

One Group's Attempt to Manage Itself (An article submitted to the AA Grapevine in September 1999)

In the spring of 1970, actually the day after St. Patrick's Day, Portland was warm, even rather muggy. I know, because that was a day when I had more to sweat than the weather. That was to be my last day of drinking – and my first day of AA. What has happened to me since then is really important to me, but what has happened to my home group, The Loyola Men's Group, could be really important to you and your home group.

Loyola, as we call it, got its name from our first meeting place: The Loyola Retreat House. A really pretty and peaceful setting in southeast Portland, it was to be our "home" for 45 years. Just last year we moved to a high school amphitheater with great seating and acoustics, which were both welcomed by our tired rears and ears.

Allow me to share with you our group's biggest problem and greatest blessing. They're the same. We've grown huge! Through my years at Loyola, we seemed to gain members in spurts. For a long time we had a core of about 15 men, then it bumped up to around 25, where it remained for a couple of years, only to jump again by another 10 guys every few years or so.

Last year when we learned that our landlord, the Jesuit Province, had other plans for "our" building, we were getting 80 or 90 guys at our Monday night meetings. Perhaps the eviction notice was God's way of helping us plan for our growth, because a hundred of us made for an overflowing room. We were really crowded!

At the retreat house most of us sat in the same place each week. Being missing from your seat was cause for an inquiring phone call. We really looked out for each other. Men who were new to our meeting were easily recognized, but even that became difficult, as our group grew larger.

The new high school amphitheater caused us to look at how we welcome the new man, and how we look after our regular members. During the first month in our new home before we staked out our new seating spots, it was nearly impossible to notice who was missing. Even now it can be difficult, but we've found a solution.

Exactly one year after our move, we now have 197 men who consider Loyola their home group. Think about that for a moment – we doubled in size in one year's time. Let me tell you how we did it, so you might think about how your group can gain from our experience.

Perhaps we're bigger because we're in a larger and more comfortable room. I think it's more than that! Our growth is best seen in the men of Loyola who have increased their involvement in the Program and taken their recovery programs to new plateaus. It is this, rather than the number of men, which measures our growth. If this is confusing, read on and hopefully you will understand.

About six months ago, a trial balloon with several ideas for group changes was presented on paper to the entire group. It suggested that we, as sober individuals, take a more active role in looking after each other. Several – no, probably more than several – were quite vocal in opposition to these changes. When we floated the trial balloon, we knew that the process would invoke a good deal of deep thought and creativity. Our group is very capable of both! Discussion followed, some louder than normal, and God's grace was bestowed upon us again with a decision by group conscience that has transformed and unified our group.

The following activities are now available to all of us who choose to attend Loyola! We have created a process, which better accepts newcomers to our group, as well as bonding present members to each other. With the following invitation, we seek our member's involvement:

The Loyola Men's Group invites you to join others in the following activities:

Greeters

Be one of four or five members who commit on a pre-scheduled evening to arrive by 7:20 P.M., stay until at least 9:50 P.M., and be responsible to welcome new people to our meeting. The Greeters will give the new man a meeting schedule, helpful literature, and most importantly, an opportunity to talk with a sober alcoholic. A specially prepared list of names and phone numbers will also be given to him, with the invitation to call anyone on the list. Greeters are also encouraged to follow-up with a phone call to the newcomer during the week.

"Trees"

Be involved in a "Tree". A Loyola "Tree" is made up of three men who have committed to talk with each other by phone or in person at least once a week outside the meeting. The phone trees are reshuffled on a random basis every three months. The "Trees" give us a chance to know each other better, and watch out for each other.

