

# Sponsorship into Service

## INTRODUCTION

### **What does “Sponsorship into Service” entail?**

Doing service in AA is a crucial part of keeping sober. It can start with the tasks given to the newcomer - making coffee and tea, setting out the literature, welcoming those who are even newer to the Fellowship. Newer members will find that the selfishness which characterises the alcoholic will be overcome by doing service and co-operating with their fellows in a common enterprise.

Sponsors have an important role to play in ensuring that their sponsees are encouraged into service. In relation to any available role, they discuss whether the sponsee is willing and able to meet the obligations which the role entails. They can also ensure that sponsees are given the tools and the confidence to carry out that role.

The sponsor may explain that the three legacies of recovery, unity and service are all needed in order to achieve lasting sobriety. In doing so, they will help the sponsee to gain a deeper understanding of AA's Traditions and Concepts.

At a suitable point in their recovery, members may seek further opportunities for giving back the gifts which they have received. Their sponsor may be able to help them in this. In addition, a member with experience in a particular type of service or role could be asked to sponsor them into a particular position. This is sometimes described as “sponsoring into service” or “shadowing” or “12th stepping into service”. Initially this could be within the group, or beyond. There is a multitude of different ways in which the work of the Fellowship can be furthered - many are set out in “The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain”.

We have put together a few of the many stories by members who have been sponsored into service. We hope that this will encourage others to share their experience of the benefits of service.

In order to preserve anonymity, the names given to contributors are not their real ones.

In ‘Sponsors Galore!’ Robert recounts how his “First Sponsor” provided the invaluable help which he needed to go through the Twelve Steps and begin service within the group. When he had the opportunity to become involved in intergroup, however, he found that he needed a “Second Sponsor” who made him aware of the importance of service in all levels of the Fellowship.

Laura, in “Sponsorship by Example” speaks of the “respons(or)bility pledge” as the driving force behind the need to embrace all three legacies which form part of the inverted triangle. She points out that without members being in service there would cease to be AA as we know it.

Keith talks about the “Boost in Confidence” which he received from various members who sponsored him into service. He also makes it clear that his study of the Traditions and the guidance in the AA Structure and Service Handbooks was an important form of support as he undertook service. For that reason, he encourages those whom he sponsors into service to develop their knowledge of the guidance relevant to their responsibility.

George warns of the need to “Beware of Ego!” when taking on service positions. He points out the benefits of having an experienced member as sponsor for service generally, or for a particular service role. This is an effective way of deciding whether one is right for a particular service role, and - if one is - providing support in carrying it out.

In “Learning to ask for help” James tells of his experience in a variety of service positions and points out that it would not have been realistic to expect any one person to be able to provide him with guidance in all the various roles. He soon found that the best way to avoid finding that any service position was lonely and unsatisfying, was to ask for the support of others who had experience of it. He has been honoured, throughout, to help others in their service roles.

## MAIN TEXT

### Sponsors Galore!

At my first two or three meetings I heard the AA mantra which every newcomer gets to hear "Get to as many meetings as you can (everyday if possible), get a sponsor, work the steps". So, I got to as many meetings as I could and after four or five weeks of careful consideration (or as carefully as someone that is as bemused and befuddled as I was in those early weeks and months can) I asked someone to be my sponsor and they agreed. For the purposes of this short recollection, I shall call him my 'First Sponsor', and of course I set about working the Steps with him.

My First Sponsor told me exactly what I needed to hear at that time and helped me open my eyes to who I really was rather than who I thought I was. He gave me a sound base from which my growth in recovery and in life, a day at a time, could happen - and continues to happen. He pointed out to me how I had lived my life selfishly and how I did nothing for anyone unless there was something in it for me. He taught me that if I wanted to keep anything worth having then I had to give it away, and he taught me that I achieved this through service in AA, and service to others on a daily basis.

Service in AA began suddenly (a week after I asked my First Sponsor to be my First Sponsor in fact) with the instruction to stand outside the door to the meeting and say hello to people as they came in and direct them to the meeting room. "Don't look at your feet, look at their faces, smile, say hello and if you ask them how they are (which was recommended), mean it, and be interested in their response." This was the suggested method for carrying out this service. More service followed in quick succession. I became secretary of the meeting and I recall one night after the meeting had finished my First Sponsor's phone ringing and him handing it to me and saying, "it's for you". That was my first Twelfth Step call.

