

Consideration of Accepting Permanent Electronic Only Groups into Our Geographic Area NC/Bermuda AFG

Thought Force Report

November 2022 Area Assembly

Background

In March of 2020, many groups worldwide began to seek alternative ways of staying connected and continuing to meet during Covid-19. Many groups used an electronic platform for their meeting as a temporary solution with the intent of returning to in person meetings at some point in time. The World Service Office (WSO) offered groups the option of changing their registration information to a temporary electronic status. We are now two+ years into this new way of operating and many groups are still meeting electronically.

In our Area, groups have generally done one of five things:

1. Become **inactive** and not resumed meeting at all in the last two years
2. Returned to a traditional **in person** meeting at a previous location or new location
3. Returned to meeting in person with a simultaneous electronic component (**hybrid**)
4. Remained in **temporary electronic status** with no in person component
5. Separated into two different meetings occurring at the same time—one in person and one electronic that function independently from each other (**concurrent**).

The World Service Conference (WSC) voted in 2021 to accept electronic groups as Al-Anon Family Groups and voted in 2022 to include the Global Electronic Area (GEA) into the World Service Conference structure. While electronic groups can register to join the GEA, **Geographic Areas have been asked to consider whether they will register permanent electronic only groups into their service structures.** While our Area still has many groups in temporary electronic status, North Carolina/Bermuda AFG currently does not have a decision or a process to accept permanent electronic only groups.

What are we being asked to decide as an Area?

The WSO has encouraged Areas to consider whether they are “ready and willing to accept electronic groups as part of their Area...and to identify what, if any, new processes the geographic Area would create to support admittance.”¹

History of Electronic Groups in Al-Anon

- **Prior to 2021:** Electronic-only groups could register with WSO and be listed in a special section of the WSO website, but they were not Al-Anon Family Groups and did not belong to an Area and did not elect a Delegate to represent them at the World Service Conference
- **April 2021:** WSC voted to recognize Electronic Meetings as Al-Anon Family Groups
 - Work began to organize a new Global Electronic Area (GEA)
 - Geographic Areas were asked to consider whether they would accept permanent electronic-only groups
- **January 22, 2022:** GRs in the newly forming GEA attended their first Area Assembly and elected their first Delegate.
- **April 2022:** WSC voted to recognize the GEA and the new Delegate participated in the WSC
- **Currently:** Geographic Areas are continuing to consider whether to register electronic-only groups into their Areas.
 - As of July 2022, 33 Areas voted to welcome permanent electronic-only groups, and four of those Areas have developed processes and guidelines for registering these groups.

What is the purpose of the Thought Force?

An Area Thought Force has formed to gather information to bring to the November Assembly. The Thought Force will not be making any decisions, but was given the following charge:

¹ [2022 World Service Conference Summary](#), page 42

Prepare a presentation to the fellowship of North Carolina/ Bermuda that provides information to aid in deciding whether or not to accept permanent electronic only groups in our Area. The Thought Force should use the Knowledge-Based Decision Making (KBDM) questions and consider the history of our Area, including what is important that must not change.

What has the Thought Force been doing?

As a group, the Thought Force answered the Knowledge Based Decision Making (KBDM) questions and the questions suggested in the document “Transforming Electronic Meetings into Al-Anon Family Groups: A Guide for Geographically Based Areas in the WSC Structure.” (See Appendix A for detail.)

Between meetings, members researched relevant Area history, motions, and policies, communicated with working groups in other Areas, and prepared a survey to send out to Area members in October through District Representatives.

There is no deadline for Areas to decide whether to register permanent electronic only groups and there is no deadline for the Thought Force. The Thought Force will continue until GRs are ready to vote on the issue. As a group, the Thought Force brought Tradition Two into all our meetings: *For our group purpose there is but one authority - a loving God as he may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants - they do not govern.*

**Information from the April 2022
World Service Conference**

- ★ There is currently **no cutoff date for “Temporary” Electronic Groups** to continue to meet virtually. These Groups are still identified by WSO using their original WSO ID number.
- ★ Each Area has the autonomy to decide whether to accept permanent electronic meetings into their Area.

“the Board and Staff do want the Areas to be supportive of electronic groups, but we do not want to tell these entities/Areas/Districts that they have to accept electronic groups. We do feel that electronic groups are the future. We want Areas to welcome all groups, but it takes time. We do not want to force a solution on any Area. It is up to the autonomy of the Area to decide if they want to accept electronic groups and the process for doing that.”

[2022 World Service Conference Summary](#)

How can Group Representatives (GRs) prepare to discuss this topic at the November Area Assembly?