Sponsor Broker

Probably like all AA groups, we are not alone in having members who attend regularly but do not participate in sponsorship. Loyola now has a Sponsor Broker! At each meeting he announces that he is willing to talk with those men who want to be hooked-up with a sponsor. He interviews them after the meeting, and then during the week, he makes the "matches." It works, and works surprisingly well! Not only has this been a helpful pat on the rear for the new guys, but a hefty kick in the butt for the older members who hadn't been passing it on. When we become sponsors, it forces us to jump-start our own programs. Our Sponsor Broker has "placed" over 35 guys, which means over 70 guys are now much more involved in the AA program.

Let me share a few other numbers with you. Of our 197 members, 143 are voluntarily participating in the "Trees." This means that each week, all those guys are talking with at least two others outside the meeting. I can't begin to tell you how important this has become in making all of us feel like we are the group. Rather than being outside observers at the meeting, most of us now see ourselves as an integral part of this wonderful fellowship called The Loyola Men's Group.

Seventy-eight men are voluntarily participating as Greeters. Our Greeters are much more than handshakers! When a new person first comes to our group, they know they are welcome. Fellowship is both shown and extended by that night's four Greeters and many other individuals. Encouraged to come early and stay late, it is not uncommon to have 70 or 80 men standing around visiting with each other 20 minutes before and after the meeting. Most people coming to Loyola for the first time are blown away by the sincere attempt to include them in our group. We like each other, and warmly welcome new people to our meeting.

Yes, we live in the "now." What happened yesterday can't be changed, but here's something to think about. If we, as a group, have doubled in size in just one year by making a focused effort to pay attention to new and established members, what was happening to all those men who came and didn't stay before we started doing this? Makes you ponder, doesn't it?

Who's to say why one group seems to be alive, while others seem to be just trudging through the paces? The Loyola Men's Group has been strong in substance for many years, and some of our group traditions have served us well. A successful meeting goes a long way in presenting the attraction part of this Program. Let me mention a few other things we have been doing which have worked well for us:

- We follow the Discussion Meeting format, and choose the chairman prior to the meeting night to allow him an opportunity to better prepare.
- Men don't chair this meeting until they've been sober for at least a year. If they have been sober, but are new to our group, they need to attend for a year. We know that it's an honor to be chairman, and we make it something to look forward to. Don't think that any of us take this casually, especially on those first birthdays.
- Our chairman does not interject his comments between the sharings made by other members during our meeting.
- Peer pressure to be a better person prevails among group members. Our meetings are focused on practicing all Twelve Steps in our lives, not on telling what bad people we were. Honesty is not only encouraged, but the lack of it is most always noticed. The loud mouth feels uncomfortable at Loyola, and is often taken aside and given some loving guidance.
- As a group, we also take a meeting into the Hooper Detox Center. Twice a week, we carry our message to others. Forty of us are now voluntarily participating in this service work.

- Like many other groups, we give birthday medallions to celebrate and honor sobriety. However, our medallions increase in value over the years. After a man carries a particular coin for a year, he gives it back to the group, his name is engraved on it, then given to another member to carry for his year. Many of our coins are filled with eight or nine engravings, and thus also filled with our group's history of continuous sobriety.
- We're not in this thing alone. Including our family and friends in our recovery has been of tremendous help. Once a year we have "Family Night" and invite important men and women in our lives to join us in our meeting. An annual Weekend Campout has also provided our loved ones an opportunity to share in our togetherness.
- To give people a better chance to know us, we are attempting to use our last names when we speak at the meeting. When a last name is spoken, it's much easier to know which "Bob" is which on the group phone list. We have chosen not to be anonymous to each other!

A day is a day, no more, no less, and this group has lots of sober days – 463,190 to be exact! That's 1269 years of cumulative sobriety. Experience has been, and continues to be, a wonderful teacher.

As I was driving home from the meeting the other night, I allowed myself as always to think through things that had been shared by my buddies before, during, and after the meeting. My mind took me to fantasy where Bill and Dr. Bob had happened along and sneaked into our meeting without being recognized. In this fleeting daydream, they were driving back to their hotel, silence finally being broken when one said to the other, "We never dreamed it could be this good."