

# Participation of Online Groups Report

73<sup>rd</sup> General Service Conference

This presentation was moderated by Trish L., Trustee-at-Large/Canada and based on a progress report, summarized here, from the Ad Hoc Committee on Participation of Online Groups in the U.S. / Canada Service Structure. The full report is available from the General Service Office.

## BACKGROUND

The sudden onset of the pandemic in 2020, as we all well know, created a brand new (for most) environment for Alcoholics Anonymous groups around the world — the virtual one — and has pointed up the need for new ways of thinking regarding the incorporation of this new platform into A.A. life in a manner that respects our Steps, Traditions and Concepts.

Participation in A.A. life up to 2020 had logically relied on geographic structural organization, particularly for general service work. The virtual reality will be with us long past the pandemic, and we need to be looking to the future. What new opportunities have arisen? What are we missing? What are the challenges? What are the constantly changing emergent concerns? As of December 6, 2022, the GSO database had 883 listings for virtual groups in the U.S./Canada general service structure. Of these 883 groups, 587 of them have a GSR as their primary contact. In April 2022, there were 595 active virtual groups in the database. That is a steady increase in the number of groups. There are currently two virtual districts that are listed in the GSO database: District 20 in Area 48, and District 25 in Area 72. Other areas may be in the process of forming or accepting virtual districts, but only two are currently listed by GSO. Both of the virtual districts have seen a steady increase in the number of virtual groups joining them.

## Survey Data

The ad hoc committee crafted a series of questions for delegates with responses received from 76.5% of 93 areas. The complexity of the issues was acknowledged. It was also noted that many of the challenges facing online groups are the same as those of brick & mortar groups, that they are universal challenges for A.A. groups.

Based on the surveys there are many areas that have found viable solutions to issues related to the participation of online groups. Rather than a dilemma needing to be solved, there may simply be a need for collated shared experience. It was also shared that areas are figuring it out. Those who haven't had the conversations yet will do so. This is an illustration of how sharing back and forth helps move the process forward. While unity was recognized it was also noted that in one survey, the delegate answered "Yes, online groups are welcome" but further comments revealed that online groups were not actually being included. It was shared that there is a desire in the Fellowship for clarity and guidance, a thirst to know "what we're supposed to do."

## Sample Survey Responses

The following sample responses show the variety of perspectives and experiences throughout the service structure.

- We're paying attention to inclusive actions so that online folks at the hybrid assembly are truly a part of the business.
- There is a Linguistic District that will not allow online / virtual only groups to participate. They are welcome to participate in-person at Area.
- One county is currently considering addition of a virtual district.

***What discussions regarding participation of online/virtual groups in your Area /districts have taken place? Are there discussions underway regarding future participation?***

- Our Area is waiting for information from the Conference that is conclusive and gives adequate direction.
- Concerns about members from other countries serving as GSRs (or being the majority of the members) and following the proper process for listing with GSO were discussed.
- A virtual forum in addition to the in-person Regional Forums would be appreciated.

***Are you aware of any online/virtual groups in your Area that have chosen to not connect to the General Service structure, either by choice or by circumstance?***

- Yes: 46.27%; No: 53.73%
- As with in-person meetings, the online meetings are challenged to get and keep GSRs
- Many groups are confused about the difference between being a “registered group” and having their meeting listed

***What is your sense of the kinds of online/virtual groups in your Area? For instance, are they mainly new groups? Are they groups that transitioned from live to online/virtual? Do you know if they intend to stay in whatever their current format is?***

- Some online groups were in-person meetings before the pandemic and have chosen to remain virtual
- Other groups decided to convert to a hybrid platform after the pandemic
- An in-person group transitioned online, half of the group wants to remain online while half of the group returns in-person
- Majority intending to stay virtual
- We have many that are not structured and are not interested in becoming part of the General Service Structure
- New groups being developed for the purpose of reaching more people outside the area • A lot of new groups. Some that transitioned from in-person to either online only or Hybrid. They plan to continue this process
- Our area is open to online groups
- Strong resistance to online assemblies
- Some groups and meetings seem to want to meet without any connection to the district, Area and A.A. as a whole
- Seeing a substantial decline in online groups and online groups going dark as we move back to in-person groups
- Some people with accessibility issues have opted to remain connected online as independent groups
- Some AA members seem to prefer to meet online, whether for convenience or safety or due to the difficulties of finding trusted servants

***To the best of your knowledge, do online groups in your area have members from multiple districts, from outside of your Area or from other countries?***

- Yes: 76.12%; No: 23.88%

- Members of the group include U.S. members and Ireland members (among other countries). The group is trying to figure out where they belong, where they should send their 7th Tradition contributions, etc.
- Most of them have members from all over the U.S. and in some cases, other countries. That is primarily due to them sharing meeting codes on social media.
- For the groups that have contacted us we encourage them to use the Traditions to guide the group conscience when making the decision on what district and Area to join
- Many have members from across the state at the least, or other states, not necessarily other countries
- Have regular members from around the country and the world

***What motions around this subject are underway or have been made/passed in your Area?***

- Motion to have a two-year hybrid trial for assemblies • Include virtual groups that register in our area to have a vote and GSR at the area level
- Passed a motion almost 2 years ago to offer Hybrid Assembly and have been offering it ever since
- Motion to create a technology committee to run the hybrid meetings, rather than volunteers
- Passed a proposal in October 2021 to welcome a virtual district
- Our votes have been roughly 50/50 to move to virtual only, rather than hybrid as they are now.
- Voted in June 2021 to “resume Area meetings and events to in-person...as long as all safety and health requirements are met.” We do not offer an online or hybrid option to participate
- Continue hybrid meetings through this year
- Develop an Online district
- Hold all Area service meetings in a Hybrid format
- What is your Area doing as far as participation at district meetings and Area assemblies for online/virtual groups?
- Must have group number from GSO in order to participate in the Assembly
- We are hybrid for Assemblies and Area Committee Meetings
- We have a virtual component to our business meetings and delegate pre- and post-Conference reports
- All voting must be in person
- Leaving the districts to make their own decision

