

September 1961

FORMULA FOR AN AA MEETING

in SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

*Some warm and friendly AA customs
have spread from the Golden State*

IN their attitude toward meetings, Southern California AAs tend to display a certain foot-loose, fancy-free disposition characteristic of this part of the country. Here an AA member may "belong" to a dozen groups (in the sense of being on the membership rolls), or to none. He may officially belong to a group he seldom attends, and attend groups he doesn't belong to. Shopping around is common. Certain speakers are drawing cards. When word gets around that one of these is going to speak, the usual attendance of a score may jump to a hundred or more.

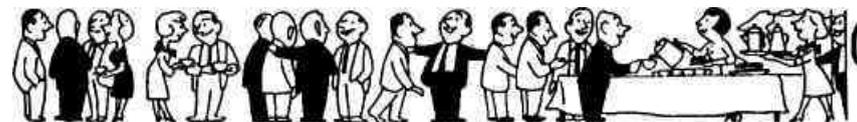
All this is hard on secretaries. A secretary seldom knows who really is a member of the group. In a year, half the membership of a group is likely to have moved away or started frequenting other meetings, without telling the secretary. And the busiest bee in the group may turn out not to be a member at all, or at least not enrolled.

As one might expect, group membership fluctuates in volume greatly,

sometimes violently. Alcoholics here (like all Southern Californians) are freeway-trained rovers. Hence, groups draw their membership from far and wide. Whether they want to or not, groups inevitably contend to a certain extent for the same people. Supermarkets here have the same problem.

But open or closed, discussion or "speaker" meeting, every group in Southern California observes two inviolable customs.

One custom is that of opening the meeting with the reading of the first few pages of "Alcoholics Anonymous." It dates back to the first AA meeting held in Los Angeles on December 19, 1939, and it began by chance. A Denver alcoholic had gone to the Mayo Clinic to learn that his alcoholism was hopeless; but a doctor at the clinic gave him a copy of the book, which had just been published, telling him it might contain some useful ideas. The book stayed in the alcoholic's luggage on a drinking jaunt to Mexico which ended in a Palm Springs hotel. Here, searching



in his luggage for a non-existent bottle one night, he found the book and desperately began reading it to pass the time until dawn would break and the liquor stores would open.

He never did buy any more booze. Instead, realizing that in order to keep his tender new sobriety he had to give it away, he went to Los Angeles, assembled an assortment of lushes and started a meeting. He had never attended one, but he had the book. He began by reading Chapter Five, and since then every Southern California meeting—all descendants of that first one—has opened the same way.

From the very start, the typical Southern California meeting has a certain distinctive flavor which might be called the "Hi!" flavor.

When the chairman opens the meeting with "I'm So-and-so, and I'm an alcoholic," he is greeted with a "Hi, So-and-so!"

Whoever is chosen to read the excerpt from Chapter Five is also greeted with the "Hi!" when he (or she) gives his name, applause as he walks to the podium and applause when he concludes.

The Chapter Five reader is likely to be fairly new to the program but no matter how timid he is at first, the

applause and the "Hi!" will start him on his way to becoming an AA ham.

A typical Los Angeles meeting lasts an hour and a half. Most start at 8:30 in the evening and end at 10 o'clock. There are usually two speakers, a man and a woman, but there may be several, or there may be only one if a special speaker from the "circuit" is booked.

There is usually a five- or ten-minute coffee break in the middle of the meeting, following the first speaker. The second part usually begins with the reading of the Twelve Traditions—another opportunity to break in timid newcomers with applause and "Hi's!" If they get hung up on the pronunciation of "autonomous" or "anonymity," as they often do, the applause afterwards is extra loud. The impression, especially in the larger meetings, is one of infectious joviality.

Another Southern California custom is that of celebrating anniversaries with birthday cakes. At the end of the meeting, just before the Lord's Prayer, the chairman may say, "We have a custom in AA of calling newcomers 'babies.' We do this because we believe alcoholics finding AA sobriety for the first time have been in a certain sense reborn. And as babies

grow older, they have birthdays. Tonight we are celebrating such a birthday. For 365 consecutive days of total sobriety—Jerry W.!"

At this point, to the usual applause, Jerry, dressed in his best because he knew full well what was about to happen, makes his way to the podium while someone, such as his wife or sponsor, emerges from the back room with a cake bearing a lighted candle.

The raggedly sung strains of "Happy Birthday, Dear Jerry" peel out somewhat discordantly (or once in a while with grade AA barber-shop harmony), and the beaming Jerry accepts the cake. The singing concludes with a mournfully drawn out "Keep coming ba-a-ack!" and Jerry blows out the candle, a feat which evokes tremendous applause. Jerry expresses his thanks in a few words, or sometimes enough to give everybody the fidgets, and returns to his seat amid more applause.

The newcomer's expressed attitude toward this may be one of supercilious condescension, and he may refer to it as rampant, blatant, sloppy sentimentalism—but he will be impressed nonetheless, and is likely to nourish a secret inner feeling of envious hope.

There may be two or more birthdays celebrated at a meeting. Some groups have an annual birthday night for old-timers who are given cakes with as many as fifteen or twenty candles. The sight of ten or twelve old-timers receiving cakes that resem-

ble ambulatory forest fires impresses even the most hardened skeptic.

Some groups give cakes decorated with the recipient's name, and he is allowed to take his cake home. In some groups, the cake is sliced and served after the meeting. Emergencies have been known to occur in which the same cake had to be used more than once in the same meeting—hastily taken back, recandled and relit, and so on. After all, we are not saints. We claim only spiritual progress.

The thundered "Hi's!" as each speaker gives his name, the applause for everything, the universal scurrying like wheeled rabbits to everywhere from, everywhere; together, they give an impression of cordiality, joviality and open-handedness that is rather startling but usually pleasing to people who encounter it for the first time.

Of course, some think it forced, even phony glad-handing greeterism. A few are genuinely shocked by the fact that most speakers and leaders give their last as well as their first names. It seems anything but anonymous. And this light-heartedness (some might say light-headedness) is not found in all groups. It is most noticeable in the larger ones—and maybe that is why they are large.

But for the secretaries, the steering committees, the sober-sides—for all those who like things tidy, orderly and predictable—it's a hard AA life here in Southern California.

C. A., Los Angeles, Calif.