

Second Strategic Planning Report to Area 50

A Mission for the Groups and Membership in Area 50: Turning the Lights On in Our Area

Introduction

The observation is often repeated that Area 50 has become a “dark area.”

The source of this assertion, and its precise meaning and significance, are not clear to me. Similarly unclear is the history of how this situation came to pass.

Perhaps it would be a worthwhile part of the strategic planning process to investigate these questions further. Part of this effort could include a review of the insights gathered during the Area 50 inventory that took place last year.

Even without such a review, however, at least some of the broad outlines of the problem seem clear. Moreover, there has been a great deal of soul searching and discussion of these issues within Area 50 for some time. Some ways to approach the problem have emerged from these efforts, and some of these ideas have begun to be implemented.

This Report seeks to capture the insights and actions that have emerged from these discussions, and to identify the goals that should guide the next phase of this effort.

The hope is that this Report can help to further a consensus within Area 50 regarding the nature of the problem and an organized approach for addressing it, in order to continue with Phase II of “Turning the Lights On in Area 50.”

The Problem

I want to stress that my purpose in writing this section of this Report is not to offer gossip or criticism. Our Program teaches, however, that one of the crucial steps in recovery is a “searching and fearless moral inventory.” We recognize that we need to acknowledge the underlying causes and conditions of our situation in order to practice our program in earnest.

The first strategic planning report documented the fact that “ultimate responsibility” for the functioning of the AA General Service structure lay with the individual AA groups. In the last several years, however, something in the range of only 10% of the groups and meetings listed in the Buffalo Niagara Frontier AA Schedule have been active participants in Area 50 and its GSA.

It thus appears that the vast majority of AA groups in Area 50 are not fulfilling their “ultimate responsibility” to the Fellowship as a whole as contemplated by AA’s Third Legacy and the AA Service Manual.¹

Informal discussions with long time AA members in Area 50 point to a number of possible causes for this lack of participation.

Frequently referenced, for example, are historical events surrounding the theft of funds from the Buffalo Central Office many years ago, and the changes to the AA service structure in the Area that

¹ There is an important caveat to this conclusion: how many of the “meetings” listed in the Schedule are actually “groups”?

followed from that event. Apparently, these changes led to a great deal of bitterness and resentment among the membership.

Also mentioned frequently is the widespread sense that GSA meetings are nonproductive and a waste of time, are dominated by “politics,” with lengthy, heated and repetitive squabbles over seemingly unimportant issues, and by a small clique whose actions are not understood by the membership and who are not welcoming of newcomers.

GSA meetings are often characterized within the membership as boring – “like watching paint dry” – or worse.

Put another way, there appears to be a widespread sense among the membership that the GSA provides no perceived value. As one member with many years of sobriety expressed to me in opposing contributions to GSA, “tell me one thing GSA does that helps my group function!”²

Finally, at least as important as the factors just mentioned, there appears to be very widespread lack of knowledge throughout the Area that GSA even exists, and what it is supposed to do.

Given that Bill W. viewed the GSA as the “mainspring” of what he called the “most vital” aspect of our Third Legacy of Service, the situation in Area 50 is a serious problem indeed.

The situation just described is perhaps only the outward manifestation of a deeper problem in our Area that goes to the spiritual core of our Program.

Bill W. clearly had a vision that the AA Program was based on *all three* Legacies – Recovery, Unity and Service. He clearly believed that each of the legacies was necessary to the health and survival of the other two, and that all three legacies had to be alive in the program of each AA member, either directly or indirectly.

Taking Bill at his word, it seems clear that if what he saw as the “most vital” aspect of our Third Legacy is not functioning as it should, then each of the other legacies - the unity of the Fellowship and the recovery of each individual member – is crippled and at risk.

Obviously, if Bill is right, this is a serious problem that we really need to address.

The Solution: Turning the Lights On

Overview

The problems just described have been recognized by many AA members in Area 50 for some time, and the good news is that significant efforts to address them are already under way.

Group participation in and contributions to Area 50 are already up significantly. Reformatting of GSA meetings is well under way. The Area Committee, which plays a key role in the General Service Structure described in the Service Manual, has been reconstituted, and the Area service committees are in many cases more active than in the past.

² This comment seems to ignore the fact that under the Third legacy of Service, the “ultimate responsibility” for General Service lies with the groups, not the other way around. In this regard, the comment seems to reflect the lack of understanding of the role of General Service that permeates Area 50.

