

History of Debtors Anonymous

The idea that would give rise to the Fellowship of Debtors Anonymous started in 1968, when a core group of recovering members from Alcoholics Anonymous began discussing the problems they were experiencing with money. Led by a man named John H., they began an eight-year spiritual odyssey to understand the causes and conditions behind their self-destructive behavior with money.

Having little idea of how to approach this, they focused in turn on the diverse symptoms they were experiencing, including many different patterns of spending, saving, shopping, and earning. They first called themselves the “Penny Pinchers,” and attempted to control through will power the amount of money they spent. Later, the group renamed itself the “Capital Builders”, convinced that their financial problems stemmed from an inability to save money. They tried to cure this by making daily deposits into savings accounts, but this, too, failed to resolve their problems.

For the next few years, the ever-changing group of people around John H. tried addressing all of the symptoms they were suffering from, but continued to fail. In addition to AA, they attended meetings of Gamblers Anonymous, Al-Anon, and other 12-Step programs, hoping to find a definitive answer. Finally, as more years passed, they began to understand that their monetary problems did not stem from an inability to save or control the amount they spent or earned, but rather from the inability to stop incurring unsecured debt (become solvent.)

By 1971, the essence of the DA Program unfolded in the discovery and understanding that the act of debting itself was the threshold of the disease, and the only solution was to use the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to stop incurring unsecured debt one day at a time, and to help others to do so (to stay stopped.) After two years, the group of recovering AA members disbanded. Meetings came and went, with John H. attempting desperately to hold the small and ever-changing group of financially troubled alcoholics together.

DA re-emerged in April 1976 when John H. and another debtor met at a church (St Stephens Rectory) in New York City for the first regularly scheduled DA meeting. Within a year, a second meeting was organized with members outside AA for the first time. By early 1982, there were five meetings in existence in the world, all of them in Manhattan.

In March of 1982, representatives from those five meetings took a daring step. With many of them having been inspired by their service experience in AA, they established a Pro-Tem Board of Trustees for DA. The Pro-Tem Board of five scheduled an Annual Meeting of Debtors Anonymous, held in New York City in September 1982. A permanent General Service Board for the fellowship was (created) elected at that meeting, and has existed ever since. Newly established meetings in Boston and Washington also elected Regional Trustees, and these were later joined by a Regional Trustee from Los Angeles.

DA remained mostly New York based during the mid-1980s, and four more Annual Meetings were held from 1983-1986, all in Manhattan. The General Service Board during this era attempted to build a service structure for the fledgling Fellowship largely on the model of AA, but with some differences to accommodate DA's much smaller size. Class B (non-debtor) trustees were added to the GSB, and Regional Trustees were replaced by a board composed entirely of National Trustees elected from regions, in the interests of DA unity.

In 1987, the GSB further followed the AA model by creating a World Service Conference and turning to it for guidance and direction for DA's future. In a bid to create a truly national broad-based Fellowship, the Conference met only the first year in New York, and in subsequent years rotated the location of the Conference to Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, and many other cities. Today, more than a hundred delegates attend the conference annually.

The biggest challenges in DA's first 15 years were the development of a service structure, the writing and adoption of a common literature, and the overcoming of regional antagonisms (differences and foraging of DA unity). In 1994, the growing importance of Intergroups was recognized when Intergroup Service Representatives joined General Service Representatives and Trustees as delegates to the annual World Service Conference.

Like most new organizations, DA struggled financially in its early years. As might be expected in a Fellowship composed entirely of debtors, DA has struggled financially through much of its existence. On several occasions its financial position has been perilous, and the emphasis of many members on "visions" they have for the Fellowship's future has outstripped the members' willingness to fund those visions. Initially volunteers fielded requests for information about DA. Although a General Service Office was established in 1985, the Office was open only a few hours a week for many years. and DA did not hire its first full-time employee until 2001. DA's original office was in New York but moved to the Boston area around 2001

As of the publication of the second edition of the Currency of Hope, Debtors Anonymous today has more than 500 registered meetings in more than 15 countries worldwide. (2014) DA has its own website, two quarterly newsletters (the DA Focus and Ways and Means) It has a recovery book, a large stock of literature, and recently produced its first foreign-language literature. As of this writing, in 2011, DA is poised to celebrate 35 years of existence as a Fellowship and its 25th World Service Conference in the Detroit, Michigan area. Since 2011 DA published its own DA Manual for Service, its own 12 step booklet The Twelve Steps of Debtors Anonymous (2015) and in 2016, a full DA 12 x 12 x 12 - DA's Twelve Steps, Traditions and Concepts of Service.(DA) is engaged in producing translations of DA copyrighted materials for DA groups around the world.

At the World Service Conference in the Minneapolis area, 2018, DA celebrated 42 years of existence.