

■ The Virtual 26th World Service Meeting: Separated Physically, Connecting Spiritually

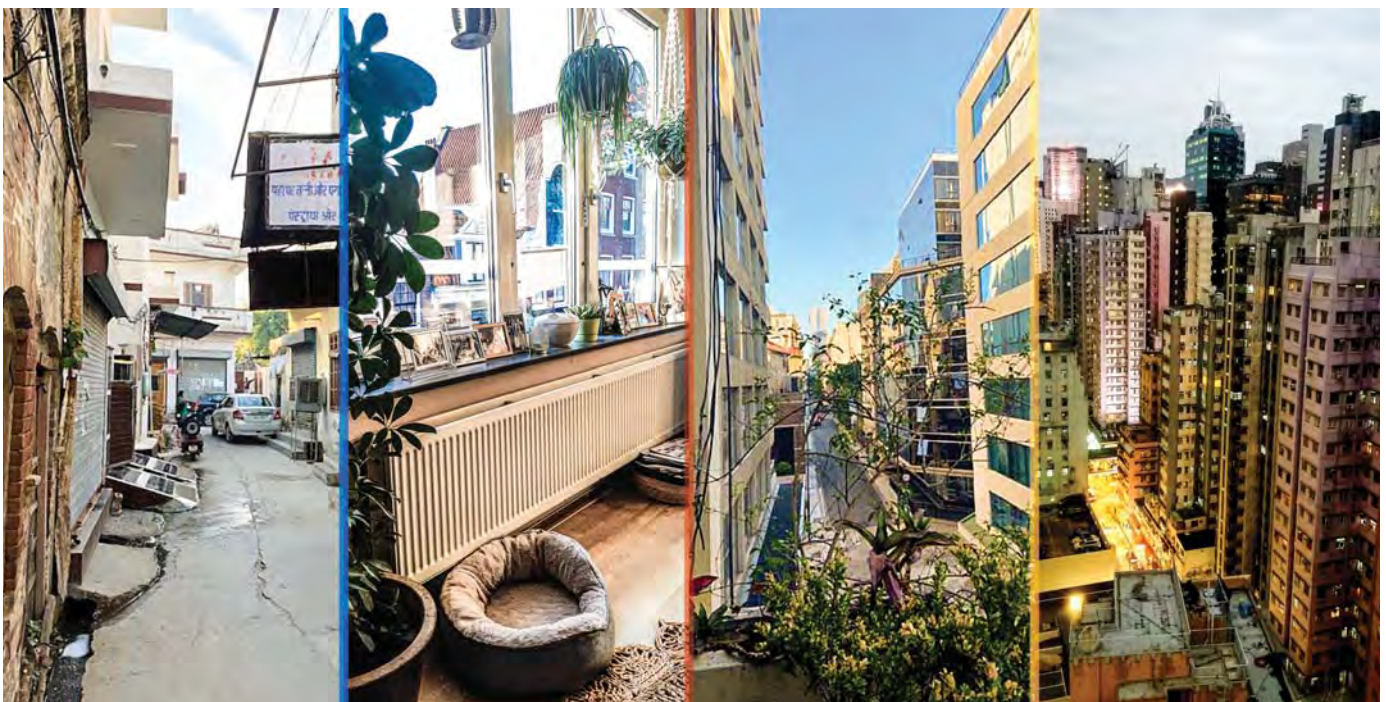
On the morning (or afternoon, or evening, depending on the time zone) of November 28, 2020, 69 delegates from 44 countries, zones and service structures around the world sat down at their computer screens to make history. They were taking part in the 26th World Service Meeting, the first ever to be held via videoconferencing platform.

Appropriately, the theme of the meeting was “The Purpose of Our Service: Sobriety Within Everyone’s Reach.” Delegates addressed issues facing A.A.’s worldwide Fellowship; shared with each other in workshops, presentations and informal general sharing sessions; connected via online chats and text groups; and listened (and danced) to a WSM playlist put together by the excellent tech team providing support throughout the meeting.

There was much missing, of course — handshakes and hugs with fellow delegates, the serendipity of bumping into old friends for coffee, and attending local meetings in whatever locale the World Service Meeting was being held in. (Held biennially, the WSM host site

alternates between New York and locations around the world.) Nevertheless, as Alberto C. of Venezuela says, “We connected spiritually with people from all over the world.” Not a terrible trade-off: attending this virtual meeting was less costly than a traditional in-person WSM — no travel expenses to factor in — and the virtual format allowed more delegates to come together during a time of global crisis and profound change, when Alcoholics Anonymous, like the rest of the world, truly needs to meet, share, take comfort and redefine.

The delegates and support staff were warmly welcomed by Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, Michele Grinberg, chair of the A.A. General Service Board (U.S./Canada), and Greg T., general manager of the General Service Office U.S./Canada. For the three days of the meeting, workshops, presentations and general sharing sessions — simultaneously translated in Spanish and Japanese — addressed such issues as developing A.A. literature in multiple languages; the importance of women’s participation in A.A.’s service structure; and maintaining A.A.’s traditional anonymity in an age of social



Box 4-5-9 is published quarterly by the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115, copyright © 2021 by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

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G.S.O.'s A.A. Website: www.aa.org

Subscriptions: Individual, \$3.50 per year; group, \$6.00 for each unit of 10 per year. Check—made payable to A.A.W.S., Inc.—should accompany order. To have issues delivered directly to your inbox, register your email on the A.A. Digital Subscription Service on G.S.O.'s Website.

Note on anonymity: From time to time in this publication full names and/or pictures of G.S.O. employees, Class A trustees and other nonalcoholics are used. The anonymity of A.A. members is maintained, as they are identified throughout by first name and last initial only.

media. A strong focus of delegates was on the effect the pandemic has had on Alcoholics Anonymous with respect to members' ability to meet (in person or online) as well as the challenges newcomers face in finding and connecting with A.A. In some countries, the virtual meetings that have become a staple of pandemic-era A.A. elsewhere are not possible due to lack of consistent Internet connectivity. There was the sense that virtual meetings are probably here to stay, even in a post-pandemic era, and so the group discussed how these meetings might (or might not) be connected to general service structures.

A full report on the 26th World Service Meeting can be found at www.aa.org. What follows is a sampling of the thoughts of ten delegates. They spoke on this historic meeting itself; the state of A.A. in their countries; and their faith in what Trish L., first-term WSM delegate and trustee-at-large/Canada, calls "the beautiful, universal application of the principles underpinning A.A."