***Has your Area invested in equipment for hybrid service events?***

- Yes: 52.24%; No: 47.76%
- Purchased four identical laptops with cameras so all cables could be interchangeable, with warranty protection and carrying cases
- May need to purchase a portable soundproof booth for assembly interpretation
- Purchased zoom account

***What is the cost to facilitate online/virtual group participation in your Area?***

Responses varied and included costs related to hardware purchases (laptops with cameras, wi-fi routers, cables, carrying cases, etc.); hotspot data plans; travel reimbursement for tech committee members; and digital licensing.

### ***Are there virtual districts in your Area?***

(The majority of the answers were no comment )

- Do not sense that that is an interest at this time
- Mixed feelings about the need or desire in our area
- Not come up as a formal motion at any point yet
- Not yet but some are discussing

### ***In your Area, have there been any questions or discussions about forming a virtual Area?***

- Majority of our area was in favor of participation of virtual groups but had mixed feelings about a virtual area being the best answer
- There have been questions about the process for forming a virtual district or Area

### **Regional Forums Workshops and Presentations**

Through our Regional Forums (the virtual Forums in 2021 as well as the Regional Forums in 2022), opportunities were provided for interactive sessions on topics of concern and interest in the various Regions. And of course, some of those topics included the current state of online groups. Reports from the workshops and presentations brought up some specific ideas and themes, including:

- A perceived need for guidelines from GSO regarding guidelines for hybrid and virtual meetings, as well as for virtual/online newcomers
- Finding unusual approaches to service work as an online group
- A question about how we use the technology to bring people together who wouldn't be able to otherwise, without just tacking onto geographic structure
- Sharing regarding the "nuts and bolts" of how to set up and use formats such as online and hybrid meetings, as well as how to adhere to Traditions (7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, for instance, among others)
- Concerns about what happens as brick-and-mortar meetings start up again, and the longevity of virtual/online, and costs involved with hybrid
- Primary purpose remains the same no matter what kind of meeting, so perhaps we should stop differentiating

### **International Perspectives from World Service Meeting**

The World Service Meeting held virtually October 1-6/22 provided a vital opportunity to continue international discussions that had been started at the 2020 World Service Meeting regarding online and virtual meetings. The WSM is not a policy making body, but rather is a global sharing session that is one of the ways worldwide A.A. unity is maintained.

Internationally, various structures are in various stages of discussions about online/virtual groups. In many places, there is a great deal of engagement and some movement forward. In others, there are still questions about the place of online groups or meetings within their structure. It is important to note that the ways the members communicate, and the manner in which structures have organized themselves, varies greatly from structure to structure. In the U.S./Canada structure, virtual groups are recognized, and then it is up to the local level to determine the way that groups will be incorporated. That is not necessarily the case around the world.

Some opportunities to aid in A.A.'s growth, among them (and unique to the WSM discussion):

- Reaching alcoholics in remote areas — in one instance a vibrant online group led to a physical meeting and the development of an online district
  - An influx of young people through online groups
  - Gives members around the world an opportunity to connect and share just as we do here at the WSM with speakers and members from around the world
  - Able to start meetings in areas and countries where there are not meetings currently
  - Potential cost savings by having service meetings online so more could be available for Twelve Step efforts of all kinds
- Some concerns about virtual groups were expressed including:
- Some feel online groups lack the spiritual impact of talking with each other after the meeting that is typical in physical meetings
  - A perceived lack of interest in service in online groups as well as a lack of service opportunities
  - Concern about privacy and confidentiality
  - Seventh Tradition contributions
  - Concerns that online A.A. groups may erode personal contact or service activity
- Online meetings where people sleep or just socialize, that don't seem to be A.A.

The question still remains regarding those groups which have no geographic “tether” and how to preserve unity throughout the process of determining what is best for all of A.A. There are still more questions than answers, but as the Delegate from Poland said, in the keynote address, quoting our co-founder Bill W.: “Our Twelve Steps probably won't change. Our Twelve Traditions? Not at all likely. But our manner of communication, our manner of organizing ourselves for service — let us hope that this goes on changing for the better, forever.”

While the 71st General Service Conference passed an advisory action in 2021 recommending “that the U.S./Canada General Service Structure recognize online groups and encourage their participation by listing groups who request to be listed in Fellowship Connection according to the group's preferred district and area” many members of online meetings are still not aware that they can be listed with GSO or how they might get connected with a geographic district or even a virtual district. Online groups who do understand that they can be listed by GSO often have other questions. Common questions heard by the office are: “How do we choose what district to join if we are not tied to a specific geography?” “What do we do if our district or area is unable to accommodate our need to participate online?” “What kind of permission would we need to join a district in another area?” “Are virtual districts accepting groups from outside of their area?” “What if our members are from other countries?” While there are rarely simple answers to these questions a good beginning is to find out what other groups have done.

### **The Ongoing Conversation**

There are still more questions than answers. However, the shape of the questions continues to evolve and change. It is apparent that many conversations are happening at Area, district and group levels, and that there is a need and an appetite for continued shared experience. There are voices that we continue to need to seek out and hear from in this still-evolving picture and process. It is a remarkable one to be a part of.

Trish L., Trustee-at-Large/Canada