

History - Proposals to Create a Pamphlet for the Non-Believer / Agnostic / Atheist Alcoholic

Several proposals have been considered in the past concerning the development of a pamphlet directed to the non-believer / agnostic / atheist alcoholic. This concept has been explored at least six separate times in the past:

- 1975-1976
- 1981-1982
- 1988-1989
- 1995-1996
- 1997
- 2000-2001

Each of these cases is summarized below. The actions of the trustees' and Conference Literature Committees are reviewed.

1975-1976

Summary: In September 1975 a letter came to the office from Al L., a member in Florida, requesting that the trustees' Literature Committee consider publishing a pamphlet for agnostics. In February 1976 the trustees' Committee appointed a subcommittee to study the issue and report back. At the July 1976 trustees' committee meeting, the subcommittee presented a preliminary report recommending the publication of this pamphlet. However, at the October 1976 meeting, the trustees' Committee decided not to forward the item to the Conference for consideration.

Al L. wrote in his September letter, in part:

"I'm a happy non-belligerent agnostic. I feel that many non-believers miss the A.A. board before they find out that they are also welcome. The 'God bit' frightens them off before they leaven that their spiritual beliefs or non-beliefs need not deprive them of the blessings of A.A."

"Q: Is it possible for the powers that be in A.A. to publish a pamphlet designed specifically for Agnostics? I don't mean the Big Book's version – Chapter IV We Agnostics – that doesn't make sense to me. Never did. ..."

"Many agnostics believe at first that A.A. with all of its 'Let God Do It' and 'That one is God, may you find him now' is really a thinly veiled attempt to shove 'religion' down their throats. You and I of course know that isn't the case...."

"I would not advise that such a pamphlet for Agnostics imply or infer that 'God' will get you sooner or later or that you will necessarily come to believe in the power of prayer or that you must 'turn it over.'"

"My logic, common sense and dedication to A.A. keeps me sober – and I don't think the non-spiritual have been given a fair shake."

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, February 1976:

The Committee recommended that the preparation of a pamphlet for Agnostics be studied by a sub-committee consisting of Ed S. and Paula C.

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, August 1976:

The subcommittee prepared a preliminary report to the Trustees' Literature Committee in June 1976:

The Sub-Committee to the Trustees' Literature Committee recommended that:

A. A pamphlet for the Agnostic and/or Atheist be compiled and written using mainly from existing A.A. material on this subject. Their reasons follow:

1. This pamphlet is vitally needed to carry the message to both newcomers and old timers.

2. That Alcoholics Anonymous, despite first appearances, is neither sectarian nor religious, and is open to all alcoholics of every persuasion or non-persuasion. The number of non-believers in the program, or who need the A.A. program but are discouraged by its theism, may be more substantial than is probably realized.

3. The chapter "To The Agnostic" in the Big Book is fine as a start but more material is needed to assure non-believers that they are not merely deviants, but full, participating members in the A.A. Fellowship without qualification.

4. This pamphlet will probably also help the God believer in A.A. to understand his/her own spiritual values better, as well as to develop tolerance and understanding of many newcomers to A.A.

5. This pamphlet would affirm in clear and concise fashion that "the only requirement for membership in A.A. is a desire to stop drinking" and that our founders and the group conscience of the fellowship does not and has never considered an alcoholic's spiritual beliefs as necessarily relevant to the achievement of healthy and happy sobriety.

B. A draft should begin as soon as possible. The sub-committee will collect material from extant literature including the Grapevine. George Gordon [Class A trustee and chair of the trustees' Literature Committee] and Al L. will serve as consultants on this project.

1. If it appears that this pamphlet geared to the Agnostic and/or Atheist will not augment the aims above, then it will be discontinued by the Committee at this time.

C. It was agreed that this type of pamphlet does not fall under the category "special groups of alcoholics" literature but concerns a more fundamental and worldwide problem that has resulted in much misinterpretation of the A.A. Fellowship.

