

49th Anniversary Meeting

# **The Mission Hills Group**

of

## **Alcoholics Anonymous**

**Monday, December 1, 1997**

"The organization meeting of the Mission Hills Group was called to order by Jim B. at 8:15 P.M., November 29, 1948, in Rm. 19 at the Florence School."

These words are from the written minutes of the first meeting of our group. The page is yellowed and tattered, but is still kept in a protective sleeve in the group secretary's book.

Yet ours was not the original meeting in the area. The very first meeting in San Diego County had been held on November 7, 1940. Five years later there were four groups active in town--in downtown, North Park, Old Town, and La Mesa. The Main Meeting, as the original meeting was called, was held on Wednesday nights. It was understood that no other group would meet then so that everyone in the area could attend. But after such a strong start, something occurred to interrupt or end the regularity of those earliest meetings. We date our proud heritage as San Diego's longest continuously convening group to that "organization meeting" in the fall of 1948.

Our meeting was held at the Florence School annex, at First Avenue and University, until 1960, when it moved to the First Congregational Church at Jackdaw Street and Ft. Stockton Drive. In July 1989 we moved to the United Methodist Church at Ft. Stockton Drive and Lark Street.

Some things haven't changed. The record shows that Mission Hills was conceived as a closed meeting--for alcoholics only--just as it remains today. It also seems to have been a topic meeting from the start, and from its inception the group was deeply committed to welcoming the newcomer and helping to make new arrivals feel a "part of" the fellowship. Our official beginners' meeting was founded in June 1985, and the temporary sponsorship program began shortly thereafter. But from the earliest years Mission Hills was a meeting at which newcomers quickly became trusted servants and beloved group members. A woman who got sober in the 1960s remembers being amazed that she was trusted to make coffee at Mission Hills. She credits this first bit of service work with helping her rebuild her shattered self-esteem.

Because the meeting was held in the First Congregational Church for nearly thirty years, many people's memories of Mission Hills are set in that upstairs room. A woman who was a newcomer in the 1970s recalls being struck rather queasy by the bright shade of pink paint on the walls. Chairs and tables were arranged in a square in the center of the room, and certain people had their customary seats at the table. One man remembers his embarrassment when he installed himself in the chair well known--to everyone but him--to be the reserved seat of a venerable old timer. A table in the hallway was laden with treats to be eaten with coffee after the meeting. Doughnuts and peanuts were the signature nibbles of the group for a time. Then came a member known as the "cookie lady." She and others brought home-baked sweets to every meeting and made special cakes for birthdays. KP (it was called that!) was for a term of one month and was shared by a man and a woman. In the era before styrofoam, china cups got washed, dried, and put away after every meeting.

Not everyone liked the capacity crowds and the wreaths of smoke that were features of the meeting in the year or so before we moved to our present location. In 1988 some members began a small meeting in a classroom down the hall. The "Little Meeting" was smoke-free and relatively small. The chairs-in-a-circle format encouraged intimacy and ease, and the meeting soon became a cherished alternative to the big and boisterous main event. Still, for many people, the huge regular meeting had its charms. The "wraparound" effect of people sitting on the floor and the cupboards and packing the doorways and halls made for a great--usually joyous--concentration of sober energy. In 1989 a visitor from Russia described the spirit in the meeting room as like that in a "big kitchen."

The Twelve Traditions had been published in May 1946, just over two years before the Mission Hills Group began. During 1946 and 1947 the Grapevine, the AA monthly magazine, had devoted an article in each issue to explaining one of the traditions. Yet it took many years for the traditions to be consistently accepted and practiced at the group level. We are fortunate that the founding members of our group were so aware of these guidelines and structured our meeting very much within the parameters of the traditions. For many years the long form of the traditions was read at every meeting, and one of our founding members is credited with suggesting the wording of the third tradition in its short form: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." From the record of our first meeting it is clear that our founders wanted to keep bureaucracy to a minimum and put the focus on carrying the message. Also, the eleventh and twelfth traditions had apparently not yet been interpreted to mean avoiding the use of last names; in the minutes of the first meeting all members are referred to by their full names.

For many Mission Hills old timers the history of the group can be told through the works and deeds of even older timers. Many remember one man with many sober years who cautioned newcomers not to "get into the ring" with alcohol if they didn't want to get beaten up. A woman active in the group in its early years waged a constant battle with "PAGGELS," her acronym for the seven deadly sins of pride, anger, greed, gluttony, envy, lust, and sloth. Then there was the woman who knit from the beginning to the end of the

meeting--and never dropped a stitch when she shared. One old timer recalls the dismay he felt when he came to a Mission Hills meeting very long ago and found a long-winded member of the group holding forth. The old timer turned to a friend to complain, but the friend growled, "While he's talkin', he ain't drinkin'. While you're listenin', you ain't drinkin'!"

The group anniversary seems to have been celebrated beginning about 1960. It is remembered as a sumptuous banquet, complete with tablecloths, centerpieces, and bouquets of flowers donated by a beloved and humble gentleman member of the group. A decadent buffet feast was consumed before the group--along with its families and friends--settled down to a meeting led by the member with the longest time in sobriety. Great honor was paid to the old timers on this occasion, and many remember the wife of one of our founders attending the anniversaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s and being showered with homage and gratitude.

Sometime between 1992 and 1995 attendance at the main meeting began to dwindle, and the crowds at the beginners' meeting increased threefold. Perhaps AAs drink less coffee these days and don't stay up as late. Or maybe Monday Night Football created a scheduling conflict for some sober fans. In July 1995 the main meeting held a group conscience and elected to disband. But HP always arranges for things to work out gracefully. The "Little Meeting," which had been using an upstairs room, was asked by the church to vacate the space. Without missing a beat they were able to come downstairs and occupy the time slot the main meeting had just made available. As a result we are still a two-meeting group: the lively throngs at the 6:30 beginners' meeting and the more personal atmosphere at the 8:00 discussion.

In recent years hospitality at our meeting has assumed a new and elegant form. We don't know just how we got so lucky, but at some point in the early nineties, Mac appeared in our midst and became coffee maker. One Monday at a time he has remained in that post, supplying coffee, tea, a bulletin board of current AA announcements, and gracious appointments at the leaders' table. Not only that, with help from a team of reincarnated "cookie ladies," Mac sees that warm cookies grace our refreshment table each week. We know that the smells of freshly brewed coffee and cookies straight from the oven have helped many a newcomer relax and feel welcome at Mission Hills. Mac and his revolving committee are doing extraordinary twelfth step work. They are definitely gifts of our sobriety.

We treasure our group legacy as passed down from our founding members through their friends and sponsors. As we mark another anniversary, we pay tribute to all the members who have supported the group through its first forty-nine years. It's an honor to know that we, too, are creating Mission Hills history--one day at a time.