

**History of the Downtown Discussion Group
(Downtown Guest Speaker Group 1962-1967)
(revised 12/14/23)**

Location	Date	Facility
First Meeting	Dec 1962 or before	First Lutheran Church 3 rd & Ash
3 rd & Beech	? probably late 60's	St. Joseph's Cathedral basement
10 th & C	? probably 1978	YWCA
3 rd & Ash	December 1999	First Lutheran Church
13 th & Island	December 2000	Inner City Baptist Church
825 7 th Ave	June 1, 2002	Salvation Army Fellowship Hall & Lobby
"Online"	March 21, 2020	Zoom video-conferencing platform
3 rd and Date	March 5, 2022	First Presbyterian Church "West Room"
Steering Committee	Early 80's (Ginny H.'s persistence)	
Steering Committee name changed to "Group Conscience Meeting" about 1994 (instigated by Pat McQ.)		
Financial Policy 1999	Contributions to AA services and \$40 to GSR fund for PRAASA and minimum "7 th tradition - \$40 / meeting or pass the basket again"	
Approx 2002	Changed to "7 th Tradition - \$70 / mtg or pass the basket again"	
May 2022	Changed minimum to \$35 due to rent being lowered by First Pres.	
Members active in AA outside the group:	<p>Ed L. (Group contact from 1973) wrote a story in <i>Came to Believe</i>. Butch M. (GSR 2007) published articles in the <i>AA Grapevine</i> in 1997 & 2003. The latter article was included in a compilation booklet, <i>Emotional Sobriety</i>.</p> <p>Bobbie C. , with the assistance of Gail N. chaired the Host City Core Committee for A.A.'s 1995 International Convention in San Diego. Cecil L., a Native American member of the Hopi Pima and Tewa Tribes, moderated and spoke on a Native American panel at the 2010 International Convention in San Antonio, Texas.</p> <p>Area Delegates include Tom M. (Panel 34); Larry N. (Panel 38); Bobbie C. (Panel 42); Sallye M. (Panel 48); Mark K. (Panel 50); Mark J. (Panel 54); Gail N. (Panel 58); Joel C. (Panel 60).</p> <p>Larry N. was elected to serve as U.S. Trustee-at-Large at the 1993 General Service Conference. He served from 1994-95 as a trustee member of the Grapevine Board and as World Service Meeting Delegate in 1994 in Cartagena, Colombia and in 1996 in New York. Larry's travels as trustee took him to Russia, Finland, Japan, Ireland, Mexico, Slovakia and Brazil. He rotated from service in April 1997.</p> <p>Joel C. was elected to serve as Pacific Region Trustee at the 2014 General Service Conference.</p>	

Larry N.'s history of the group, edited and updated by Butch M. as recently as December 14, 2023:

Looking back over the years, it's clear that Gail and I have been sober by the Grace of God, together by Grace, and there is nothing related to our recovery we've ever done alone. Ed and Joan G., delightful OB residents approached us in late 1973 for a ride to the rebel group that met at St. Joseph's Cathedral on Saturday night. At the time, and hopefully still, we responded affirmatively to an AA request. The meeting was certainly different than our customary Ocean Beach weekday meetings. There was an evident strength and sincerity in the message spoken, there was variety and beauty in the diversity of the members. So many colors and accents, and through the voices came powerful expressions of AA love. We were hooked from the very first meeting.

AA members wanting to carry the message downtown started the meeting as a guest speaker meeting, in the early sixties at the Lutheran Church at 3rd & Ash. The first contacts recorded at the General Service Office for the group were Leonard P. and Helen R. In the late 60s or early 70s, the group moved to St. Joseph's Cathedral at 3rd and Beech. Ginny H. (the steering committee instigator), Mary DeB., George J., and Mary G. were steady attendees. Max, an elderly man of German descent, was so thankful for AA, that he always

wanted to read “How It Works.” Sometimes he recited it from memory, and always with his thick German accent. Donuts were always provided. We came early and stayed late. Beautiful Bill P., the first chair of the San Diego Spring Roundup, was a regular; a secret romance occurred between George J. and Mary G.; Kim and Tony fell in love and married.