The August 1976 trustees' Literature Committee report indicates that this document was reviewed: *REPORT FROM SUB-COMMITTEE ON A PAMPHLET FOR AGNOSTICS - The sub-committee reported by submitting a two page document. It was suggested that the subcommittee now write a new version of their recommendations in greater detail and present it to the 1977 Conference Committee on Literature before further action is taken on its preparation.*

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, October 1976:

REPORT FROM SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE EXPLORATION OF AN AGNOSTIC/ATHEIST PAMPHLET The committee read the report and decided not to ask the 1977 Conference Literature Committee to consider a pamphlet for Agnostics / Atheists at this time.

[Unfortunately, after an exhaustive search, we cannot find a final report of this subcommittee, nor any reason for why the preliminary report's recommendations were not adopted.]

1981-1982

Summary: In October 1981, former trustee Ed S., who had worked on the subcommittee relating to this proposal for a pamphlet to the Agnostic/Atheist in 1976, wrote to the trustees' Literature Committee requesting that the idea be revisited. The trustees' Literature Committee reviewed the material in January 1982 and declined to pursue this pamphlet.

Ed S.'s October 1981 letter reads, in part:

"Even though it would not be a best seller, could we have a pamphlet written by an agnostic or an atheist for those who have trouble believing? Possible title: 'Came Not to Believe.'"

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, January 1982:

The committee declined to recommend the publication of a pamphlet intended for agnostics or atheists who have trouble believing.

1988-1989

Summary: In June of 1988, the Conference secretary received a request from the sitting delegate in Area 59-Eastern Pennsylvania, Bill G., requesting that the Trustees' Literature Committee consider a pamphlet for the 'non-believer.' The matter, including several pieces of background described below, went to the trustees' Literature Committee in January 1989, and to the Conference Literature Committee in April 1989. The Conference Literature Committee did not recommend the production of this pamphlet.

Area 59 delegate Bill G. wrote in his June 1988 letter:

"[This pamphlet] would help those in the Fellowship who by their individual views of life, have never accepted the concept of God or a Higher Power in their recoveries.

"As you can see, Jack M. wrote previously to GSO and received a reply from Susan. The subject was presented to District 59-24 who elected to take no action, but to take it to the area committee. This occurred at our latest area meeting on June 5, 1988, where it was discussed briefly during the Summaries and Actions portion of the meeting. It was the sense of that meeting that the matter be referred in the appropriate manner to the Conference Coordinator for further consideration."

The letter Bill mentions, from Jack M. to the GSO, was included in the background as well. Jack wrote to the GSO on February 1, 1988:

"Subject: Article in October, 1987 A.A. Grapevine, Inc. "Is There Room-Enough In A.A.?" J.L., Oakland, CA

"This letter is prompted by the subject article, subsequent correspondence with an Editor of the Grapevine as well as the author of the article and, perhaps most of all, my devotion to A.A. and the people in that fellowship with whom I exchange patience and kindness in my recovery.

"My own continuous sobriety of thirteen years in A.A. can only be described as unexplained phenomenon. Doubtless I was an agnostic and have gradually become atheistic over the years. In my first few months of sobriety in A.A. a very kind and patient member with some thirty years of continuous sobriety in A.A. suggested, nay, encouraged me to speak openly of my uncertainty of a higher power so that others with similar views would perhaps feel the same close connection in the fellowship as I did and still do. I was lucky to exchange views with that particular member at that critical moment in my recovery and have tried to follow the suggestion to the best of such ability as I have.

"With a view toward doing a little homework I just looked through As Bill Sees It and found a dozen or so references to atheism and agnosticism under the index heading of Higher Power. All of the entries appear to me to persuade the reader that believing is far, far better than non-believing. I can't understand why former non-believers hardly ever tire of trying to convince or persuade non-believers to change, particularly in A.A. which is a program of attraction, because the thought of trying to persuade a believer to change never even enters my mind.

"To quote the author of the subject article, "Never would I seek to explain A.A. in my own atheistic interpretation to an alcoholic who believes in God and suggest that he would do well to modify his perception in order to get or stay sober. Instead I can speak to the person about God from the many references and explanations which abound in A.A. literature. Yet it is probably more difficult the other way around. A God-oriented A.A. member doesn't

have a large supply of ideas from atheists available to share with the newcomer atheist. Too few of us state our positions in meetings; too little is written in A.A.'s literature.