Nur I., *second-term delegate, Turkey*

I'm from the city of Izmir, where A.A. was founded in Turkey. There are maybe 4.5 million people in the city, but only one A.A. group. Probably we have a maximum of 2,000 members who are actively in service, in a country of 80 million people. But A.A. is growing in Turkey. In 2018, Alcoholics Anonymous became legally recognized in Turkey. And the Big Book and the "Twelve and Twelve" were retranslated after 30 years.

I have to say that the 2018 World Service Meeting in Durban was probably the best experience of my life and that this virtual one was the second best. In Durban there was a lot of personal contact and local culture, and people welcomed us. They had A.A. meetings and we shared at their meetings. We danced a lot. However, I don't like flying too long or being away from my two kids, so this online experience from New York was a

really excellent compromise. I made an office in my bedroom and locked myself in for three days, and I could feel the A.A. love through the computer screen. We felt safe in that environment at a time during this pandemic when the whole world doesn't feel safe. The technical team did an amazing job. This was proof to the world that A.A. has no borders, no limits.

I chaired the Literature committee and we discussed the International Literature Fund [the "ILF," to which countries contribute to defray the cost of literature for countries unable to finance their own publication]. During the virtual meeting I shared about how important it is to encourage ILF fundraising, and just as I finished I got a message from Publishing Director David R., who said, "Bravo, great presentation! Let's talk about getting your translations approved and then using the ILF to print them!" And this happened online. At an in-person meeting, it would not have happened that quickly.

Pip A., *second-term delegate, New Zealand*

I found that I was very excited by the possibilities that the virtual World Service Meeting opened up. We live a long way from anywhere, and I was very aware of the savings we made to the environment by not flying to New York. I thought it was really great. It was very heartwarming and made me feel a lot more hopeful than I thought it would.

We started early with online meetings in New Zealand, and now we have started back face to face. But there are still online and hybrid meetings. I think there is a group of us for whom virtual meetings have become this amazing option. But there are a lot of questions surrounding them in terms of structure. The virtual meeting I go to is very small — ten people — but with members regularly coming from overseas, it doesn't feel quite right to have them contribute to our G.S.O. So, we're saying, "Contribute at the next A.A. meeting you go to." In Auckland, which has been shut down more than the rest of the country, physical groups are sponsoring online groups. The big elephant in the room is that people keep talking about online meetings as free, but when you come down to it, somebody's paying a monthly subscription for a virtual meeting platform.

Publishing was my personal high point of the World Service Meeting. In New Zealand we have A.A. because someone sent a copy of the Big Book to a person who was in a psychiatric ward in Nelson, so we hold the literature really close down here. We love some of these new books that are coming out, especially since over the pandemic, people have been relying more and more on literature, reading more and more.

We are so grateful that we have existing relationships with countries overseas. Covid-19 hit us last in New Zealand. So, we were able to ask Japan, Germany, Italy and China about how we continue carrying the message



and maintaining the Traditions. It was extremely helpful. In the opposite direction, we were one of the first countries to return to face-to-face meetings, and people have asked us how we did that. It just shows that we really are a global community.

Newton P., *second-term delegate, trustee-at-large/U.S.*

You see different levels of A.A. presence all over the world. Within our own zone, there are definitely a lot

“ I could feel the A.A. love through the computer screen. ”

Nur I., *second-term delegate, Turkey*

of areas for us to carry the message, particularly in the Caribbean. For my whole term now, we have been trying to get an A.A. data map on our website to impart the idea geographically of where and to what extent A.A. is present in these 180 countries — the old saw of a picture being worth a thousand words.

The main theme at the WSM was how to deal with this pandemic and the effects that it has had on A.A. One of the questions the delegates talked about in terms of virtual A.A. meetings is how they might fit into their general service structures. My area in North Carolina is putting forth a proposal for the upcoming U.S./Canada General Service to make virtual groups with no geographical location a part of our U.S./Canada service structure. But that may be providing a 20th-century solution to a 21st-century problem. Should there be another structure based on service rather than geography? What about groups that don't want to be part of a service structure? There are a number of questions.

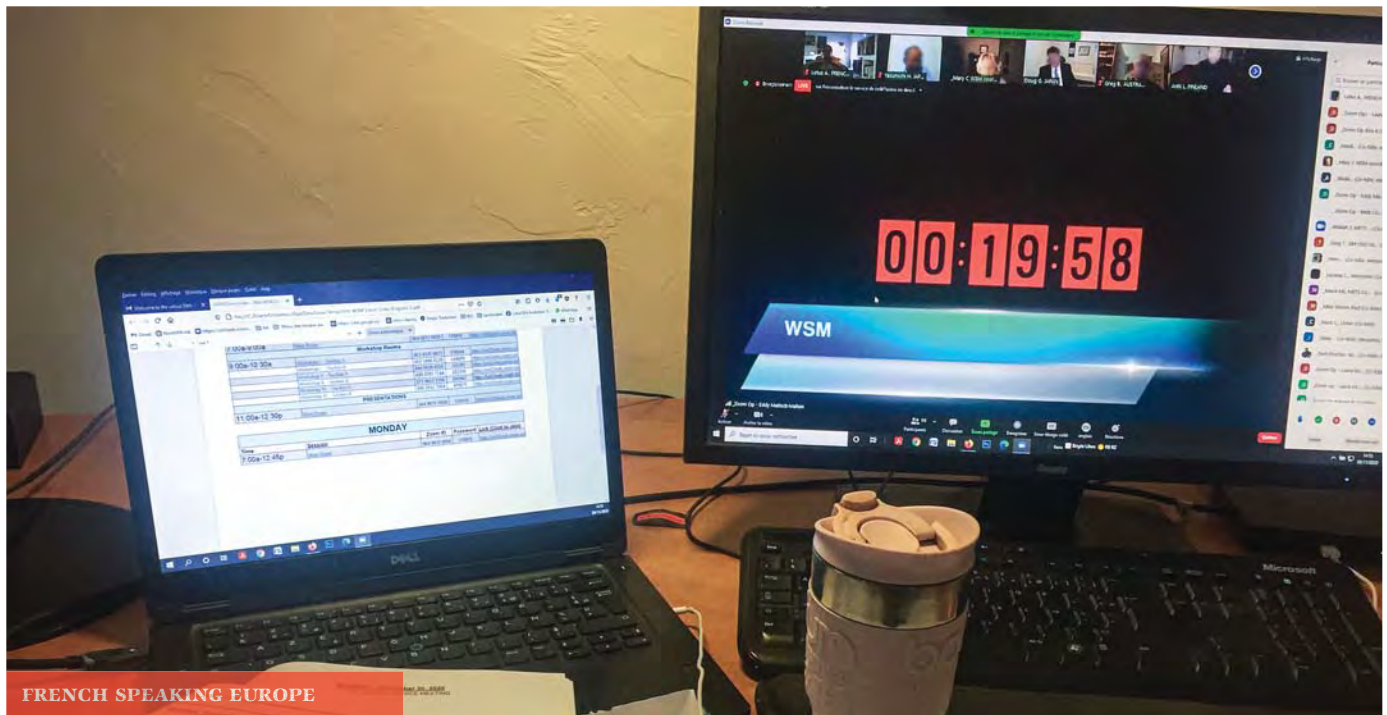
We need to disturb the comfortable a bit with respect to A.A.'s post-pandemic future. I think of Bill's description of the attributes of leadership as “tolerance, responsibility, flexibility and vision” in Concept Nine. The latter two are especially needed to meet the challenges of this time.