During this time a Fellowship friend from what had become my home group, asked me if I would like to join him in attending an intergroup meeting, I didn't have a clue what that was but said "Yes" simply because I was worried that if I said "No" I would be missing out on some vital part of recovery (in hindsight, I was sort of right). I can't say I really understood what was going on at the Intergroup meeting, I just remember being greatly impressed with the chair and how she conducted business. On my return I asked my First Sponsor what intergroup was all about? "Don't worry about intergroup" he said, "It's just a bunch of egos talking at one another to increase their CVs and make themselves feel important without actually achieving anything. Just concentrate on service at our home group and doing Twelfth Step work and you'll be fine" was his view.

A couple of months later my 'First Sponsor' gained his title of 'First Sponsor' and we parted ways, and I approached my 'Second Sponsor', who for the purposes of this increasingly lengthy recollection, I shall simply call my sponsor as he remains so today. He took me through the Steps again and introduced me to the Traditions and had a very different view on service and indeed of intergroup. Having been a former chair of intergroup himself, he taught me about the inverted triangle and importance of service at all levels, about intergroups and what they do, about regions and GSO and about questions for Conference. He pointed out that all this is the reason why AA is still around and continues to serve its members.

Sometime later I became the GSR (General Service Representative) of my new home group and began to attend intergroup with the understanding that the point of attendance was not only to act as the interface between my home group and intergroup but also to do service at intergroup. It was suggested to me after I had attended intergroup for a few months that I might like to consider being nominated for one of the vacant regional representative positions. I discussed this with my sponsor who explained that while he understood the role of the regional rep., he had no experience of this himself and suggested that I seek another member who did and who could help to determine if it was appropriate service for me. He further suggested that I look into the Concepts and seek guidance on this too, as his knowledge and experience was not perhaps as great as many others.

This is when I first came across the concept of the 'Service Sponsor' - to my mind a person that has experience of all levels (or most levels anyway) of service, who can help guide a member on their journey through the service structure, and provide their experience of the challenges and the wisdom gained through that journey. While I never formally asked the lady who was chair at my first intergroup meeting (who had since become chair of region), I did seek her advice and guidance, not just about my service journey (I did become a regional rep.) but also on the application of the Concepts and Traditions at regional meetings, so as to understand why AA works in the way it does.

When I geographically relocated myself and my family sometime later, I was quick to get myself into service in my new area at group, intergroup and region. Service allowed me to quickly grow my fellowship in a new area and it was through this that I met a member whom I asked to be my service sponsor, which I still very much felt I needed. He politely demurred but said that he was happy to speak to me anytime about service, AA structure, Conference, Traditions or anything else where my sponsor (my beloved spiritual sponsor) could not guide me. Of course, for my general wellness, I still check any service that I am considering with my sponsor just to make

sure that my ego and my old desire to people please isn't coming into play, or if you prefer to check that my motives are correct. I assure him that I have already discussed this with an experienced member.

If you, the reader, find yourself in a similar position to me and you wish to move further through the service structure (which I recommend to all my own sponsees) but find your sponsor does not have the experience themselves, then I think a service sponsor can help. I would also suggest going to workshops that cover Traditions and Concepts as this too is an invaluable source. It works for me.

Robert

## Sponsorship by example

God willing by the time of print (if it is deemed worthy) I will have celebrated nearly 30 years of continuous sobriety, and barely a day has gone by that I haven't been involved in service sponsorship in some shape or form. Initially the example of the member who returned my call, who had previously done the public information leg work with the organisation I had contacted, who greeted me at my first meeting and offered the half-filled cup of tea. For me sponsorship in service is by example. It's saying "This is how I did it - but you might find another way. This is how I got well. If you want what I've got you'll do what I did (or your version of it). I am here for you – for as long as needed." It's explaining the why's and the how's and the when's of things getting done. It's saying no question is too small. It's being encouraged to go to everything that might be of benefit – workshops, presentations, a forum, reading manuals, intergroup and region and beyond and being involved. Not just attending but participating. It's being shown by example – I did it – so can you. This is the structure - the inverted triangle - this is you – at the top – this is YOUR Fellowship!!

