggestions.

7. Don't Compete With Last Year

While it's best not to try to compete with previous conventions, if you're the convention chairperson, you will naturally want to benefit from the experience of previous convention committees.—In Australia, ask General Service Office about the National Convention database.

8. Sound System

It's vital to have an efficient sound system as well as at least one roving mic for Q&A sessions. If the event is being recorded, make sure to repeat the questions into the mic so that there are not big blanks in the recording and someone answering a question nobody heard.

Inform the audiences that they are being recorded, unless they object.

AA AND AL-ANON

The following questions often arise:

How may AA and Al-Anon co-operate in Area and Regional Conventions and get-togethers?

In accordance with the principle of non-affiliation, a convention would be either AA or Al-Anon – not both. However, most AA convention committees invite Al-Anon to participate by planning its own part of the program, and the committee arranges for facilities for the Al-Anon meetings.

Should an AA event committee make a contribution to Al-Anon from the financial profits of the convention?

In accordance with the self-support Traditions of both Fellowships and to abide by the concept of "co-operation but not affiliation," it is suggested that AA should not make gifts or contributions to Al-Anon. By the same token, AA should not accept contributions from Al-Anon.

If separate registrations have been kept for both AA and Al-Anon, however, income may be easily assigned.

AA AND OTHER 12-STEP FELLOWSHIPS

From its earliest days, AA's traditions and literature have stressed the importance of its *Singleness of Purpose*. Statements of *Singleness of Purpose* are often read out as a routine at the beginning of AA Meetings. They are no less relevant in the context of a larger AA event. It is therefore suggested that something like the following be read out before each day's proceedings begin:

Mindful of our obligation to AA Unity, and the necessity for our ultimate survival to stick to AA's Singleness of Purpose, we ask all speakers to confine their contributions to their alcoholism. Brief mention of other addictions may be made where they form an important part of the drinking story, but speakers are asked not to dwell on those aspects.

As Bill W. said in 1958, "We have to confine our membership to alcoholics and we have to confine AA groups to a single purpose. If we don't stick to these principles we shall almost surely collapse. And if we collapse, we cannot help anyone." (Grapevine).

BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS

We hear from many of you before, during, and after events and so have a unique opportunity to know what pleases and does not please event-goers. For your quick reference here are some of the points most often made, and for want of a better term, we'll call them 'dos' and 'don'ts'.

DO

- Plan ahead. Detailed plans for programming, physical arrangements and entertainment should be made well in advance.
- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting: is it service? celebration? PI? identification? networking?
- Choose speakers with care and brief them on their part in the overall program plan.
- Use 'service' speakers on a variety of subjects, such as sponsorship, institutions.
- Have plenty of free time for coffee sessions and informal get-togethers.
- Think 'system': to prevent backtracking and chaotic delays, at busy moments such as registration and meals: eg have a comprehensive system to cover all possible demands at registration, think system when setting up coffee and meal queues so that the items are placed in logical order, also ensuring that catering is timely and adequate.

DON'T

- Don't lump all 'service' speakers (General Service Office people, Delegates, GSRs) in one bunch for a panel or meeting on service *per se*. Almost everything we do in AA is service, and it's best not to separate it from other topics.
- Don't over-program, scheduling too many meetings on too many subjects. Especially, avoid the three-ring-circus confusion of too many meetings at one time.
- Don't try to outdo yourself each year. Competition with yourself or others often leads to undue stress and unbalanced budgets.