Much more remains to be done, however. One of the most important results of what has been called this “first phase” of “Turning the Lights On” has been the identification of several specific topics that should be addressed in “Phase II” of this Mission.

This section of this Report describes the goals for Phase II that have been identified to date. Once there is general agreement on these goals, we can turn our attention to addressing the specifics of each of them in an organized fashion. (In fact, of course, work in most of these areas is already under way.)

Goals and Concepts to Guide Phase II of the Mission to Turn the Lights On in Area 50

1. Clarify the Roles of the Area Committee, the GSA, the Groups and the Membership in Carrying Out the Mission.

A. AA Members

The AA General Service structure is designed to give every AA member an opportunity to engage in service work outside his or her Home Group, and thereby incorporate the Third Legacy of Service into his or her individual program.

In the Service Manual, Bill W. addresses the challenge of getting the individual member involved in General Service:

Most AA members are primarily interested in their groups, in their own sobriety, and in helping other drunks one-on-one. And that is as it should be. While the work of general service has exactly the same objective – carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers – the connection is not always direct or obvious. Some stimulators are usually needed to get the attention of AA members – to show them that service can add a rich dimension to their sober lives and Twelfth Step work, and that their participation is vital to the future of AA.

Good communication is of vital importance. . . . [W]hen it comes to general service work, communication has a tendency to break down. It can take hard work to get the attention of alcoholics, but with a creative approach, they can be encouraged to take time out from the nuts and bolts of recovery to think about another phase of their new lives. Once AA members are well informed about service, they often want to become involved and to take on their own service responsibilities. Manual at S23 (emphasis in original.)

A core goal for Phase II of our mission must be to establish the kind of communication with individual members that Bill describes in this passage as being “of vital importance” to the success of the General Service structure and to bringing the Third Legacy to life in our Area. See Goal 2 below.

B. The AA Home Groups

In the Service Manual, Bill describes the home group as “the very basis of the service structure.” *Id.* at S25.

At a minimum, it is through the Home Group that individual members begin to experience service. Moreover, the members participate directly in the formation of their group conscience, which is the foundation of the entire AA service structure. (See First Strategic Planning Report at 6.)

For most AAs, membership in a home group is one of the keys to continuing sobriety. In a home group, they accept service responsibilities and learn to sustain friendships. The home group affords individual AAs the privilege of voting on issues that affect the Fellowship as a whole; *it is the very basis of the service structure*. . . . [T]he home group is where they participate in business meetings and cast their vote as part of the group conscience of the Fellowship as a whole. Manual at S25 (emphasis added.)

Our First Strategic Planning Report described how the groups themselves bear “ultimate responsibility” and “final authority” for the AA service structure and the survival of AA as a whole, as stated expressly in the First Concept for World Service. First Report at 6.

The groups discharge their responsibility and exercise their authority by active participation in their District and Area, through the election of a General Service Representative who carries the group’s conscience to those bodies and participates in them.

As our First Report concluded, “The success of this service structure depends upon the active and informed participation of each Home Group and its membership. *Without this active participation in the District and Area, the vision of our Third Legacy is lost.*” Report at 9 (emphasis added.)

Given the critical role of the groups in the AA service structure and their “ultimate responsibility” for the success of that structure, it is obviously essential to increase group participation very significantly if the mission of “Turning the Lights On” is to be successful. See Goal 2 below.

C. District and Area

The role of the District and the Area in General Service are summarized at pages 7-8 of the First Strategic Report.

As Bill says in the Service Manual, “The area assembly is the mainspring of the Conference structure – the democratic voice of the movement expressing itself.” Manual at S36; First Report at 7.

Assembly meetings should provide a forum for discussion of all matters of concern to AA in the Area: “assembly meetings consider a variety of issues, from General Service Conference business to area problems and solutions and financial affairs[.]” See, generally, Service Manual at S36-S42; First Report at 7-8.

Bringing this critical forum back to life, and making it relevant to the Fellowship in our Area, is the focus of our Mission and should continue as the focus in Phase II. It is also critical to revive the GSA service structure beyond the GSA meetings themselves. See Goals 1 D, 2, 4 and 5.

As noted already, increased participation by groups and members is the key to accomplishing these goals. Developing a plan for working with the groups and membership should be a key component of Phase II. See Goal 2.

Part of this goal is reconstituting the District structure in Area 50. This topic is the subject of a separate goal – see Goal 6 below.

