

October 1945

CHICAGO'S NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS

Key to Simplicity in a Metropolitan Area

The first A.A. member in Chicago contacted the Akron group in the fall of 1937 and slowly over the next two years assembled a group of six members, at which time the first formal A.A. meeting was held. Since that time - September 20, 1939 - regular weekly meetings have been held in Chicago. It is interesting to note that three of the first six in the group were advised to try A.A. by physicians. Since that time the friendly sympathy of many Chicago physicians of alcoholic patients with whom they had struggled in vain has contributed greatly to the growth of the group.

From the beginning the Chicago group has adhered closely to the A.A. fundamentals as absorbed from the Akron group. The feeling has been that growth should be steady and sound. There has been a considerable amount of favorable publicity in the Chicago newspapers and all of it has been unsought. It is an unspoken tenet of the group that the restoration of each individual to a calm, orderly way of living is of more importance than promoting the group in public. Experience has been that there is a very great power in the example group members have given those who knew them before their entrance on the program.

Spirit of Simplicity

This spirit of simplicity extends to the activities of the group as a whole. Organization at all times has been only to such extent as to insure against over-organization. Fortunately the Chicago group early in its existence was given this advice by the leader in Akron: When the time is right and you are right, Providence will show you the way.

Six months after the group moved into the Loop for regular Tuesday meetings it became apparent that the general meeting itself was not a proper place for the discussion of business affairs. We, therefore, set up an earlier meeting on the same evening for any matters of business which might come up. This meeting was without officers and any member interested could attend. For lack of a better name it was called the Set-up Meeting. This has continued, although now one member from each neighborhood group attends and at this meeting the members may present for discussion any subject in which their groups are interested.

The plan for the neighborhood groups developed naturally with no impulse to organize for the sake of organization. At about the same time the Set-up Meeting was formed a rather

considerable rush of prospects appeared. Each was sponsored by an older member but there was no arrangement on the part of the group as a whole for meeting or helping the new people except by casual contacts at Tuesday meetings. Two of the older members conceived the idea of an informal bull session with the men under their sponsorship at the time invited to a home to sit around for the evening and discuss any particular problems of their own. This experiment was so successful that other informal gatherings at unstated times were held here and there throughout the city. Presently it became apparent that the idea could well be systematized. The city was divided into 10 areas and a discussion group to meet regularly on Tuesday nights was formed in each one. As each group has acquired new members it has divided and in some cases subdivided until there are now 60 in the Chicago area. It has been found that the value and pleasure in these group meetings lie in a rather small attendance. Some of these groups have been reluctant to divide because of close association in their early days of A.A. and remain large. The general feeling, however, is that from six to 15 members is the ideal size of a group for a discussion meeting.

Tuesday night meetings in the Loop are at present held in the Engineering Building at 205 West Wacker Drive. This is the fifth meeting-place required by expansion of the group. Many members and their wives have dinner in the building before the meeting. In general the procedure on Tuesday nights follows the early pattern which is a program of speaking conducted by a chairman. The practice now is that four or five speakers, each allotted 10 minutes, give the Tuesday programs.

As time went on the increasing number of newcomers appeared to justify a special instruction meeting. The first of these was held informally in one corner of the large meeting hall by a volunteer older member who gathered the newer ones and talked to them and answered their questions. This haphazard plan was so evidently successful that a definite regular meeting was arranged to precede the main meeting.

Another Tuesday night meeting was organized for the benefit of old members who were concerned with sponsorship.

Even before the Chicago group began its regular Tuesday meetings in the Loop the need for companionship was recognized and met by a Saturday night open house at the home of one of the members. The group soon outgrew the accommodations of any home and moved the Saturday night festivities into a hotel in Evanston. Members of the far

south side soon set up their own Saturday night open house and since then another regular party has been established on the north side and one each on the northwest and west sides.

The Alano Club

Another activity is the Alano Club on the sixth floor at 189 West Madison Street. This project is sponsored and supported by members of the metropolitan group, administering it separate from the central office but entirely in keeping with A.A. principles and practices. Open house with coffee and cake at the Club at 1 P.M. Wednesday and at 8:30 P.M. Friday.

In the experimental field the Chicago group has had success with patients at the Chicago State Hospital on the Northwest side of the city. By special arrangement the group has been enabled to send men and women in need of hospitalization and to obtain treatment for them without putting them through the regular process of commitment. Regular A.A. meetings are held at the hospital Wednesday nights, conducted in turn by the neighborhood groups. Members submitting to this course are received into the group without distinction. The results have been good. The work was originally started some four years ago in a small, quiet way with no publicity and

we have tried, with considerable success, to continue this program on this basis of as little publicity as possible.

We were fortunate in having the services of a non-alcoholic secretary donated at the beginning of the group. She is still with us, having grown up with the group. Now on a salary basis, she is in charge of the details of the central office at 209 South State Street and has all the experience and tradition of this group as well as the Foundation office at her fingertips, and with an assistant handles all inquiries, visiting firemen, information bureau, and acts as nerve center for the Chicago group.

Throughout its existence the Chicago group has held the belief that its strength as a means of supporting each individual member and as a means of reaching others lies in its adherence to A.A. fundamentals and to simplicity in practice. Early in the group's history it was decided by common consent that any new suggestion, if approved even by a minority, should be given a trial; if it is good it will endure - if it is unwise it will not. That has proved to be sound in every instance. - *E. T.*