AA is about so much more than meetings. "Get in the middle of the lifeboat", I was told. Use all the tools – embrace all three legacies.

It's the respons(or)bility pledge 'when anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there – and for that, I am respons(or)ble.' The hand of AA – not my hand which was what I thought it said – so any service I undertake to serve my Fellowship fulfils that pledge whether my gift be to share, to sponsor, to type minutes, to answer phones, to answer emails, to represent my intergroup or region, to be a pen pal to a loner or prisoner, to serve on a sub-committee, to welcome newcomers, to write to SHARE, to contribute to AA Service News - all these activities and many, many more have become known to me because I was sponsored into service. Because I got involved and in so doing, the world of AA grew and grew along with my hunger for it. I was shown the way – just as I had been in my recovery. Firstly, in my home group – doing my share of the roles and rotating out or sideways as appropriate, going to intergroup - always accompanied in early days – never 'thrown to the wolves'. I was encouraged to take notes – not realising I was being 'groomed' for GSR and later to region rep. where I learned more about the disciplines and the Conference delegate privilege, where I learned even more about the roles of trustees.

My 'real world' role had been in accounts so that fitted nicely with treasurer positions and suited secretarial which I have and do hold at different levels of the structure. I learned of the Traditions – in practice as much as by reading -

and the Concepts – usually when they weren't followed – I barely noticed when they were.

I can't thank the service sponsors enough who have shown me the way – who have led by example. Who impressed upon me that service is a privilege. Who have opened my eyes to all that AA has to offer and I hope I haven't finished learning yet.

Today I try to set that same example by being in service, by being a willing and helpful sponsor to anyone else in service or thinking of it. Without members being in service there would cease to be AA as we know it.

To quote Dr Bob:

"I do it for four reasons:

1. Sense of duty
2. It is a pleasure
3. Because in so doing I am paying the debt to the man who took the time to pass it on to me
4. Because every time I do it I take out a little more insurance for myself against a possible slip"

(So, it's in my interest)

Laura

## **A boost in confidence**

During my early involvement in service in my home group I was well supported, particularly by one member who sadly passed away in 2019 having had 40 years of continuous sobriety. I recall very early on as a GSR when I was looking to get some time to feedback from intergroup and being met with some resistance. The member who 'encouraged' me into service, supported me, and we had reporting back established as part of the meeting. I remember, during my first stint as group secretary, having a particularly difficult situation to deal with, and receiving solid support from that same member. Knowing that there was another member on hand to check things out with, helped with my confidence.

I have never sought to analyse this but my early experience at intergroup when it was in its infancy may well have had a long-standing influence on me with regard to sponsorship into service. When intergroup had been in existence for just over 18 months the chair, secretary and treasurer all stood down together, leaving some much less experienced members including myself (18 months sober) to take on these responsibilities. With no real source of reference at intergroup, I read a great deal about the history and the structure of the Fellowship to enable me to do the best job I could at the time as intergroup secretary. Thankfully, I have always been an avid reader of AA literature, so it wasn't a chore for me and gave me more confidence in what I was doing in the Fellowship.

Throughout my time in the Fellowship, I have seen members being encouraged to take on service responsibilities without being aware of what those responsibilities are. They have then been left without any support while trying to do the best they can. This is not peculiar to our area; I have seen examples of it elsewhere.

I would not encourage anyone into service without being around to support them, in whatever way they feel they can do with that support.

I have been a service sponsor for some members who already have a sponsor. They are happy with their sponsor helping them with personal matters and taking them through the Twelve Steps, but because of the sponsor's lack of experience of service in the Fellowship, they have decided they would like someone to support them with their service role. In these instances, I have always agreed with both parties concerned that I would not get involved in personal issues and would stick strictly to my service sponsorship role.



The most important aspect of service, for me, is the need to put the whole of AA before any of its constituent parts (Tradition One, if you like). This holds true for groups/intergroup/region and Conference. I encourage those I am sponsoring into developing their knowledge of the Twelve Traditions and the guidance in our handbooks relevant to their responsibility. Over time I would expect the sponsee to be able to make connections between what happens at group/intergroup/region/Conference and the wider Fellowship.

