



### The 12th Step

In 1989 my then sponsor Dan suggested that I go onto the 12th Step List and try to help the suffering alcoholic who called on the telephone line. Back in those days there was only one treatment centre in Bournemouth where I got sober. In the next two years I had on average one 12th Step call every week; it was very active on the telephone service. I was taught very quickly that there should always be two of us going out on a call and that men for men and women for women was the rule.

Dan told me that it was very common to go out to somebody on a Saturday when they were feeling low and depressed and with a promise to come to a meeting on Monday. I would leave them but on Monday very often I would get a call to say they had forgotten that they had booked a dinner party with friends and could not make it to come to a meeting. Funny how a couple of days without a drink can cure one! In 1991 I got a new sponsor and he was a great example of service. He told me not to be disappointed if my prospect didn't get sober and that I was going on the 12th Step call to keep myself sober. One day I got a call from the telephone service about a young fella who needed help. I rang my friend Tony W and we went out together to visit the young fella. We found a man in desperate need of stopping drinking; he had tried to do something about it himself but had found that he just couldn't stop. Tony and I gave him the full works and true to his word, the young man came to a meeting with us. That was many years ago. Today I still see him doing service at my regular AA group as happy as Larry and a fine specimen of AA in action.

These days it is quite usual for me to go three months or so without getting a 12th Step call, this is probably because many of us go to treatment centres or contact AA via the website. This is particularly true of the younger generation. However, I feel it is vitally important that we still use the tried and tested formula of visiting the suffering alcoholic in his home or in a public place such as a café. This is far better than simply telling him (or her – ed) where the nearest AA meeting is.

I think that in general, experience is the thing of supreme value in this world; the experience of my sponsor was to do 12th Step work and service for AA. Therefore I have always been in service and on the 12th Step List. Today I have about 10 sponsees, most all of them do service in the Fellowship and are prepared to carry out 12th Step work because they have learnt that it keeps them sober, not anybody else, just them. I have a friend in the Fellowship who we shall call JJ. My friend never had a home group as such but he was a great 12th Stepper. If the telephone went and a call out was required he would always put on his coat and get on with the job. A few years ago he said to me that he hadn't had a call in some while. I asked the local TLO if he was still on the list and was told that as he had not got a home group he had been removed. What a shame that was, to lose an experienced old-timer from the Helpline. Perhaps it is important not to check home group lists but to ask Responders about whether or not a person on the list who is in doubt is an active 12th Stepper or not. That way we wouldn't lose good people.

### Urgent Vacancy

We need a Telephone liaison officer for London Region North  
For North middelsex

# SOUTHERN SERVICE OFFICE BULLETIN

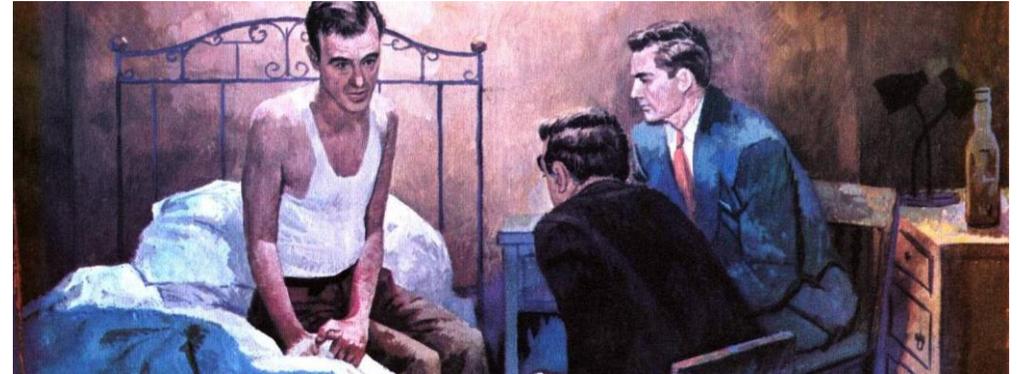
Our primary purpose is to stay sober, and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety



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PHONE SERVICE

Issue No. 5



*On the first Monday evening of every month, around fifteen to twenty people make their separate ways to a nondescript building in Lafone Street, near Tower Bridge . They have at least two things in common – a minimum of one year's continuous sobriety and an interest in doing Telephone Service for Alcoholics Anonymous*



*They sit quietly for an hour while two of AA's elected Telephone Reps talk incessantly and enthusiastically about signing up for the Service that is 'guaranteed to improve your sobriety.' There and then, a training stint is arranged for each of them to sit in with one of the ninety-three teams of four ex-drunks who answer the phones each month, dealing with around 100 calls a day and arranging personal help for some 4,000 problem drinkers each year who are passed on to many hundreds of AAs organised into rosters and lists throughout the London area.*

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Jewish Joe had no idea what he was getting into that Easter weekend in 1961. Or had he.....?

There has been a telephone helpline of some sort for alcoholics in London since the very early days of the Fellowship. It is an amazing service, over all those years manned entirely by AA members who chose to do part or all of their 12<sup>th</sup> Stepping by this method. It is a duty of love – not one of the thousand of volunteers has been paid a penny. Employing only one full time paid administrator and one part time paid administrator , it has run daily for 55 years, with more efficiency than a big Corporation. There are no weekend breaks, no strikes and no annual holidays. Its principles and practices are tried and true. How did it begin? When the bleak and foreboding gates of Britain’s most brutal prison opened and closed to incarcerate Dartmoor Bill for five years in February 1948, another Bill was drying out yet again in a London clinic. But this time, **Bill H** was Stepped by Canadian Bob, one of the founders of AA in the UK Bill H and his brother, **Roland**, had their buying-agent offices in the London Fruit Exchange at Spitalfield According to Roland: 'When Bill had been sober a few months, he said, *These people I'm with don't have an office or telephone. Would you mind if I took the entrance office from the corridor and installed a telephone for their use?* And he added, with a bit of foresight, *You may need it yourself one day!* I treated that remark with the contempt it deserved and gave him my blessing.'

The telephone was installed in August 1948. The first secretary, Lottie, was followed by Esme, a man from Tunbridge Wells. They were unpaid and they worked hard.



But progress was painfully slow. By the time Dartmoor Bill emerged in May 1953, there were only five meetings in London, though the fledgling groups up and down the country had managed to set up a Central Service Office (CSO) in Redcliffe Gardens. This was the forerunner of today’s General Service Office (GSO). It dealt with literature and group administration, servicing the Fellowship. Its phone was also rung by alcoholics seeking help. There weren’t many.

In 1954, an advert in the *Daily Express* gave the Bishopgate number and the London members gathered round the phone in anticipation of the influx of calls that never came. In 1955, Bill and Roland’s number was transferred to CSO so that calls could be taken from 10am to 6pm five days a week. It was totally disorganised, but every call from alcoholic or relative was answered by an enthusiastic helper. If the caller was a suffering alcoholic, they would be stepped in home or hospital...in the gutter if they had its correct address.



If advising of a meeting, the telephone contact would make certain that some particular person greeted the newcomer by name, even if they had to go to that meeting themselves to do it. It was a real hands-on service and in some chaotic manner, it worked well. There were far fewer private telephones in the Fifties, almost all calls came from public phone boxes. So there was always a prodigious effort made to make personal contact immediately – it seemed to be by bush telegraph sometimes. A missionary attitude prevailed and every caller saved was another victory won. If contact was delayed for any length of time, 12<sup>th</sup> Steppers could be greeted with puzzlement or outright hostility by a man or woman who had no memory nor wish to be reminded of their recent binge. The birth of a better system was painful. At the end of the 1950s much time and heat was spent as the London groups, the national group representatives and the Central Service Board members thrashed out plans by the first London Intergroup to fund and set up a telephone service which would operate into the evenings and offer a quicker response.



