

“Are special interest groups/meetings dividing us or fulfilling a need?”

My sobriety date is March 10, 2007. Home group-Firgrove Group in Puyallup, WA. Current Service positions-DCM Dist 29, action log reporter for my home group.

My first thought was what qualifies me to speak to this subject? Special Interest, what a broad spectrum question. Aren't we all, as alcoholics, part of a special interest group? Aren't open and closed meetings special interest groups? I don't consider myself a member of a special interest group unless you consider AA a special interest group. My home group is a closed meeting so maybe that qualifies me? So my experience is not very helpful here. I go to women's retreats but that to me is fellowship (and vacation from the family and phone). I qualify as an alcoholic.

Initially, my idea when asked to speak on this somewhat controversial subject was to speak on pros and cons of this-how they may be dividing us and how they may be fulfilling a need. To provoke discussion and debate. To leave without having a strong one side or the other answer. And so I started to “think”. I am “good” at thinking...

If you are at all like me, you get all “over-thinky” and may possibly, like I did, look up the definition and see that the meaning I found has nothing to do with what comes to mind for me. It's about “special advantages” and “political lobbying”. So, I get even thinkier. And I broke it down further.

Special- better, greater, or otherwise different from what is usual.

Interest-state of wanting to know or learn about something or someone. Participation in advantages or responsibility.

These definitions made me crazy and think of the word, “entitlement”. I saw different, better, advantages. They made me think “special interest” sounds so negative.

So I started to research. How did special interest groups come about? I soon discovered a phrase that was easier to swallow, “Special Purpose Groups.”

Purpose-motivation. Intent.

Why do we have these special purpose groups? What is the intention? When a new group is formed, shouldn't we should ask ourselves, is it filling a need? Is it fixing a problem? How will neighboring groups be affected?

We have so many kinds of special interest groups-men, women, LGBTQ, pilots, lawyers, doctors, young people, old timers, Spanish speaking, the list is long. So lets' talk about why there are these groups. I am a nerd and love to study so you are going to learn some history here, you're welcome.

Information I found was that the first Women's group to be formed and recognized was in Cleveland in 1941. There was originally resistance to women attending AA meetings, we were considered “a disturbance.” There was concern about (and I love this word) “hanky-panky”. Little do you men know, you are often a disturbance (and sometimes a nuisance) to us and having our special interest group is nothing that most of us are sad or put out about. Thank you for that.

Early in AA, as I understand it, is that if you were black, you had to sit in the back of a meeting and couldn't share unless it was a meeting that catered to black members. You were considered “observers”, or “visitors”. The first black meeting was formed in 1945.

Records I found state that the first LGBT meeting was held in 1967. Members first introduced themselves as “gay alcoholics” but later changed that to “alcoholics”. There was controversy within the gay community whether they should even form such meetings or not. They formed these because they didn’t feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences due to stigma and safety.

Many professionals have special meetings catered to their career to protect their anonymity at great lengths. Pilots, Police Officers, physicians, and lawyers, are just some I am aware of existing out there. These are very protected and private meetings as to protect the identity of these alcoholics for professional reasons due to public stigma.

In 1975 “no prayer” and agnostic meetings began to form and can be found in most areas. In today’s culture, organized religion and cults are an outside issue and a very real trigger for some.

You can find young people’s meetings in many areas today. We have minors in the rooms and our newcomers coming out of facilities and institutions are younger today than ever.

These are just some of the things I found in my search for special interest groups.

So back to the question, are these groups dividing us or fulfilling a need? I believe each one is fulfilling a need, attraction. Is there a possibility they could divide us? Maybe. But I do not see it currently dividing us. In my journey on this subject and in talking to others who are members of some of these special interest groups, they seem, for the most part, familiar with tradition three. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking. They are AA members, they identify as alcoholics. Not black alcoholics. Not Pansexual AA alcoholics. Not

female AA alcoholics. AA members, as a whole, here to help the next suffering alcoholic. I realize this may seem like a grey area when you read the long form of tradition 3 that states (read tradition 3).

In my research, I found no history, proof, or example of any of these special interest groups trying to conform or refuse another alcoholic. I found quite the opposite. Most of these special interest groups were formed with good intention, focused on inclusion not seclusion and welcoming towards all alcoholics. Most of these groups were wanting to be understood.

So I of course, next I had to look up affiliation- the state or relation of being closely associate with a particular person, group, party, company, etc

The affiliation I discovered was alcoholics anonymous.

Members of these special interest or as I like to now call them, “common interest” groups, who have suffered trauma, stigma, and racism, who relate to one another with experiences that we may not understand. Members who newcomers find comfort and similarities with. Members who may have found a way to enter Alcoholics Anonymous that I cannot understand. I am a white, heterosexual, woman. While I can empathize and relate to everyone in this room as an alcoholic, I have never experienced racism or hatred against me for my sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or race. I am not a minor who may have been taken advantage of by adults. I have not walked your trauma. I have not suffered the intolerance of another.

I found members who participate in AA as a whole. I rarely found members who only stick with their common interest groups. They are not looking to create their own brand of AA. They sit on committees

and sponsor others and make themselves available for service and join in fellowship. You may be sitting next to someone who belongs to a common interest group. It is up to those members of special interest groups to continue to look for the similarities and not the differences of all alcoholics and not isolate or become “unique”. It is not only up to the members of common interest groups to stay united within the fellowship as a whole, it is up to all of us as a whole to be sure we include and accept those who belong to a special interest group. Historically, this has not always been the case, hence the reason some of these common interest groups were formed. Love and tolerance is our code and we all must practice this in order to survive as a whole.

So, how do we determine if special interest groups are diving us or fulfilling a need?

I Quote John Norris MD, from the Grapevine in Oct 1977, “Perhaps, what we are really dealing with in special purpose groups is communication among AA members and how to improve it so that we can do a better job of carrying the AA message to alcoholics of all kinds.”

This statement still stands true.

In my opinion, the traditions are key. As Bill W said, “The group must survive or the individual will not.” It is up to us (all of us) to learn the traditions. To study the traditions and most importantly, to practice them. To help the next suffering alcoholic understand the traditions so they can practice them. Embrace them. I love them. If you don’t love them, you don’t understand them. My opinion. They are beautiful and so unique. They help us survive despite ourselves and were designed specifically so that we are not divided. The steps are a design for living. The traditions are a design for living in unity. I thank all of you who are of service, who are working to keep the upside-down triangle alive, and

the traditions intact. To know the traditions is to have knowledge. To practice them is power. Magic. Growth. Freedom.

If we continue to practice the traditions, nothing will divide AA and we will be here for generations to come.

The traditions were formed as problems arose. Success and failure are part of our history. And will continue to be in our future. For that is part of our beauty. Success, failure, success. Progress not perfection. We continue to move forward, no matter what and when we do this together, the process is magnificent. The outcome positive.

I leave you with this...

This we owe to AA's future-

To place our common welfare first

To keep our fellowship united

For on AA Unity depends our lives

And the lives of those to come

Panel Presentation PNC 2019.

Kari K