When I sponsor anyone into service, I encourage them to develop an independence of thinking and to be able to stand up and be counted. From my observations those who have taken the time and effort to develop a good understanding of the responsibility they have taken on become more confident and better able to carry out their role. I might add that it is not uncommon for those I have sponsored into service to take up a different position from me on an issue or policy up for discussion at a group conscience meeting or at any service meeting. I would not expect anything less.

Another element of sponsoring into service is the practice of some member who has been elected shadowing the post holder who is rotating out of a particular service. Along with others, I have been involved in this practice at group, intergroup and regional level and have found it really helpful to allow someone to take over and be up and running from the start.

Whenever I have been involved in this process, I have always had a few meetings with the other member concerned and gone into the minutiae of the responsibility with them.

I don't think that the importance of the Traditions in service responsibilities can be overstated, so I thought I would say a couple of words about them. The Traditions are our Traditions and the responsibility for preserving them is ours. We cannot expect others to understand and observe the Traditions if we are poorly informed of them ourselves.

Sponsoring members into service is a great privilege. To be in a position hopefully to add to some other member's growth and development in the Fellowship is very special to me.

Keith

## **Beware of ego!**

I began service at my home group first as greeter, then secretary. I received sufficient guidance and support from my sponsor and the group elders. At about eighteen months' sobriety I was allowed to be Health Liaison Officer (HLO) for my intergroup. In that role I got the help I needed from the region HLO. I then became chair of intergroup. At that time, I was suffering from a relatively high degree of egotism. Certainly, I wanted to do service for the sake of AA and the still-suffering alcoholic. But my fragile ego needed boosting from what appeared to it to be the prestige and power of the service position. I also felt responsible for the functioning of the intergroup. And I thought I knew more about what that involved than did the other serving members. I was keen to have my way at intergroup meetings. Hubris! Looking back, I think I felt somewhat alone in the role. The intergroup had excellent written notes for the chair, and it didn't occur to me to seek much support and guidance from others. As a result, things didn't go very well. I failed to set a good example as a leader, or to foster a good atmosphere at intergroup meetings. Looking back, I think a service sponsor could have done me and my service a world of good.

I wanted to move on to health liaison at region. However, another member was willing and able to take on that role. The public information (PI) position had been vacant for a long time, and I felt compelled to fill it. Having no experience of PI as such, I sought help from a very wise region elder. In effect they became my service sponsor at that point, becoming my official sponsor in all AA matters later on. Their service sponsorship has made a huge difference to how I feel and act in service. Crucially, I feel supported. I remember in particular a situation in which I had been serving too much and for too long at a particular group, thinking that since no-one else was doing the work, I should. But I wasn't happy. I talked with my sponsor, and they helped me see clearly that it wasn't good for me or for the group and that I should give it up.

Whenever necessary, my sponsor gives me specific guidance about what positions to take on and how to do the job. And they help me approach service with the right spirit, remembering that I am but a servant and that the fundamental aim of service is to help others. I benefit most if I focus only on performing the service role and refrain from trying to feed my ego.

I have had the good fortune to sponsor about fifteen members through the Twelve Steps. I always recommend that we also go through the Traditions in detail. Most of them have agreed. They have done service at least at group level, and from time to time seek my advice about the application of the Traditions to particular situations. I often find myself reminding them of Traditions One and Two. Their role is to serve rather than to impose their will

on the group. Fighting is to be avoided (let's try to remember that Step Ten promise!). Unity comes first.

I have only one sponsee specifically for service, the member who became region PI after me. I took them through the Traditions and the Concepts, and we meet regularly for interesting and enjoyable discussions about service matters.

Sponsoring people for service is particularly pleasing, since I feel I am helping not only my sponsees but also those they serve. And I am ever grateful to my service sponsor for supporting me and for showing me, whenever necessary, how to place principles before my personality.

George

## Learning to ask for help

I needed help from my first sponsor on how to deal with my first service commitment. I was a greeter, and my feelings were hurt by regular members wanting to brush past and not be greeted! He helped me put it into perspective and I learned that not everyone was coming to the meeting for the honour and pleasure of being greeted by me – and that just like me, they had their own ‘stuff’ going on.