One of the members, having mental difficulties, caused some problems for the staff at St. Joseph’s and the group moved to the YWCA at 10th and C in the late 70s, where it remained until late 1999. About December of that year the YWCA wanted to do other things with their space, and asked our group to find another meeting place; the group moved to 3rd and Ash — First Lutheran Church. We met in their “lobby” space. Soon they needed the church for weddings and services, and asked us to leave. We moved to the Baptist Church at 13th & Island Street (only one block from Detox). Their back room was slightly too small for us — and very warm in the summer time. We were allowed to use the sanctuary, but it didn’t seem appropriate for an AA meeting — though we did use it for several months. We finally moved in June of 2002 to the Salvation Army Fellowship Hall at 825 7th Avenue. We are currently still at that location as of this writing — [January 2021]. We have use of the gated parking lot except on those nights when the Padres baseball team are playing at home (just a short walk from here). Our rent remains at \$200 since we moved here. We started a step study meeting on Sunday nights at 6:30 pm. Rent is \$50/month. We also started a women’s meeting on Tuesday nights,

which later moved to Thursday night, originally held across the courtyard at the Sally's Kitchen. The women's meeting moved to the lobby of the Saturday meeting room, then to the upstairs conference room, where it meets on Tuesdays to this day. Rent is \$25/month."

Some of the members who have passed from our sight and hearing (since 2003) include: Mike M., Gary D., Summer B., Stasi B., and Kathy D. They are not far from our memories even now. Love has bloomed in our group too: Butch M. and Sallye M. wed in 2003, and Rich S. and Renee R. were married in 2013.

In July 1995 the A.A. International Convention came to San Diego. On the Saturday night prior to commencement of the convention AA members from all around the world attended our group meeting at the YWCA. We had never heard so many languages spoken in a single meeting before. It's as though we were a microcosm of the Convention itself. Friendships were made that night that would last for years.

Members of our group have always been heavily involved in carrying the message, whether through service, or direct Twelfth-Step work. Over the years we have frequently taken commitments to answer the phones at the San Diego Central Office, so that when an alcoholic reaches out for help, a sober member of A.A. will be there. We have also, as a group, staffed H&I panels at

the Volunteers of America Detox 10-Day program (their facility was torn down in 2008 as part of the East Village redevelopment), and later at Vista Balboa, a mental health crisis house near Balboa Park. In the fall of 2002 the group put on a workshop on how to do wet Twelfth Step work, to which we invited AA members from all around the downtown area.

In October of 2011 the group began — on a trial basis — to offer American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation for deaf alcoholics at the Saturday meeting. The Sign Language Fund, to which many groups contribute to provide ASL, provided the first month at no charge. The trial was successful, and in January of 2012 we made a six month commitment to providing ASL — the Sign Language Fund subsidized the first \$25 and the group paid the remaining \$25. Over the next several months we had at least one, and as many as seven deaf alcoholics attend each week and carry/receive the message through the professional ASL interpreter. There was a wonderful spirit of unity and shared blessings. In time, though, another group began to provide ASL at its speaker meeting on Saturdays, and by the end of 2012 attendance by deaf alcoholics had declined to zero, and we discontinued the practice of providing ASL.

In 2011 or 2012 longtime members Larry and Gail N. pulled up stakes and returned to the upper Midwest to live near Gail's family members. They visit when they can, but it doesn't seem the same without them. Still, we soldier on.

What follows is related by longtime member Butch M.:

Late in 2014 Sandie B., longtime member, and then secretary of the step study meeting, passed from our sight and hearing after a short but intense battle with cancer. While her physical absence is still felt to this day, her spirit of loving service remains a palpable part of our little home group.

Henry “Ski” A., a loveable old timer with great stories, attended when he could until 2015, when he moved to Salt Lake City, Utah to be closer to his children. Ski was instrumental in planting the seed of A.A. in his ancestral homeland of Slovakia, making dozens of trips with Czech language Big Books, even when it was behind the “iron curtain.” To his credit the Fellowship took hold and many hundreds of alcoholics found their way to sobriety. Ski left us to join the big meeting in the sky in December, 2016.

In November 2016 an A.A. member from Ohio, Josh B., temporarily relocated to San Diego, and became active in our group. He proposed we hold a speaker meeting once a month. The Group Conscience meeting approved it on a three-month trial basis. The trial went so well that the group agreed to continue the practice. As of this writing, we are still enjoying hearing someone’s story each month.

During a group conscience meeting in mid-2018 we approved a trial period of holding the Saturday meeting in the lobby instead of the large meeting room. In this intimate space we have found there is more camaraderie, joyousness and democracy to the group, both before, and during the meetings.