“There just doesn't seem to be any A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature written specifically for the non-believer. Is such a project under way? If not, there must be a way to put together a pamphlet which unconditionally encourages the newcomer who happens to be a non-believer without contradicting steps two, three, five, six, seven, eleven and twelve or parts (b) and (c) of the chapter on How It Works in the Basic Text for Alcoholics Anonymous. Such a collection of encouraging words would not have to be adversarial, antagonistic, cogent, defensive, patronizing or persuasive. A foreword could even be included which would explain the apparent conflict, at least to some newcomers, between the statement in our preamble regarding A.A. not being allied with any sect, denomination, organization or institution and the fact that we all rise, the ancient act of fealty, and recite the prayer beginning Our Father at the close of each meeting. The foreword could also contain a clear statement that belief in a higher power is not at any time a requirement for membership or for getting and staying sober.”

Another letter from an A.A. member, Tom M. of Florida, was also included in the background. Tom wrote to the GSO January 2, 1989. Excerpts of his long letter follow below:

“It is (we hope) the initial step in a process that may ultimately lead to the publication of a new pamphlet for A.A. members that supports sobriety and recovery in A.A. from a non-theistic (agnostic or atheist) point of view.

“I know that at first this might seem to be quite unnecessary, because after all A.A. has been doing nicely for fifty odd years without it. I hope in what follows I can show that a pamphlet on this subject may indeed help some of our fellow alcoholics.

“The first thing I would like to point out, is that there is big difference between an agnostic or atheist and a person who does not practice a religion. Both agnostics and atheists do in fact have a moral and spiritual base founded on some common humanistic principles which are derived by personal choice. Both agnosticism and atheism provide as valid a spiritual base (albeit it's different) as religion does for Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Islamic people who have come into A.A.

“A.A. IS NOT A RELIGIOUS PROGRAM. IT IS A SPIRITUAL PROGRAM.’ Case finished, right. Wrong. We are not talking about religion here, we are talking about a person's right to have a differing spiritual base than the majority.

“The prevailing notion in A.A. is simply that a lack of belief in GOD or a 'higher power' automatically indicates a lack of spirituality, and of course, 'spirituality' is required for recovery. It is my personal experience, that most

'GOD or higher power' people treat agnostics and atheists as if we lack something, as if there is something wrong with us. We lack nothing and there is nothing wrong with either agnosticism or atheism.

"The other side of the coin is that most agnostics, or atheists (in and out of A.A.) think of A.A. as religious in nature, and they will not be converted or coerced into changing this position by the use of the term higher power.

"And so the quandary. Few would dispute that A.A. is the most successful recovery program ever found for the disease of alcoholism. So what does an alcoholic who is an agnostic or atheist do to recover. A.A. suggests (rather strongly I would say, since a whole chapter in the Big Book is devoted to the subject) that the first endeavor is to forsake their fundamental beliefs and spiritual base.

"Now nobody in A.A. would ever think of asking a Catholic or Jew to give up their spiritual base to get sober, and yet these same people without so much as blinking an eye, assume that an agnostic or atheist ought to do this just as a matter of course.

"The result is that many agnostic and atheists leave A.A. in short order....

"Some of us believe that is time to share our experiences on a more the one-on-one basis, and so this letter about a pamphlet. We believe that we have accumulated experiences that can give hope, strength, and comfort to newly sober people in A.A. who are of the agnostic or atheistic persuasion. Our intent is not to "change" A.A. or the Big Book. We only mean to share our recovery with our own kind, so that they can avail themselves of what we have found, and we would like to be able to do that openly and as part of the mainstream of A.A.

"We cannot do that. To declare your agnosticism or atheism at many meetings (at least in this part of the country) brings upon oneself knowing stares and sometimes repudiation from someone in the group. Now, I personally don't have this problem anymore. My longevity in sobriety is given respect, but I am still thought of as a paradox or oddball. I can handle that just fine, now. The question that bothers me, is that 'Can a newly sober agnostic or atheist handle being treated as an oddball?' Many cannot."

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, January 1989:

Pamphlet for the "non-believer"

After agreeing that the term "non-believer" is inaccurate and misleading, the committee recommends to the General Service Board that the Conference Literature Committee be asked to consider a proposal for some sort of spiritual literature in response to requests from atheists and agnostics.