D. Area Committee

Chapter 5 of the AA Service Manual describes the role and structure of the Area Committee, which is made up of officers and committee chairs elected by the GSA.

According to the Service Manual, “perhaps more than any other group of people in AA, the area committee is responsible for the health of the Conference structure and thus for growth and harmony in the AA Fellowship.” Manual at S44.

The Committee is the trusted servant of the GSA and of the groups active in the Assembly. The Committee has all of the rights and responsibilities described in the “Twelve Concepts for World Service” consistent with its mission.

As noted above, this Committee has already been reconstituted, and is taking front line responsibility for the mission to “Turn the Lights On in Area 50,” reporting regularly to the GSA on its progress with recommendations for action by the Assembly and the groups themselves.

We expect this approach will assume increasing importance in Phase II.

Given its role in the AA service structure, it is essential that the Area Committee assume leadership in guiding and implementing the mission of “Turning the Lights On.”

E. Summary

This Goal No. 1 is intended to identify each element of the AA structure whose participation is required in order to “Turn the Lights On in Area 50” – individual AA members, home groups, districts, the GSA itself and its constituent committees, including the Area Committee.

The goals to follow set forth concepts concerning how each of these elements of the AA structure may be encouraged to work together in fulfilling our mission and bringing back to life the Third Legacy of Service in our Area.

2. Increase Outreach to and Encourage Participation by the Membership and Home Groups in All Aspects of General Service, Including GSA Itself.

Obviously, increasing member and group participation in all aspects of General Service, including the Area Assembly, is the core goal of the mission to “Turn the Lights On in Area 50.”

As noted above, there has already been significant progress toward this goal, in terms of both group participation and group financial contributions to GSA. However, this effort is still in its early stages, and much work remains to be done.

We recommend that the Area Committee and the GSA develop a specific and detailed plan for outreach to the groups and members, and increasing their participation, as a matter of first priority.

3. Enhance the Functioning and Visibility of the Area Service Committees.

For the first time in several years, all of the Area 50 service committees appear to have chairs, who are active and committed to their responsibilities.

With committee chairs in place, the next step appears to be supplying the committees with sufficient active members to discharge their responsibilities effectively. This step depends, of course, on the participation of a sufficient number of groups so that there are a sufficient number of GSRs to staff the Committees.

Meanwhile, the committee chairs have been proceeding with the service work delegated to their committees with the membership currently available.

All these efforts should continue in Phase II. There should be a determined effort to ensure that the GSRs and the Assembly as a whole understands the work of each service committee so that this information can get back to the home groups, and so that the groups and their individual members understand the service opportunities available to them and the importance of this service.

The service committees could also play an important role in outreach to the groups as part of Goal 2 above.

Finally, issues have already arisen with overlap between GSA service committees and their counterparts at the Intergroups (see Goal 4.) This issue will need to be addressed, as will the service responsibilities at the District level (see Goal 6.)

In summary, we recommend that a plan be developed for increasing the visibility of each service committee throughout Area 50, and that these plans be integrated with the overall mission of “Turning the Lights On” in our Area and with the other Goals set forth in this Report.

4. Increase Cooperation and Coordination with the Intergroups in Area 50, Particularly in the Area of Service Activities.

There is significant overlap between the roles played by GSA and the Intergroups, particularly in the area of service activities outside the home group (corrections, treatment, CPC, PIC, accessibility, etc.)

Generally, this overlap is neither understood nor endorsed or accepted by the membership. To the contrary, it is a source of significant confusion and frustration.

Efficient work in these areas, and indeed more generally in all aspects of AA general service, requires good communication between the groups themselves, the Intergroups, and the GSA.

Some progress has been made in this area already, most notably in GSA’s effort to hold assemblies in each of the four Intergroups in Area 50 during 2016.

Once again, however, there is much more to do. One example involves the clarification of the roles of the GSA service committees with their Intergroup counterparts. See Goal 3. Another example would be enhancing communication between GSA and the Intergroups through revived and more substantive participation by liaison representatives from GSA and the Intergroups attending each other’s meetings.

Moreover, to be effective, any efforts to revive the GSA Districts, or to reconfigure the District structure (see Goal 6), should consider the overlap between the Districts and the Intergroups.

Finally, to the extent that any of the Intergroups are themselves suffering from lack of participation or other “dark area” issues, this would be a matter of concern to AA in our Area as a whole.

If GSA and the Intergroups are to work together effectively, then each must be healthy and functioning entity.