In 1961, CSO gave office space at a peppercorn rent at Redcliffe Gardens. George M, Vincent S, Trevor O, Frank from The Oval and many others made Herculean efforts to make it work, while Jewish Joe traipsed round the London meetings, resorting to emotional blackmail to round up volunteers to fulfil the pledge that when anyone, anywhere reached out for help, the hand of AA would be there. The new Telephone Service covered 10am-10pm and promised help within 48 hours. They had no other firm guidelines. One night the line was manned by two members, one of whom felt like a refreshment. One drink led to another and to two very drunk volunteers. Another pair used the wastepaper bin as an ashtray and only a neighbour’s vigilance and the fire brigade kept AA in business. The lack of agreed procedures disrupted the daytime office. Phone volunteers sometimes invited newcomers to come in for help. Shaking drunks staggered between desks, while many AA members felt it their right to wander around ‘their’ offices. CSO staff couldn’t get their work done...and it was ‘suggested’ the Phone Service find their own premises. In 1963, they set up in Paddington, but returned to Redcliffe two years later after another series of discussions and disputes over ‘who runs what around here’. Many alcoholics who proved themselves unemployable for decades appeared quite capable within six months of sobriety of deciding the boss is an idiot. For some years, Frank from The Oval looked after the dayshifts and Vincent took charge of the evening shifts. All this work was carried out unpaid. Ironing Board Arthur took over as office manager from Frank, then there were several women in that post over the next few years, including a Margaret, a Bridget, a Dorothy and a Doris. The Groups ensured that not only evenings were covered, but 12-hour Saturdays and Sundays, as well as Christmas, Easter, etc. Alcoholism doesn’t take Bank Holidays. The window of surrender doesn’t stay open very long...Trevor O had a plan. An ex-actor with a smooth, reassuring voice and a dignified manner that encouraged confidence, he sought decentralisation of all authority, believing that the individual alcoholic and the local group should be enabled to take charge of their own affairs and that they would respond to responsibility rather than patronisation. He saw that the Telephone Service would operate much more smoothly if the London Intergroup dissolved into local units. It was time for change, anyway. By 1974, London had 101 AA meetings and some of the groups in South London wanted their own intergroup.

So five intergroup who took on responsibility for finding the volunteers and the contributions from their local groups to build up the Telephone Service. AA members were now much more accountable, as Trevor had foreseen. Now they decided to get themselves a proper administrator.

Marie, originally from Northern Ireland, pronounced her name ‘Marry’ and that’s what she did to Trevor shortly after she was installed as London AA’s first full-time Office Manager.

A recruitment advisor with Brook St Bureau in Central London, Marie was five foot nothing and made up for her lack of height in stature. She presented a rather classy image, except for the long fag hanging from her lips, about half of it already ash. She quit smoking just too late to avoid emphysema and Trevor took her back to Portrush in Northern Ireland in 1988, when she retired after 14 years. She’d been a phone volunteer herself in 1971:

‘We had two telephones. During the day, the volunteers tended to be housewives, members who had retired or could afford not to work, anyone who was willing to give four hours a week to the Service. Many unemployed AAs learned good habits that got them back to work again. ‘Like all voluntary services, some were extremely good and others not so good. Some arrived on time, some didn’t arrive at all.

‘Quite often, alcoholics ringing in for help were invited into the officer for twelfth-stepping, so volunteers coming on duty at 6pm for the evening would find one or more drunks creating chaos, asleep in a chair or lying on the floor. ‘The office itself was depressing. To come on duty after a hard day’s work and find a table covered with dirty cups and spilt milk was not terribly inviting. We had no kitchen, the washing-up was done in a hand-basin in the loo.’

The work itself was difficult too:

‘It might take fifteen telephone calls to pass out a single Twelfth Step call to the Fellowship. We had an extensive file of names and phone numbers, but it was impossible to keep it up to date in a city like London, with folk moving or drinking. Often we sent people direct to meetings.’

The five intergroup chairmen decided they wanted Marie to run the office and put her own plans into operation. ‘I like working in a bright, tidy, clean and calm office. We got it painted and carpeted...and we kept it free of drunks, so that volunteers could concentrate on the phones. I took a bit of stick for that, but we never turned anyone away, we just stopped encouraging people to visit.’ She didn’t ban smoking, though. The priority was to come up with a better system for getting the calls for help to the members who were keen to provide it.