Nana K., *first-term delegate, Greece*

At the World Service Meeting, I saw people I knew from the European Service Meeting, and I felt like crying when I saw them again. I have met so many people from all over the world that I never would have been able to meet otherwise. We couldn't have afforded the trip to New York or even the virtual meeting fee, but the World Service Fund paid for us. We don't like this: we would like to be self-supporting. But in Greece, we have 21 Greek-speaking groups, eight English, two Russian and one Polish, which means we have very few contributions. We sell our books at cost, since we are a nonprofit organization. Part of this is our tax system — we don't have a tax identification number. Publishing Director David R. will give us some information on how to deal with this.

Another issue we have in Greece is that we don't have enough groups of people willing to stop drinking. It's the mentality. Men drink. Men should drink. A lot of people drive drunk, and the laws are not very serious about that. Our PI committee is working on going to hospitals, courts and police stations to speak with doctors, judges and police officers about alcoholism.

I felt comfortable in the virtual meeting at the WSM. When I saw the delegates I knew from ESM, I felt as if we were together in the same room. I got some good



information in the women’s mobile chat/voice group, which was set up by Tatjana R., the Netherlands delegate. We don’t have Class A trustees, and so I asked them a lot of questions and received a whole bunch of answers to see how these nonalcoholic trustees work.

When the pandemic is over, we’ll return to our normal physical groups, and we’ll see who will come back and who will stay online. It’s too early to say. But in A.A. we adapt to all situations — it’s what we learn. One thing I liked that A.A. trustee-at-large/U.S. Newton P. said was that the group conscience is what rules, above all — not the trustees, not even God.

Tatjana R., *second-term delegate, Netherlands*

The World Service Meeting was a very good experience. The only difference was we weren’t live. I’m a big video-conferencing fan. I see virtual meetings as a portal that can bring us anywhere we want to go. We’ve been catapulted from 1950 to 2020 in about nine months. And it works. It helps keep you sober. It was very good to see all the other countries represented and to see people I knew from the 2018 Durban WSM — to hear their stories and learn what is going on in their country. I started a women’s group on mobile chat/voice with South African delegate Helga and got women delegates’ phone numbers to discuss problems. There are about 17 women and we talk every day. Currently we’ve been talking about Class A trustees — where you can find them and what they can do for A.A. in your country.

But we’ve also been talking about the issues women alcoholics face. I had a sponsee who committed suicide on Christmas Day 2018. I wonder what would have happened if she’d been able to talk to women in A.A. from

another country who might have been able to help her. You can’t make the problems confronting women go away. But you can talk about possible solutions.

Toby D., *first-term delegate, Denmark*

I got into general service because for the first year of sobriety, my home group didn’t have a G.S.R. With a requirement of one year of sobriety, I thought, why not? So, I jumped straight into it once I had a year. One of the old-timers gave me the thumbs-down — “Don’t do it!” — but I did. In Denmark we are lacking people to join service, and if we put in a principle of rotation, who will rotate in? We were 30 people in a room, but somehow we found a consensus. And it was good for me to learn that you can listen, and actually hear what other people are saying.

The WSM virtual experience was disappointing in some ways. It is very clear that we didn’t have time to go into depth in the discussions. The tech team did a strong job. But people are not used to it and it takes time. And when you have a deadline, you rush to the goal and perhaps do not reflect as much. Mostly what was missing were the casual conversations — where you sit at dinner and just talk. That’s what I enjoyed at the European Service Meeting. When you talk, you hear something and think, oh, that’s just what I was thinking.

At the WSM we were wondering about where these online groups all over the world fit into the service structure. In that regard, I shared that sometimes people who are in service create problems or challenges that are not really there. I believe that before deciding on how to fit these groups into the overall structure, there should be an expressed need or desire from the group to be part

of the structure: if there is no need or knowledge of a structure, then it's pointless to discuss where they fit into one. I do think we are looking to a future with a lot more online meetings and a lot more confusion. For instance, if a representative is elected in one of these groups, what do we do? What if the person elected is in South Africa? Do we provide funding for that individual to come to a Danish service conference?

The big eye-opener for me was that the whole world is affected by this pandemic. You see that the feelings of the Fellowship in each particular country are felt all over the world, and it's good to know we are trying to figure things out together.

Trish L., *first-term delegate, trustee-at-large/Canada*

When I first heard that the in-person World Service Meeting had been canceled, there was a deep heaviness in my heart. But I really think the experience of the U.S./Canada structure holding a virtual General Service Conference opened the door to the possibility of holding a virtual World Service Meeting. The virtual WSM wasn't the same as meeting in person, of course, but the heart of service that I saw, heard and felt in all the delegates was inspiring. It reinforced the beautiful, universal application of the spiritual principles underpinning A.A.

There was a lot to be inspired by. As Michele Grinberg, nonalcoholic chair of the General Service Board, mentioned, there were 22 women delegates present, as opposed to only seven at the last WSM. What struck me was that, even virtually, some countries had to go to great lengths to participate. How fortunate so many of us are, with our minimal barriers to access, with our reliable Internet connectivity.

There's a lot of work to be done around the world in understanding the ways we can help A.A. internationally; the connections we make at the World Service Meeting are part of the incredible value it provides. I've always seen a connection between international work and work with remote communities in our home zone: members in parts of northern Canada share many challenges with members in the far reaches of South America, in terms of remoteness. So, what we also find are our commonalities.

Dr. Varoshini Nadesan, *second-term delegate, South Africa*
[Dr. Nadesan is a Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee from South Africa, a social worker and an academic.]