Early in 2020 the Covid-19 virus changed the world. To paraphrase the Big Book, "Covid being no respecter of persons, we are an accurate cross section of the world." To be frank, AA was changed too. To maintain "social distancing" we moved both meetings back into the large dining hall, and asked attendees to wear a mask. However, based on the Mayor's prohibition against public gatherings in mid-march, we could no longer gather in our regular meeting place at 825 Seventh Avenue. It almost looked as though A.A. may cease to exist. Craving fellowship, and to safeguard her own sobriety, longtime member Renee R.-S. started a noon meeting on the Zoom video chat platform on March 21, and she invited Butch & Sallye M. to participate. So encouraged was Butch by the new medium, he opened a Zoom account and, after a flurry of e-mails and texts to regular members, the Downtown Discussion Group went online that very evening. It was a great success and people from all over the country attended our twice-weekly meetings. We even had visitors from time to time from as far away as the United Kingdom and Japan. Bill W. could not possibly have foreseen this when he mentioned the "colossus of modern communication!" This new medium has even caused A.A.s worldwide to coin a new slogan: "Please

unmute yourself!” Our Sunday night step study meeting is still being held on Zoom, as are our monthly group conscience meetings. Perhaps we will add these vital gatherings to our in-person schedule once again. During the shutdown we were also able to continue our custom of an occasional “movie night” via Zoom! In October 2020, after utilizing our prudent reserve for several months of Zoom fees, we started to pass a “virtual Seventh Tradition basket” using Venmo to remain self-supporting.

We continued to meet online for a full two years from the date of the Mayor’s proclamation. As things began to open up again in San Diego early in 2022, we reached out repeatedly to the Salvation Army leadership to inquire when we might be able to start meeting in person again. Responses were sketchy and inconclusive, so we began to look around the Downtown area for another venue. Members Julie O. and Renea C. found us a wonderful meeting place at First Presbyterian Church at Third and Date Streets, where we have been gathering since March 5, 2022.

As to rent, we began by paying the church \$200 a month, what we had been paying for our Saturday night meeting at the last location. A little more than a year later, the church cut our rent to \$25 a week, because they no longer felt they needed to keep a custodian making \$25 an hour on staff the whole time we were in the building. They said we had earned their trust.

To ensure the group remains inclusive, there is wheelchair accessibility and ample parking, and it is very close in proximity to public transit. Additionally, we are a “hybrid” meeting, offering a Zoom option for those who cannot participate in person.

Still, it is sobering to know that, during the long shutdown, many people who had been attending our group in person, but not connecting with a sponsor to do the Steps, or not having the technical or financial wherewithal — or the desire — to get on Zoom, have relapsed for lack of A.A. fellowship. Some perhaps have died of alcoholism.

As always, life on life’s terms is still in session and, on October 15, 2021 Renee R.S. passed from our sight and hearing, followed by our beloved Larry N. in February 2022. Their impact on the local fellowship continues to be felt as that noon meeting Renee started is now called Midday Miracles, and is still going strong. Larry’s sponsees continue to work with others in the same manner in which he did, fostering several “generations” of sponsorship out of the Downtown Discussion Group. And on December 29, 2022, we lost an “honorary member” of the Downtown Discussion Group, when Nancy Bernath, Dixie’s sister, left us for the big Al-Anon meeting in the sky. Those of us who spent any amount of time with her know how much she loved us, chiefly because we love her sister. Heaven gained a great friend that night, and we shall not soon forget her.

While the core membership of the group has declined over the past few years, several A.A.s remained staunch members through the months of physical separation, including Dixie M., Julie O., Robyn M., Butch & Sallye M., Renea C., David B., Devin G. and Dennis J. We have added some new members both online and in person, such as Carla L., Donna G., Golda W., Alease T., Jeffrey T., Janet G., Kelly C., Kirk L., Giovanni O. and Sunny K.

A few regulars from the old days, such as Jeff S., Rex B. and Daniel V., have found us again, and we enjoyed our group's first fifty-year cake when Gail N. celebrated with us while traveling to San Diego in June 2022. So many friends and past members were in attendance that night, it was like "old home week!" We even got a group picture after the meeting was closed.

We are committed to sponsorship, and to keeping the doors open, both to the church building and our Zoom "room" so the alcoholic who still suffers has somewhere to go to receive the message of recovery from alcoholism. By God's grace we are grateful once again to be able to meet in person, so that the newcomer in the Downtown San Diego area can also receive a warm handshake and half a cup of coffee, face to face.