The Thought Force will prepare a presentation for the November Area Assembly and there will be an opportunity for GRs to discuss the issue and ask questions. GRs are encouraged to prepare for Assembly:

1. Review the questions and responses included in Appendix A with group members.
2. Complete the survey that will be distributed by District Representatives in October.
3. Review the summary of relevant Area policies and motions included in Appendix B.
4. Read pages 39 through 45 of the [2022 World Service Conference Summary](#) on the topic of electronic meetings.
5. Review [Transforming Electronic Meetings into Al-Anon Family Groups A Guide for Geographically Based Areas in the WSC Structure](#)

At Assembly, we will ask GRs for input about what direction you want the Area to go in next. It is Area GRs who will make the decisions on this topic. GRs will decide whether to move forward with the idea of including permanent electronic only groups in our Area OR whether to table the topic for now.

How will our decision impact different types of groups?

Type of Group	Impact of “Yes” Decision	Impact of “No” Decision
In-person groups	No impact	No impact
Hybrid* groups	No impact	No impact
Temporary electronic only groups	Two options: -Register with the Global Electronic Area -Remain in NC/Bermuda AFG with permanent electronic status	Transfer to the Global Electronic Area
New groups that want to register as a permanent electronic only group	Two options: -Register with the Global Electronic Area -Register in NC/Bermuda AFG with permanent electronic status	Register with the Global Electronic Area

*In-person meetings that offer a virtual component

Appendix A

Questions Considered by the Thought Force

The Thought Force answered the Knowledge Based Decision Making (KBDM) questions and the questions suggested in the document “*Transforming Electronic Meetings into Al-Anon Family Groups: A Guide for Geographically Based Areas in the WSC Structure.*” Questions and responses are provided below – GRs and groups are encouraged to engage in these questions.

KBDM Question 1. What do we know about our members’ (and prospective members’) needs, wants and preferences that relate to this issue?

Thought Force member responses:

- Wide range of *opinions* heard in our Area:
 - “Electronic meeting options expand participation” versus “Electronic meetings have a negative impact on participation.”
 - Differences of opinion on the time needed to make this decision.
- Confusion about what we are being asked to decide.
 - “The membership doesn’t understand the current situation. Electronic groups don’t understand that there are different paths - they can join the GEA and then rejoin the Area later.”
- Indecision about long-term group plans – groups not sure whether they want to be in-person, hybrid, or electronic only long term.
- Many groups thinking about a permanent electronic only status want to maintain a connection with their existing District.
 - Some groups are afraid that if they register in the GEA now it would be difficult to transfer back to the Area at a later date. “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t - what will it look like for us while we are waiting for the Area to make a decision - will we be in an abyss where nobody knows about us.”
- By accepting permanent electronic only groups within our Area we will support and encourage the growth of recovery through relationships in our “WE” program as well as adhere to our Al-Anon declaration... Let it begin with me...”

Additional Question Suggested by WSC/WSO 1: What are the potential benefits of welcoming non-geographically based groups into our geographically based Area? What are the potential risks? Are there any options for overcoming the risks?

Benefits of welcoming electronic only meetings to Area:

- Increase access to participation in existing groups where members have local connection: Traditions One, Five
 - Allows members to attend even if they have health, transportation, childcare, or other accessibility issues, such as living far from meetings.
 - Al-Anon needs to keep up with the times. Zoom is here to stay.
- Increased membership into the Area via electronic meetings could result in more Trusted Servants, more funding contributions, greater outreach efforts, more attendees into meetings, and more diverse groups.
- Some members stated that the in-person component of their group no longer wants an electronic component to the group. The electronic component has no other alternative but to become a permanent electronic only group to continue meeting. However, they want to remain part of the District and Area. Some have expressed the feeling of being “strong armed.” Traditions 1, 5, Concept 5, Warranties Four and Five

Risks of welcoming electronic only meetings to Area:

- Concerns over rushing to change the system too quickly.
- Impact on our service structure
 - It will take some time to get electronic groups and trusted servants acclimated to our service structure and actively involved in it. (*see additional question below*)
 - Groups with no prior connection to our Area could petition to become part of our Area.
- Possible issue over Districts' autonomy if they do not have a say in whether permanent electronic only groups join their District. (*Tradition Four*)

Options for Overcoming Risks:

- Set a trial period to work out any kinks or challenges that might arise. For example, three years.
- Establish an educational implementation process (thought/task force) and disseminate information in a clear, concise, understandable manner consistently as long as needed.
- Clarify guidance/policies on service position roles. Decide whether members from outside NC/Bermuda can serve in service positions and if the decision is yes, make sure that our current policies are honored.
 - Consider service requirements such as requiring that the GR and/or the current mailing address (CMA) for electronic groups be located within the NC/Bermuda Area
- Think through options for districting, which might include:
 - Creating a new district for permanent electronic only groups.
 - Allowing groups to "apply" to a district of their choice. Consider how to keep district sizes equitable and preserve district autonomy.