I was honored to also serve as first-term delegate to the World Service Meeting for South Africa. Attending the 2020 meeting, albeit online, was a privilege, as it provided an opportunity to learn on many different levels from

delegates from other countries.

A.A. South Africa has almost 350 groups. The Covid-19 lockdown restrictions on social contact resulted in temporary closure of face-to-face meetings. The remarkable thing with the lockdown restrictions is that our groups creatively used social media platforms to continue having meetings. However, some groups could not go online due to lack of resources such as Internet access, which is a legacy of apartheid. Members are eager to start group meetings again as soon as government regulations allow for in-person meetings.

As a social worker, I have been trained to conduct therapeutic and counseling groups for individuals with an alcohol dependency. However, I have found that my training did not equip me to effectively assist the person with the dependency. My focus was from a statutory perspective. I came to realize that the A.A. program is different, as it focuses on one alcoholic sharing his or her experiences with another. I became a Class A trustee in 2012, and it was then easy for me to reach out to other social workers nationally to share knowledge about alcoholism and A.A. Throughout South Africa and Namibia, workshops were held with social workers, psychologists, counselors, care workers and other helping personnel. The workshops were specifically structured with a teaching or theoretical component on addiction and alcoholism, followed by information about A.A. as a fellowship. We reached out to A.A. members and groups within specific geographic areas so that social workers knew whom they could contact when they were faced with clients with alcoholic tendencies. During 2020, all workshops with social workers and other helping personnel were held online, with over 800 participating.

“ I see virtual meetings as a portal that can bring us anywhere we want to go. We've been catapulted from 1950 to 2020 in about nine months. And it works. ”

Tatjana R., *second-term delegate, Netherlands*

Nigel, *second-term delegate, chair of General Service Board, United Kingdom*

I think in the British service structure we were very lucky that we had accepted online meetings a number of years ago, so we were able to steal a march on the Coronavirus. The distances involved in our Continental Europe Region and the sparsity of English-speaking A.A. in parts of Europe is such that online meetings were the only way many people could stay within the Fellowship there. And that has progressed quite nicely I think, and it has enabled us to be available to still suffering alcoholics in areas where A.A. is scarce, and available to those who would have difficulty attending

face-to-face meetings for other reasons, too.

In Great Britain, our online groups are represented at our General Service Conference through the normal service structure and regional delegates; it's become a part of the norm. We also wrote to our members and said, "If you want to make a donation straight to G.S.O., here are the bank account details, here's our online payment account." So that

is how we go about it, although generally our online meetings now have structured themselves so that they have a means of collecting Seventh Tradition contributions, and that's been going on for some time.

Having said that, I think we should be careful of virtual service meetings, in that I think they're more tiring than face-to-face ones. The coffee breaks, where you normally decompress, are missing. So, I think we probably need to spread a virtual World Service Meeting over a few more days. But I do think the potential is enormous, including the potential for freeing up more funds for doing primary purpose work (and getting people together to look at what primary purpose work needs to be done). There are workshops on how to do all this — online workshops about running online workshops! It is a bit frightening, but freedom can be frightening. I can understand some countries saying, "I'm not sure if this is the right way forward; I'm not sure if this is A.A." But I think we can reap great benefits, so long as we are not too intimidated by the system.

Alberto C., *second-term delegate, Argentina*

For me, both experiences — of the Durban World Service

Meeting and the virtual conference — were wonderful. The difference this time is that we missed the physical contact — the talking and joking — but we still connected spiritually with people from all over the world. Everything that happened at the meeting impacted me

in a very good way, especially what Newton P. talked about: Concept Nine's discussion of tolerance, accountability, flexibility

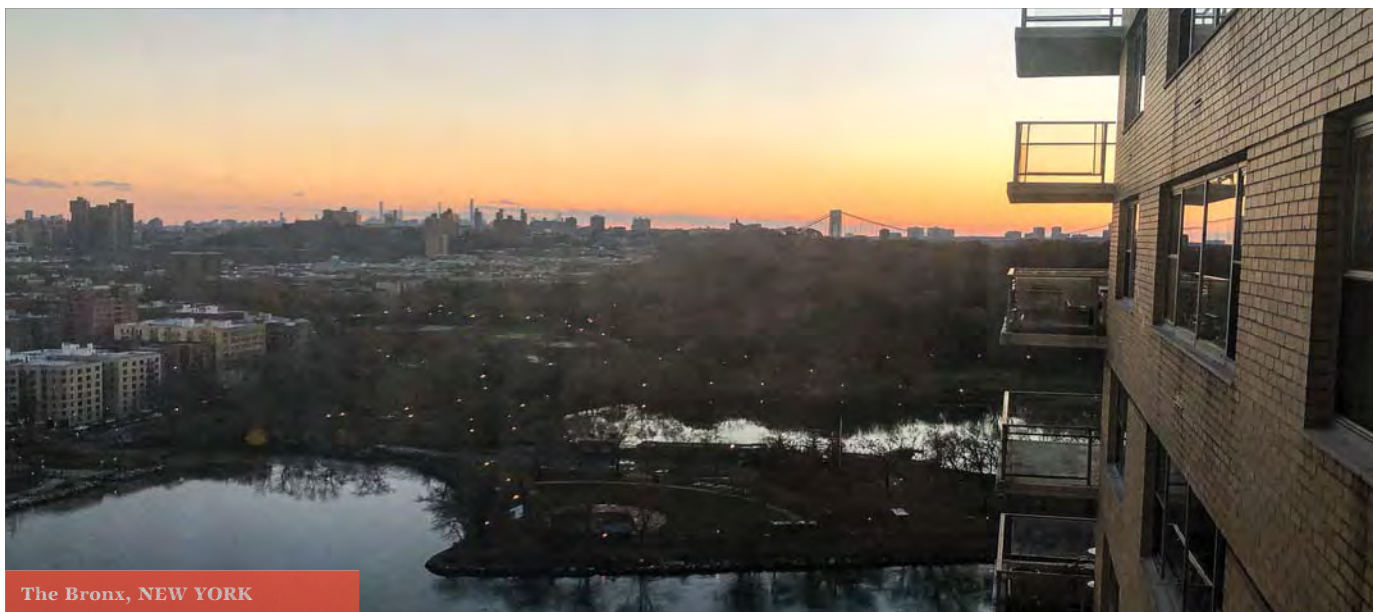
and vision. We have relied on them a lot during the pandemic. The world we live in has given us many new experiences, and these qualities are very important now.