Addressing these issues seems to fall clearly within the responsibility of the Area Committee and the GSA itself, working with the Intergroups. We recommend that all aspects of the relationships between GSA and the Intergroups receive individual, specific and focused attention as part of the Phase II process.

5. Re-Imagine the Structure and Function of the GSA Meetings.

The widespread current and historical complaints within the Fellowship concerning the perceived lack of value in the GSA meetings is documented in the statement of “The Problem” above.

As noted already, efforts are already under way to improve the usefulness of these meetings. GSR education efforts are a prominent example of the kinds of efforts that have taken place already, as is the decision to hold meetings throughout the Area to enhance outreach.

Once again, however, we believe that much more can be done to improve these meetings, to the point of re-imagining the function they might play in a fundamental sense.

The AA Service Manual envisions GSA meetings that go far beyond the kind of “business meeting” structure currently in place, which is dominated largely by committee reports and debates on motions conducted pursuant to Roberts Rules of Order.

For example, what if a focus of the meeting was an issue of concern to the membership and the groups in the Area, such as our Primary Purpose and how it relates to the presence of rehab patients at many meetings? What if a main focus of an assembly was a Day of Sharing on the Three Legacies? What if once a year, the Assembly addressed the “State of AA in Area 50,” with reports and panels involving the intergroups, the Districts, and the Service Committees? What if on occasion, an assembly was set up as a weekend retreat rather than a 3 hour meeting, to allow for more in-depth sharing on important topics?

Any of these ideas fall within the scope of an Area assembly as envisioned by the Service Manual, and certainly many more can be imagined. See, generally, Manual at Chapter 4 and First Report at 7-8.

The point here is simply to recognize that making Assembly meetings useful, substantive and interesting to the membership should be a key goal of Phase II of our mission. We believe that the focus of the Assemblies should perhaps be at least as much on outreach to the membership as a whole as on the internal business of the GSA.

We recommend further detailed consideration of and action on this issue as part of the next phase of our efforts.

6. Revive and Revise the District Structure.

In the vision of the AA Service Manual, the District is a crucial component of the General Service structure, providing the building blocks on which the Area can function efficiently.

Districts are supposed to consist of a number of groups meeting close to each other, who work together on General Service issues. They are made up of General Service Representatives (GSRs) from the constituent groups, who elect a District Committee Member (DCM) to represent the interests of the District at the Assembly.

On paper, there are 22 Districts in Area 50. However, to my knowledge, only one of these Districts is functioning in any fashion with an elected DCM.

Obviously, we need to consider whether and how to revive the District structure in Area 50 as part of Phase II, particularly given the importance of the District to the vision set forth in the Service Manual.

For some time, there has been discussion of whether the current structure of 22 Districts in Area 50 should be reconsidered. This should be one of the issues addressed in Phase II, as should be the relationship between the Districts and the Intergroups (see Goal 4.)

My personal impression is that this is a particularly complicated set of issues to be addressed on a practical, real world basis. It may take time to address these issues, which may become more clear as the other goals move toward realization – in particular, the roles of the GSA service committees and the relationships between the GSA and the Intergroups.

Obviously, however, this is a decision for the Area Committee and/or the GSA as a whole.

Conclusion: Next Steps

This Second Strategic Planning Report has a small number of specific and hopefully modest goals.

First of all, we have sought to define the problem behind the description of Area 50 as a “dark area.” We have then sought to summarize what has been achieved so far in addressing that problem.

As part of the effort to date, it seems that a small number of general goals have emerged that could serve to guide and direct our next phase of the efforts to “Turn the Lights On in area 50.” Goal 1 above seeks to define the parts of AA that would be critical to the success of Phase II, and the remaining 5 goals seek to define specific tasks that should perhaps be addressed in this next phase.

My thought is to submit this Report to the Area Committee for consideration and discussion. The Committee may decide to seek input from the GSA as well.

As noted in this Report, Bill W. felt that “*good communication*” – Bill’s italics – “is of vital importance to making General Service function, and I hope these discussions would achieve that goal. See page 3 above.

My hope is that out of these discussions, an “informed group conscience” will emerge regarding the goals for Phase II of our Mission. At that point, and with the input from these discussions, specific plans can be developed for progress toward each of these goals.

In the mean time, of course, I expect that progress in each of these areas will continue, as it has with such effectiveness during Phase I.

Yours in Service,

Hank K., scrivener, Ad Hoc Strategic Planning Committee

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