Shortly thereafter I started making tea and coffee at a meeting. No need for training here, I thought. But I didn’t know which cupboard contained the cups and which the fig rolls. I had to ask for help from my fellow tea-maker in finding the tea bags and fulfilling this service – and so I started taking suggestions and help from others in my service ‘career’.

Over my time I’ve done service at all levels of our structure, and it would be unreasonable to expect that any sponsor had experience in every role. The person who shepherded me through the Twelve Steps was not the best person to advise me on how to approach prison meetings, nor how to deal with Conference question workshops. These were areas of service of which he had no first-hand experience. He was great on applying the Steps to get me sober and discussing the Traditions.

Accordingly, I had to continue to ask for help – from those ‘sponsoring’ or ‘twelve-stepping’ me into a role that they had held and were passing onto me. I also needed guidance on suitability of roles and how time-consuming they might be. Most of this was outside the experience of my sponsor. I’ve always found enjoyment from working with others to help others; learning from them and discussing some of the challenges we face. Sometimes this has been on how best to deal with the denial from someone on the first response telephone line, and sometimes on how best to deal with prison authorities. Whenever I have been tempted to put my head down, muscle through and do it my way, without the input and support of other members, it’s been lonely, unsatisfying, and often substandard. Ego is seldom my friend.

I haven’t pursued an “AA service career” and have been fortunate to be in the right place at the right time when volunteers were sought. I came to rely on the counsel of a wise older member who had done a lot of service over more than 40 years, and she was able to suggest what vacancies might suit me, and when I was in danger of over-reaching or to committing more time than I had. She might easily be called my service sponsor, although the relationship was never formalised.

When I became a General Service Board (GSB) Trustee, her experience ran out – this was not a role for which she had applied or been appointed. Thankfully, the GSB operates a 'buddy system' where each trustee asks another trustee to be there for them to discuss matters of concern within our circle of confidentiality. It's not an exclusive arrangement: while I have but one buddy with whom I discuss my concerns, I am buddy to two other trustees who can call on me. I have latterly discovered that some intergroups operate a similar system for GSRs. I wish that I had received more support in my stumbling first steps into that role.

I've also been asked to be service sponsor to another member. I think I said that I didn't really understand exactly what that might look like, but that I would commit to being there as a sounding board for any issues that he had in his AA service. It's been an honour to hear his approach to the roles he's undertaken and those he has considered. Hearing someone review their motives, abilities, availability, and shortcomings is intimate and a privilege. Being able to reflect back and offer what I know about the demands of roles at different levels of our structure seems only partial repayment of the support given to me.

James

## FINAL PAGE

*Extract from The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain (2022)*

### **1.5 Sponsorship, Service Sponsorship, and Sponsoring into Service**

Essentially, sponsorship is one alcoholic who has made some progress in the recovery programme sharing that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another alcoholic who is trying to stay sober.

(from the pamphlet 'Sponsorship: Your Questions Answered')

In addition to sponsorship in the AA programme (e.g. helping someone through the Steps and Traditions), it is suggested that new members are also 'sponsored' into service.

Some AA Members may seek a 'service sponsor' who has experience in a particular type of service or role.

Although there are different ways of understanding service sponsorship or of sponsoring into service, the two may be viewed in similar terms. (Some AA members say that service sponsorship is not separate, but simply a part of sponsorship.)

Service sponsorship focuses on AA's Third Legacy of Service. A service sponsor shares experience, strength, and hope about service roles and positions within our service structure. Information on many of these roles can be found within this handbook. A member may take on responsibilities within the group or further down our inverted triangle – that is, at intergroup and region.

A service sponsor supports and encourages the member in all service activities –

regardless of level – and leads by example. A service sponsor may suggest opportunities a member might consider in the group or beyond and help the member gain a deeper understanding of AA's Traditions and Concepts.

Service sponsorship helps a member understand the commitment and responsibilities of a service position and whether they are able and willing to meet the obligations of the role.

Please see also the AAGB pamphlets, '*Sponsorship: Your Questions Answered*' and '*Growing into Service*'.