To overcome what we are experiencing today, it is useful to look back to other hard periods in Argentina's history, such as the 1970s, when A.A. overcame challenges and was able to survive. Or, in times such as World War II, when North American Alcoholics Anonymous was able to unite across borders and new groups were born, as we are doing now. In Argentina, we share and cooperate with other Latin American countries, our neighbors: Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. We are sponsored by Central Mexicana de A.A. We share culture with South and Central America.

In Argentina, most of the time we have held virtual meetings because, since March 20 of 2020, we have been under an official quarantine. We have had to ask ourselves, "How do we move forward in a virtual environment while still manifesting the values and conscience of the group?" But we are using the virtual environment to support each other, and virtuality is becoming the new normal. After all, A.A. started with a phone call, so you could say our Fellowship really was born in a virtual environment.

“ We need to disturb the comfortable a bit with respect to A.A.’s post-pandemic future. ”

Newton P., *second-term delegate, trustee-at-large/U.S.*



The Bronx, NEW YORK

■ “From Mexico to Mongolia”: A Conversation with Greg T.

Box 4-5-9 reached out to Greg T., who recently completed his term of service as General Manager of the General Service Office after five exciting and productive years in that role, preceded by three years as A.A.W.S. Publishing Director that included elevating the visibility and participation, the creativity and stepped-up professionalism of the Publishing Department. Born in Independence, Missouri, Greg studied philosophy at Yale before moving to the New York area where he began a successful career as a writer and editor.

Box 4-5-9: How did you first get sober in A.A.?

Greg: I was living in New Jersey and employed in the book publishing industry in New York City. On July 11, 1986, I was Twelfth Stepped and brought to my first A.A. meeting. I was drunk at the time. Forty-eight hours later, I walked into the South Orange Group, my first A.A. meeting without a drink. And I stayed.

Box 4-5-9: That’s a historic group, founded by Bill W. and Hank P.

Greg: That’s right. Service within the group started at 90 days, so I made coffee, helped with set-up, served as group secretary and held other rotating positions. After a year or two, John S. and Pat R. — the latter a G.S.O. staff member — conspired to pick me out of the herd for other aspects of service, one of them being to chair the South Orange Group’s 50th anniversary celebration in 1989. As time went by, I served in other positions, including alternate GSR and Area 44 newsletter editor. After that I served on the Grapevine Editorial Advisory Board, which was my first general service role. I went on to serve as a director on the Grapevine Board and then as a General Service Board trustee.

Box 4-5-9: Did doing this level of service give you a different perspective on carrying the A.A. message in any way?

Greg: Yes, and not necessarily just through my participation in general service. I learned to be willing, if asked, to take on tasks and roles at all levels within our service structure. Doing general service work helped me understand how the A.A. program could be supported and how the message could be carried beyond the group level — beyond local and state levels, really — to an international level. General service has also given me an appreciation for the way the General Service Conference has continued these 70-plus years to function as intended: to reflect the group conscience as a whole.

Box 4-5-9: You began working at G.S.O. as A.A.W.S. Publishing Director in 2013. With your publishing background that seems like a good fit.

Greg: It was. In addition, thanks to my years of service and participating in seven General Service Conferences, I knew a lot of people at G.S.O., so my learning curve wasn’t quite as steep as it might have been. By the time I arrived, the world of publishing had changed, and we needed to really get our arms around the importance of data, and of licensing terms and copyright. I’m very proud of bringing David R. [now Publishing Director] into G.S.O. He and I had worked



together previously, and he has been able to bring his considerable skills and creative management to the task of licensing intellectual property. I feel we made a lot of progress. The Board assigned me the responsibility of implementing a redesigned aa.org and a bookstore platform and of bringing out our titles in digital format. We did all that in a year and a half.

Box 4-5-9: You became G.S.O. General Manager in 2015.

Greg: Yes. I stepped into the job on October 1 of that year and served until February 2 of this year. One thing I learned about being general manager was that the person in that position has to be very flexible and open to being thrown off track on any given day. The general manager is responsible for working with the A.A.W.S. board and maintaining a strategic approach to legal issues, workflow issues, financial issues. Then you have the responsibility for overall management of the General Service Conference, working with staff and boards to prepare the agenda — a very intense two- or three-month run-up. And then there’s what you might call the ambassadorial function of the job, traveling to domestic and international forums and conferences from Mexico to Mongolia. It’s a great gift and a wonderful privilege to represent A.A.W.S., G.S.O. and the General Service Board, and to hear directly from the members of A.A. But this is also hugely time consuming if you have operational responsibilities, which is why I was so fortunate to have a great support team.

With this team, one of the great achievements we were able to put together was the conception, development and publication of the first new A.A. book in decades, *Our Great Responsibility* — a book that is now being quoted, studied and passed from member to member throughout the Fellowship.

Box 4-5-9: And then came the pandemic....

Greg: Yes. Early last year, acting decisively, we formed a task force to focus on what was quickly emerging as an emergency situation, with an impending disruption in our ability to communicate with the Fellowship and the possible closure of the office as a nonessential business. From the start, the health and welfare of our employees was our chief concern, followed by service to our members and maintaining business continuity. The Fellowship was looking to us for guidance on how to address situations of all kinds. On top of this, the annual General Service Conference was a matter of weeks away. How would we handle that?

We assessed our technical capabilities — we had a really great tech team — and through the efforts of the entire office we got everyone set up and working from home. We established new ways of meeting virtually, just as the Fellowship was doing. And we planned a virtual General Service Conference in less than eight weeks.

Box 4-5-9: Is there a “normal” that Alcoholics Anonymous is going to return to, after all this?

Greg: There is a great hunger for face-to-face meet-

ings, but it’s also obvious that being on virtual platforms will change the way we do things in A.A. People are getting more used to purchasing literature and making group contributions online. In addition, I think A.A. has developed a tolerance for online groups and meetings, and I imagine there will be a way to incorporate their representation into the general service structure, as the need does exist. The point is to acknowledge that the process may be imperfect and will likely change over time, but I believe that it will happen.

Box 4-5-9: What are your own next steps?

Greg: I’ve already begun developing two book projects — one nonfiction, one a novel — and I am busy moving these ahead. A digital publisher has asked me to edit and acquire titles, so I’m looking forward to working in that part of the business again.

Box 4-5-9: Is South Orange Sunday night still your home group?

Greg: Yes, ever since July 13, 1986. And I’m anxious to get back into the cycle of doing service. In fact, I just took the job of alternate secretary of the group.

■ A Trio of New Arrivals at G.S.O.