KBDM Question 2. What do we know about the resources and our vision for AI-Anon and our meetings that are relevant to this issue?

Thought Force member response:

- Our AWSC already has a successful hybrid practice with quality equipment to include Bermuda regularly in our business meetings, so it is possible to welcome permanent electronic only groups to our AWSC meetings and Assemblies.
- New service positions could be required and we are having trouble filling the current tech coordinator position.
- Accepting permanent electronic only groups is consistent with our values - it would be beneficial for Area to meet needs of members in providing access to meetings.
- Would it be good to have temporary solutions until a decision is made? Some groups are waiting for resolution. *Tradition One, Concept Five*
- Groups would have autonomy to provide for their individual needs related to attendance at District and Area meetings in-person or virtually. *Tradition Seven*

KBDM Question 3. What do we know about our "culture" and "environment" that is relevant to this discussion? In other words--Will our decision be consistent with our principles, policies, and legacies: the Twelve Steps, Traditions, and Concepts? What are the implications of our choices? What are the pros and cons?

Additional question from Thought Force charge: Consider the history of our Area, including what is important that must not change.

Thought Force member responses:

- Spiritual and emotional growth have long been part of the AI-Anon culture and practices. By accepting permanent electronic only groups we become open and willing to grow and include those who request to participate in our service structure. This can be a growth opportunity for our Area and each group involved.
- There are processes and policies that have been voted on in our Area that are important to preserve. (*See Appendix B for detail.*)
- Some members have expressed that electronic meetings were not as appealing to newcomers, while others felt it was helpful and that newcomers had kept coming back to electronic meetings.
- Does the ability to attend electronically protect minority voices? *Concept Five*

Additional Question Suggested by WSC/WSO 2 Groups which meet electronically often attract members who do not reside within the geographic boundaries of the Area. These members may be encouraged and willing to serve our groups, Districts, and Area as trusted servants. What impact might this have on our District and Area service structure? What impact might this have on how our Area service responsibilities are fulfilled?

Thought Force member responses:

- If the Area decides to welcome and register permanent electronic only groups, then we would also need to establish a set of processes and guidelines. A few options related to the residency of GRs or other trusted servants could include:
 - Require that all service positions of GR, District, and Area reside in NC/Bermuda.
 - Require that all service positions of GR, District, and Area not hold any other service positions in any other Area above the group level.
 - Allow trusted servants to serve in our Area, regardless of their residency.
- *Benefits of allowing members outside the geographical area to serve in NC/Bermuda service positions:*
 - Could expand the members available for service. More exposure and different perspectives help to make Area stronger.
 - Just as we can go to an Al-Anon meeting anywhere in the world and “find Al-Anon” shouldn’t we be able to serve in any Area?
- *Challenges of allowing members outside the geographical area to serve in NC/Bermuda service positions:*
 - Sometimes you need “feet on the ground” - for example a Public Service Coordinator needs to attend events in person.
 - Members from outside Area would not have familiarity with District and Area.
- As an Area we welcomed Bermuda to our service structure and have had officers from there serve as Delegate, DR’s and coordinator positions..... It has had a positive impact and teaches us it can work if we are willing to work it as we did since 1985.

Additional Question Suggested by WSC/WSO 3 Groups which meet on electronic platforms and seek to participate in the local structure may have trusted servants who reside in different locations across the geographic Area. How would the Area determine in which District(s) these groups would participate?

Thought Force members considered the pros and cons of a number of options:

1. A new District could be created for permanent electronic only groups
2. Existing groups that have decided to remain permanently electronic only, or that have separated from the in-person part of their meeting, stay in their existing District
3. New and existing electronic groups could petition to join any NC/Bermuda District or new Electronic District, based on group conscience
4. New Electronic Groups can register in the District of their current mailing address (CMA).

If the Area votes to accept permanent electronic only groups, a task force would be formed to consider such options and bring recommendations to GRs at Assembly.

- We can do a trial period for three years to work this out. (Strong agreement on this in TF)
- Consider whether growth of electronic meetings would make the size of Districts lopsided? Create inequality?
- Autonomy is important. For Districts to decide whether to accept a group and for groups to decide which District they want to join.

