

## Dark districts—a focus for many area delegates

Box 4-5-9, February-March 2006

A district that sends no one to represent it at area assemblies is said to have gone “dark.” This occurs with the breakdown of the process by which general service reps (G.S.R.s) meet to elect a district committee member (D.C.M.) to attend area meetings. When the district goes dark, its members no longer have a voice in Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole.

There are 93 areas in the United States and Canada, comprising hundreds of districts. Judging from the five delegates who spoke about their experience for Box 4-5-9, participation varies—sometimes widely—from area to area.

“We have always had great participation in our districts,” says Randy M., delegate for Area 91, Saskatchewan, Canada. “We have 21 districts, and at the last couple of area assemblies we had full attendance, with either the D.C.M. or the alternate showing up.”

The most recent meeting, he says, also attracted “a significant number of G.S.R.s from meetings in the local area.” On top of that, “local members come to the meeting too, to help with set-up, and, hopefully, to be exposed to service and maybe be attracted to it.”

One of the ways in which areas, including Area 91, encourage participation is by holding their meetings in different districts. Area 91 also pays the expenses of D.C.M.s, so that “their attendance does not become a funding issue,” says Randy, whose term as delegate ended in December. “We have a district development fund, which we are ready to use to take a workshop into a district, at its request. We would do this to build support for service. We haven’t had any need to use it, though, because support is already so strong,” he says.

The situation is not so bright in Area 53, Central Southeast Ohio, where, says delegate Madeline H., “dark districts are a big problem.” Of 42 districts, “only 16 are connected in some form or other,” she reports.

The area, says Madeline, counts on “a core set of groups that have a real interest in the A.A. structure.” What hurts participation, she says, is that, “some take for granted that A.A. will always be there. They have the idea that G.S.O. takes care of itself—that’s pretty common. They believe they have to donate money to G.S.O., but do not believe that their group can make a difference.” In an effort to draw people to service, “we try to approach the new groups. The old groups look on it as politics. They are glad there are service geeks, and are happy to let someone else do it.”

Her area, says Madeline, does not spend time trying to boost interest among groups that have a history of non-participation in the service structure. “The older groups have already been approached, more than once, so we don’t feel it is a good use of our time to keep trying over and over again. The best prospects are the new groups and those A.A members in the first year of sobriety.”

The area looks for opportunities to expose groups to service, she says. “An opening for service can occur when a group is having personality problems and calls on the delegate to head a group

inventory—that's a good opening." Basically, though, says Madeline, "you deal with the 16 districts that are active."

According to Nancy K., the delegate for Area 29, Maryland, "dark districts have been a problem for quite a while. You can have a district that has no D.C.M. or not even any G.S.R.s. Other problems are G.S.R. lists that are not up to date. There is no contact info, so the members in the district have no voice or representation."

Area 29 comprises 47 districts, with fewer than half participating at any given assembly or committee meeting, says Nancy. "We get about 100 people for an area assembly, whereas if everyone were participating, we would have almost 1,000."

Nancy has been doing area service since 1990, starting as a G.S.R., then alternate delegate, and now delegate, a position she rotated out of at the end of 2005.

"Some members don't think they have a voice in A.A. They see it as a group in New York that makes the decisions. I want them to see what is coming out of New York, to see for themselves that G.S.O. is constantly asking for input from the members out there."

Nancy puts in a lot of legwork to encourage participation. "I have gone to groups in districts that have no representation. I drop off stuff like the area calendar of events or the phone numbers of staff members at G.S.O. At the break I announce that information from G.S.O. in New York is available on the literature table, which never fails to spark interest."

Efforts of the area are paying off, she says. "We have six new active districts this year as a result of scheduling area meetings in parts of the state where there was little to no participation. One district that had not been heard from in six years now is active." In addition, she says, "the area is working with three districts to get them up and active; that would make for nine newly active districts in all in the last two years." Simply put, says Nancy, "you need people willing to serve—an active district sets the tone for service in the area."

The newest area in the North American service structure is Area 93, Central California. Formerly a part of Area 5, it was added in 2000. According to Vicki B., Area 93 delegate, "when we were attached to Area 5 we had about 50 districts and about 1,900 groups—an unmanageable number—with 12 to 14 districts not participating." After splitting off into a new area, "we asked ourselves what we could do to help increase participation."

The area officers agreed that each would visit every district at least once during their two-year commitments, with the delegate making regular visits. "The personal contact counts for a lot. We ask them what they need. Also, it's important that the districts know that they don't have to come to us always," says Vicki.

Of the 27 districts in Area 93, only two are nonparticipating. "One district became participating when a neighboring district reached out," says Vicki. "In another, someone who was very active moved into a district that was dark, and his involvement got things started."

In Southern Wisconsin, Area 75, four of 32 districts have for years had no representation at the area meetings, according to Nancy G., delegate. A few years ago, three districts were absorbed by

neighboring districts due to nonparticipation. "Misinformation or lack of information regarding the general service structure seems to be the major problem," says Nancy. There is also, she says, "the perception that area meetings are nothing but politics." People fail to realize, she says, "that the area is made up of their groups, of their districts, and that the structure is in place to keep them connected to A.A. as a whole."

According to Nancy, "education is imperative, both through sponsorship and through organized efforts such as district workshops. Area 75 provides a G.S.R. school, which is held at the first area assembly of each year, and also travels throughout our districts upon request. "As delegate, I forward copies of the new group forms received from G.S.O. to the appropriate D.C.M.s so they can welcome the groups into the service structure and encourage them to elect G.S.R.s."

In November 2003, Area 75 formed an ad hoc committee to look into the problem of dark districts, and as a first step contacted those districts, says Nancy. "The responses varied from an assurance that they would attend the next area meeting to a clear dismissal of any interest in A.A. at the area level or beyond."

Area 75 continues to communicate with these districts through mailings, if there is a contact, says Nancy, and through district visits by area officers. "We continue to reach out, maintain communication, and work at all levels to ensure that everyone in Area 75 feels welcome and connected to the area and A.A. as a whole. We hope that they will see the value of participation and unity through general service."