It’s unusual for three new staff hires to land at G.S.O. within the space of a few months. In part this is in response to the number of employees who took advantage of the Voluntary Retirement Incentive Program (VRIP) offered by the General Service Board in the summer of 2020, says Sandra W., Director of Staff Services. “When we carefully assessed our needs with the support of management, we realized this is what was needed. We received many resumes and undertook a stringent interview process and these three rose to the top.” Interestingly, all three new hires are former delegates, experience that has helped them hit the ground running during planning for the virtual 2021 General Service Conference.

Born in the New York City borough of Staten Island and raised in various towns in northern New Jersey, new Group Services Coordinator **Craig W.** experienced a drinking career that was reckless, brutish and swift. He’d spent time in 17 institutions and was incarcerated multiple times — all by the age of 19, when he found Alcoholics Anonymous on November 28, 1998, in Del Ray Beach, Florida. “I was homeless in Delray Beach during early sobriety,” he says, “but I still had the opportunity to be of service and to make the coffee at a young person’s group.”

Craig, who now lives in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, went on to a successful career managing relationships and building partnerships — all roles, he says, “where communication is essential.” Inspired by the self-sacrifice others in A.A. demonstrated early on in his Florida

home group, he threw himself into service at the group level, moved back up north and, due to great sponsorship, worked with Nightwatch in northern New Jersey answering phones for intergroup. Moving again to Danbury, Connecticut, he later became D.C.M. and, ultimately, Area 11, Panel 65 delegate. He has a lengthy service resume in numerous roles throughout the service structure, including NECYPAA XIX 2009 and NERAASA 2018, and has done corrections work in state and federal prisons, including youth facilities.

Craig retired from employment when he was 37 to become a stay-at-home stepfather in his recovery-centered family: his wife and his mother, who lives with the family, are in Al-Anon, and his stepson is in Alateen. But G.S.O. beckoned. After the 2016 General Service Conference, which he attended as delegate, a trustee suggested Craig might be interested in a job at G.S.O., should one become open. Five years later, one did. The time was right, Craig applied and was hired as Group Services Coordinator on November 16, 2020.

“One thing I can say with absolute confidence, is that all the G.S.O. employees — alcoholic and nonalcoholic — work extraordinarily hard. I used to be so hard on them as a delegate and now I have a new perspective. I’ve now served in all but one area of the upside down triangle and intergroup and I feel like this has given me the experience and agility to work with A.A.’s groups, intergroups and central offices, including Hispanic and French ones in this new role. I’m also working with area registrars, our internal team on Fellowship Connection,

the Technology/Communication/Services Committee on the A.A.W.S. board, and several working groups looking at ways to update various pieces of service material. And, most importantly, I'm working with A.A. members. I cannot describe how important that is to me."

Craig recounts the story of a newly sober A.A. member in Georgia who contacted Group Services because he wanted to know how to go about starting a new A.A. group. "He asked for literature regarding cooperating with treatment centers. This inspired a conversation about the Traditions, service and meeting formats. The best part of communicating one on one with members in our roles at G.S.O. is that the more phone calls we get to answer, the more information we receive helps us to help the next alcoholic we speak with. This is just one of the things that makes me really grateful to be a small part of a huge piece necessary for a great whole in this amazing organization."

Amy B., on the Cooperation with the Professional Community (C.P.C.) desk, was born in Lexington, Kentucky, the daughter of a "preacher and a teacher" (her father was the former, her mother the latter). She embarked on her drinking career young, and it only got worse after her father died when she was 13. "By that point, I already knew how drinking could numb my feelings," she says. "I first came in to A.A. when I was 19 because of the court system. I was just going out of obligation and it didn't last." She continued to drink for the next couple of years while attending the University of Kentucky. She kept up with her work and school commitments, but, she notes, "All my values, hopes, dreams and plans were gone."

Then, at the age of 21, she walked into an A.A. meeting on May 31, 1994, and turned her life around. She became a licensed mental health therapist and moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where she worked in a hospice. Because of the early tragedy in her life, she says, "I did not want to work with death and dying or with substance abuse, so of course my Higher Power put me in hospices, where I worked with death and dying every day for 14 years. I had been placed where I needed to be."

At the same time, Amy became an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous, doing service from the group to the district level. She chaired the South Carolina Annual State Convention in 2012, served as Treatment Chair for Area 62, and eventually became the area's Panel 68 delegate.

It was while serving as delegate that Amy began to think she could be "a part of the process" as a General Service Office staffer. She applied for an open position in 2018, but didn't get the job. In the spring of 2020, she moved from South Carolina to Long Beach, Washington, to take a job at a mental health clinic — only to get a letter from G.S.O. in October, asking her if she was interested in reapplying. She began work on December 14, 2020.

Amy says, "I'm a solutions- and goal-oriented thinker. On the C.P.C. desk I get letters from people in treatment,

often requesting a Big Book or other resources for when they get out. I provide resources so C.P.C. committees can do their work, whether it's directly with suffering alcoholics, presenting at rehabs or talking to professionals. Downsizing and moving to New York wasn't really on my radar, but I'm grateful for the opportunity to be here and to do this work."

James H., G.S.O.'s newest staffer — date of hire, January 19, 2021 — lives in Corpus Christi, Texas. When he begins his day working remotely on the Regional Forums assignment, he steps into his home office, where all the clocks are set on Eastern Time, thus losing both an hour and a little bit of his sanity at the same time. "When I emerge at the end of the day," James says, "I go back into the Central Time Zone. I will be glad to be in one time zone."

James will get his wish in April, when he and his wife, Cathy, move to Connecticut, along with his Ford pickup and his Teardrop trailer. His road to employment at the General Service Office, echoing that of Amy and Craig, came through service. James took his last drink on December 17, 1993, in Corpus Christi. At the time, he says, "I was in a bad personal relationship and had a job that was crumbling. I thought I needed a 'pause.' I wasn't going to stop drinking; I just wanted people off my case." But James stayed sober and stuck around. He began doing service on the group level — "everything from making coffee to finding speakers" — got a literature-based meeting going, helped out with local intergroup and became Grapevine/La Viña chair for Area 68. (An accountant and a business manager for nonprofits, James didn't think of himself as a writer, but he has published multiple stories in Grapevine.)