Additional Question Suggested by WSC/WSO 4 How might Areas Assemblies and District meetings need to change to accommodate trusted servants living within and outside the Area? Would Areas need new service roles to support groups which meet electronically? Why or why not? Are our groups willing to financially support additional Area service roles and/or technology?

Thought Force member responses:

- Our Area Assemblies and AWSC meetings are already held in hybrid format, which allows participation regardless of location. We are set up well to support such a change due to our already existing practices to include and make access to our Bermuda counterparts.
- We would need to improve our internet connection for Area Assemblies - an issue that a current Thought Force is addressing.
- We currently have not yet filled the Area Info Technology service position. If we anticipate a large number of AFGs joining the Area, we may need to do more to attract potential members to serve.

Additional Question Suggested by WSC/WSO: Because Electronic Meetings were not a part of any service structure, some of their members may not have participated in District and Area meetings. How might our Area welcome and support them? How might we help them understand the service structure in our Districts and Area? For example, are members willing to organize service workshops? Are members willing to act as Service Sponsors? What other kinds of support could our members provide? Are there any kinds of support which it would be wise for us not to provide?

Thought Force member responses:

- Our existing GR orientation is detailed and very informative about our service structure on all topics related to service roles at the group, District, Area and Assembly level.

KBDM Question 4. What are the ethical implications of our choices? Would we be practicing our “principles in all our affairs”?

Thought Force member responses:

- Accepting permanent electronic only groups to our Area honors our spiritual principles in Tradition Three by addressing our primary purpose, as well as our AI-Anon Declaration.
- We have been asked to make this decision at the Area level, so Concepts Three and Ten suggest that Area GRs have the right of decision.
- Tradition Four ensures group autonomy, including the decision to meet electronically or in-person.

KBDM Question 5. What do we wish we knew, but don't?

Thought Force member responses:

- How many groups would want to become permanently electronic and remain within our structure? How many groups would be impacted by this decision?
- How has the number in the GEA changed pre-Covid to post-Covid? How long have they lasted on average? Are they more transient?
- How different is service in other Districts and Areas?

Appendix B

Relevant NC/Bermuda AFG Area History, Policies, Motions

Listed below are relevant policies and motions passed at the AWSC and Assembly that are relevant to the topic of accepting permanent electronic only groups to the Area. This is not an exhaustive or complete list of Area policies and motions.

- **Current Area policies to consider:**
 - **Voting members of the Election Assembly are outgoing GRs:** Can the GR live outside of NC/Bermuda?
 - **Voting GRs vote on outgoing DRs & past DRs that have remained active at Area level:** Can a DR live outside of NC/Bermuda? Can an Area Officer live outside of NC/Bermuda?
 - **A member serves in only one voting job:** If the GR/DR/Area Officer/Coordinator lives outside of NC/BDA, can they serve in another voting job [assuming this is allowed by that Area] in the Area in which they reside?
 - **The Alternate GR or designated member votes on behalf of the group:** Can the Alt. GR or designated member live outside of NC/Bermuda?
 - **Nomination of a Regional Trustee candidate is approved by the Assembly:** Can the candidate that is being presented by NC/Bermuda for Regional Trustee live outside of NC/Bermuda?
 - **Redistricting Guidelines:** Identifies questions to consider before changing boundaries. The goal of the guidelines was to have more equality in size of Districts, ensure service positions could be filled, and that the District is self-supporting.

- **Past Approved Assembly Motions to consider:**
 - **Spring Assembly 1976:** Outgoing GRs will vote at Election Assembly
 - **Spring Assembly 1991:** That outgoing GRs vote for all offices from the outgoing DRs and past DRs who have remained active at the Area level.
 - **Spring Assembly 1997:** That we continue to follow the election procedure that we have been following that outgoing Group Representatives vote for all officers from the outgoing District Representatives and past District Representatives who have remained active at the Area level and that Districts be consistent with the Area and that outgoing Group Representatives vote for the District Representatives from the outgoing Group Representatives and past Group Representatives who have remained active at the District level.
 - **Fall Assembly 2000:** North Carolina/Bermuda Al-Anon/Alateen adhere to the principle of one vote per person on all levels of service, thus allowing a member to only serve in the capacity of one voting job.
 - **May 17, 2003:** That if the GR is not able to attend the Assembly, the Alternate GR or designated member is able to register and vote on behalf of the group.
 - **November 1, 2008:** To accept the Regional Trustee Nomination Guidelines as amended by the Group Services Service Arm and presented to the Assembly

- **Past Approved AWSC Motions to consider:**
 - **July 10, 1999:** That the guidelines for redistricting be approved.