Other general service level positions followed. "I was ten years sober before I became a G.S.R.," James says. "I was fascinated from the beginning. A.A. was so much larger than I imagined." James was chosen as a Panel 64, Area 68 delegate and loved serving. "What I really liked was the ability to see how others around the country may do things differently, but we all strive for the same goal, to help the alcoholic who still suffers." While a delegate, he became friends with Patrick C. (current Conference Coordinator), who encouraged him to apply for a staff job, should one become open. And one did — 15 months after James had retired, gotten the pickup and the Teardrop trailer, and toured around the country with Cathy, from Texas to the Dakotas to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Should he apply? Cathy told him, "How will you know what God wants you to do if you don't put yourself out there?" And thus he ended up, temporarily astride time zones, planning four Regional Forums (the first one in June). "All of this," James says, "is right up my alley. I love to engage people and to get people interacting with each other. I love being a member of the Fellowship, sharing information and learning something new all the time."

■ 1st Virtual 57th International Women's Conference Held... Everywhere

On February 18-21, 2021, over 19,000 A.A. women came from all over the world to gather at the 57th International Women's Conference (IWC). They traveled from every corner of the globe — Australia, Lithuania, Japan, Italy, Ireland and Ghana, as well as the United States, Canada and Mexico — and they came in droves. In a final tally, women from 74 countries attended this event — which turned out to be an IWC unlike any other.

The conference was to be held in Charlotte — North Carolina's "Queen City" — at the Westin in the center city, with registration limited to 3,000 participants. But in 2020 the Coronavirus pandemic shut the doors, en masse, of offices, businesses, schools and public spaces around the world, and by the summer of 2020, the members of the IWC's planning committee realized that they needed to make a decision: Should they fold up the tent and cancel? It turned out that the desire to carry the message of A.A. and the commitment to holding a conference for women in A.A. was too powerful: the International Women's Conference has been held every year without fail since 1965. Besides, anyone listening to sober A.A.s detail the lengths they went to to get a drink knows that alcoholics are, if nothing else, a resourceful crowd, and the women on the committee of the IWC were no different. According to Betty G., the chair of the IWC Charlotte 2021, the women began asking each other if the conference could be done virtually. She relates how Ali S., the 2021 IWC committee's logistics chair, used all of her "God-given superior technical talents": "Without her," Betty G. says, "the Conference would not have been as successful as it was." Indeed there was no shortage of "God-given talents" among everyone involved, with the entire team pivoting to figuring out the new platform for the first-ever virtual 57th International Women's Conference.

The IWC committee volunteers began advising attendees to cancel hotel reservations but kept in contact with all guests and speakers while researching how to hold events securely via web conferencing. The committee had some concerns about attendance: would people come to a virtual event? Inviting those already registered was an obvious first step, but the committee had more ideas, too. They combed through the Alcoholics Anonymous directories "Central Offices, Intergroups and Answering Services for the United States and Canada" and "General Service Offices, Central Offices, Intergroups, and Answering Services Overseas." For each office listed that had an email address, conference volunteers emailed information and flyers. They translated new information into Spanish, and procured interpretation services in Spanish, French and ASL for the event. The committee decided that registration would be open and free: no Seventh Tradition monies would be used although members could donate as they wished to defray costs and contribute to conference expenses.

Meanwhile, numerous logistical concerns around registration were addressed. Technical volunteers would be

on hand to help any member with connection issues. In addition, in order to ensure registrants' anonymity, email links with instructions would be sent to those who asked to register. Those links would connect registrants face to face (via device) with volunteers who would finish the registration process and answer any questions. Only then would registrants receive a second email containing entry information, links to the various events, and a program.

The response was enormous. For many, seeing a friendly A.A. face during the registration process helped to allay fears about attending a virtual conference — How do I participate? What if I have problems? Indeed, not only did the interaction ensure anonymity and safety, but it also served as the warm welcome a member might get from a friendly greeter at the door of an A.A. meeting. During the weekend of the conference, an additional 2,000 people registered. In all, over the third weekend in February 2021, a total of 19,000 women settled in at kitchen tables, desks, couches and countless other venues around the world to connect with each other on tablets, desktops, laptops and smartphones. It was reported that some participants even showed up in their slippers and pajamas.

Once it began, the conference was conducted in much the way it would have been conducted on the ground — except participants had to make their own coffee and bring their own ice cream. Attendees could select from their programs any events or meetings they wanted to attend. Meeting topics such as "Why Am I Taking Your Inventory?" and games such as "Dysfunctional Family Feud" encouraged insight and laughter. Other meeting topics included "It Ain't the Caboose that Kills You" and "Pearls of Wisdom ... Oldtimers." Experience shared by women during speaker meetings throughout the conference exemplified A.A.'s primary purpose of carrying the message to the alcoholic who suffers. In between, A.A.s streamed into a sizeable selection of meetings-before-and-after-the-meetings in the hospitality room throughout each day. Yoga and meditation in the morning provided balance to ice cream karaoke and dance parties at night. Diverse groups found homes in different virtual rooms, including the Young People in A.A. room, the Seniors in Sobriety room, the Trudging Rainbow Road room and the Treatment/Corrections room.

Sharing what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now is a cornerstone of all speaker meetings, virtual or face to face. Cathi W. from Illinois offered her experience, strength and hope on Thursday evening, while Terri K. from Ohio, the speaker on Friday, detailed a love affair with alcohol that began as a young teenager and ended with a car accident and a lengthy prison sentence. She addressed a painful, almost unthinkable question: "How do you make amends for a death?" On Saturday night, Deborah K., from North Carolina, related how she "lied when [she] didn't have to lie," noting, "I was a chameleon." She then detailed a life in sobriety marked by love,

service, challenges, hope and freedom, adding, “One of the most powerful freedoms has come from service.” On Sunday morning, Amy S. D. from Kentucky displayed a fiery strength as she compared the shame and remorse that is the natural companion of booze to the hope, redemption and love she has been blessed with in A.A.

The conference also succeeded in bringing together women alcoholics across the world — and, sometimes, closer to home. In an interesting twist, one Rwandan woman said she was aware of only seven women in all of Rwanda who were A.A. members. Yet, during the IWC, she discovered that 12 Rwandan women were present, so she now knows of five more with whom to “trudge the Road of Happy Destiny” in her homeland.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent switch to online meetings, many have raised questions and worries about whether A.A. can work meaningfully via web conferencing. Can we carry the A.A. message to newcomers virtually? Sharon Y., publicity chair for the IWC 2021, shared that toward the end of the conference’s sobriety countdown (beginning with Liz B.’s 68 A.A. years), two women with less than a day of sobriety joined in the countdown. So, does virtual A.A. work? “Yes,” she said with certainty, “it does.” Indeed, with an event that originally capped its attendance at 3,000 but expanded to 19,000 women, the question of whether people would use web conferencing to seek out A.A.’s solution seems to answer itself.

Whether the “channels of contact” are over the telephone or a WiFi connection, across a kitchen table or in a church basement, the language of the heart is all-embracing and ever-multiplying. Surely it will also be spoken at the next IWC — to be held in person in February 2022, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And thanks to the success of the 57th IWC, plans include making this event available virtually, too. For more information, visit <https://internationalwomensconference.org>.

■ AA Grapevine Seeks Publisher and Nontrustee Director

AA Grapevine’s Corporate Board is seeking candidates for the position of Publisher of the AA Grapevine, Inc. Candidates should be A.A. members preferably with 10 or more years of continuous sobriety with the following qualifications: 10-plus years in a senior leadership/management position; experience in print and/or digital publishing and distribution, digital content strategy and marketing management; working knowledge of social media; experience with vendors, professional and contracted services; corporate board experience; strong communication and presentation skills; financial acumen; undergraduate degree or higher. Interested members may forward their professional and A.A. service résumés, along with any questions regarding the position, to mirzam@aa.org by June 16, 2021.

AA Grapevine’s Corporate Board has started its search to fill the vacancy for one nontrustee director following the 2022 General Service Conference. Basic qualifications: a minimum of seven years of continuous sobriety with a working knowledge of the A.A. service structure; nonprofit board experience; experience with organizational management and finances; and experience with publications media including new communication technologies. The time commitment includes availability to attend four planning meetings as well as three General Service Board weekends, the General Service Conference for one week in April and possible attendance at Regional Forums or other A.A. functions. In seeking applications the Fellowship is committed to creating a large applicant file of qualified persons, which reflects the inclusiveness and diversity of A.A. Résumés should be sent to Janet Bryan, GV Director of Operations at jbryan@aagrapevine.org, by June 30th, 2021.

■ Announcement for Opening for Nontrustee Director Position for A.A. World Services, Inc.

There will be an upcoming opening for a nontrustee director position in 2022 for A.A. World Services, Inc. Nontrustee directors are A.A. members selected for business or professional experience that relates to the activities of the corporation. Per the A.A.W.S. bylaws, a nontrustee director can serve up to four successive one-year terms. Full details will be made available through aa.org, the Meeting Guide app news alert feature and in a letter to Conference members and the Fellowship later in the year.

■ Opening for Class A (nonalcoholic) Trustees

Following the 2022 General Service Conference there will be openings for two Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees, replacing Hon. Christine Carpenter, of Columbia, Missouri and Nancy McCarthy, of St. Louis, Missouri. The trustees’ Nominating Committee asks that trustees, delegates and directors submit any names they deem appropriate as candidates for Class A trustees. Class A trustees are chosen from a variety of professional backgrounds, including accounting, clergy, corrections, education, finance, health care, law, medicine, military, psychology, social work, and science. In seeking applications for all vacancies at A.A.W.S., Inc., AA Grapevine, Inc., and the General Service Board, the Fellowship is committed to creating a large applicant file of qualified persons reflecting the inclusiveness and diversity of A.A. itself. Please submit your candidate’s business or professional résumé to the Secretary, trustees’ Nominating Committee (nominating@aa.org), by July 23rd, 2021.

NOTE: Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, events may be canceled or moved to online formats. Please contact the event coordinators as listed before making your plans.

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. Please note that we cannot attest to the accuracy, relevancy, timeliness, or completeness of information provided by any linked site. **For any additional information, please use the event contact information provided.**

April

1-5—*Adelaide, South Australia*. 56th Australia Convention 2021 Write: 95 Currie Street, Adelaide, South Australia, 5000; aanatcon2021.com.au

10—*Online*. Woman to Woman Arrowhead Virtual Conference Write: Box 7501, Capistrano Beach, CA 92624; w2wArrowheadVirtual@gmail.com; <http://w2warrowhead.com>

14—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.

23-25—*Saint Louis, Missouri*. Spring Fling Conv. Write: Box 22002, St. Charles, MO 63126; www.springflingstl.com

23-25 —*Sligo, Ireland*. All Ireland Convention 2021 Write: Clarion Road, Ballinod, Sligo, Co Sligo, Ireland F91 N8EF; c182@alcoholicsanonymous.ie

May

1-2—*Online*. GirlapaloozAA 2021 via Zoom. Info: girlapaloozaadfw.com

7-9—*Grants Pass, Oregon*. Rogue Roundup. Write: Box 1741, Grants Pass, OR 97528; www.rogue roundup.com

12—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.

28-30—*Fort Worth, Texas*. Asamblea Hispana de AA del Estado de Texas. Write: 2321 Hemphill Street, Fort Worth, TX 76110; AsambleaH2020AA@gmail.com

June

4-6—*Framingham, Massachusetts*. Northeast Reg. Forum. Write: Forum Coord., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; regionalforums@aa.org

9—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.

26-27—*Online*. Pacific Northwest Conference; Info: <https://www.pnc1948.org/>

July

14—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.

16-18—*Eugene, Oregon*. Summerfest Write: Box 11824, Eugene OR 97449; www.aa-summerfest.org

22-25—*Pine, Idaho*. 37th Annual District 10 (Area 18) Campout Write: 324 4th Avenue E., Jerome, ID 83338

August

5-8—*Jacksonville, Florida*. 64th FL State Conv. Write: Box 57442, Jacksonville, FL 32241; www.64.floridastateconvention.com

11—*Online*. Monthly Area 19 Service Sharing Sessions via Zoom. Second Wednesday monthly, June through December, 6pm CT. Info: casa@chicagoaa.org.

13-15—*Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*. Area 57 State Conference. Write: Box 6601, Norman, OK 73070; <http://aaoklahoma.org/2021-state-conference>

20-22—*Austin, Texas*. SWTA 68 PI/CPC Conf. Write: Box 141434, Austin, TX 78714; 2021. picpc@gmail.com

NEW FROM GRAPEVINE

Free on the Inside: Stories of AA Recovery in Prison

Free on the Inside: Stories of AA Recovery in Prison features powerful stories by sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous who have experienced A.A. in prison—while either currently serving, formerly incarcerated, or as outside A.A. members carrying the message inside.

Great for alcoholics looking for recovery in prison and for those who want to help them. **ITEM #GV43**, Price: **\$11.50** each/5 or more copies **\$10.50** each. To order this book or other products in our collection, visit AAGrapevine.org and click on Store or call Customer Service at **800-631-6025**.

For more information about AA Grapevine, visit AAGrapevine.org.