➤ Conference Literature Committee, April 1989:

Additional Committee considerations

The committee discussed the proposal for some sort of spiritual literature for atheists and agnostics and did not see a sufficient need to take action at this time.

1995-1996

Summary: In November of 1995, the Conference secretary received a request from the sitting delegate in Area 49-Southeastern New York, Paul S., requesting that the Trustees' and Conference Literature Committees consider a pamphlet "directed to the concerns the non-believer (atheist/agnostic)." (Note: Paul S. was also serving as the chair of the Conference Literature Committee in 1996.) The matter, including several pieces of background described below, went to the trustees' Literature Committee in January 1996, and to the Conference Literature Committee in April 1996. The Conference Literature Committee did not recommend the production of this pamphlet.

Area 49 delegate Paul S. wrote in his November 1995 letter:

"At our Area Assembly held on November 11, Area 49 voted with substantial unanimity to request that the 1996 General Service Conference agenda include a proposal to consider a pamphlet directed to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) alcoholic.

"Such a pamphlet might be directed on three levels:

(a) to the active alcoholic who is unfamiliar with our program of recovery but who is intimidated by the misconception that Alcoholics Anonymous is a religious program; such people are unlikely to be exposed to Chapter 3 of the Big Book until they have overcome their fears or suspicions about A.A.;

"(b) to the newcomer to Alcoholics Anonymous who may be misled by some of our common practices, such as use of the Serenity Prayer or the Lord's Prayer at meetings and the fact that many of our meetings are held in houses of worship; for these people some help with understanding the idea of a "power greater than ourselves" may be valuable; and

"(c) to the non-alcoholic, whether professional or lay, who may be in a position to refer alcoholics to A.A. but who may be reluctant to do so because of the perception that ours is a religious program; the example of legal attacks on court references to A.A. on First Amendment (separation of church and state) grounds comes to mind.

"Southeast New York deliberately chose not to propose a specific text or suggested content because of the belief that drafting of such language might best be left to the appropriate Trustees' and Conference Committees. Indeed, the question of whether the presentation should be by way of stories or by way of discussion was also thought to be a matter for Trustee and/or Conference decision."

In response to this proposal, Jim C., an appointed committee member on the trustees' Literature Committee, wrote to Paul S. on February 8, 1996. This letter was included as background for the Conference Committee.

Jim wrote:

"I wanted to give you my views in writing about the proposed pamphlet directed 'to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) alcoholic.' As you may remember I voiced a minority opinion as to sending it to the Conference Literature Committee based on the narrowness of the title.

"I think a pamphlet based on the three points stated in your letter to [Conference Secretary] Richard B. on November 21, 1995, would be a valuable piece of literature for our fellowship. However, I think as suggested in the three points, it should cover a broader segment than the title of non-believer (atheists and/or agnostics) suggests. I believe it would be more valuable if its title was directed to the concerns of those who may wonder if A.A. is or is not a religious organization, or is affiliated with any religion because of common practices or meeting places as set out in your point (b). I do not want to pick a title, but something like 'A.A., Religious or Secular?' or 'A.A. and Religion' or even 'God as we Understand Him,' might be more to the points suggested."

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, January 1996

Review a request to publish a pamphlet directed to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) alcoholic: The committee forwarded the request for a pamphlet directed to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) to the Conference Literature Committee.

➤ Conference Literature Committee, April 1996

Additional Committee considerations

The committee considered a request for a pamphlet directed to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) and made no recommendations.

1997

Summary: The trustees' Literature Committee received a request from Naomi D. of the We Agnostics Group in New York in July 1997, requesting that the committee consider published a pamphlet titled "A.A. is Not a Religion." The trustees' Literature Committee declined to pursue this pamphlet.

Naomi D.'s July 1997 letter reads, in part:

"Consider a pamphlet entitled 'A.A. is Not a Religion.' This would be very helpful to newcomers (who may be looking for excuses) and would also be useful in the P.I. or C.P.C. Areas."

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, November 1997

Literature Review Subcommittee report:

A request to consider a pamphlet entitled 'A.A. is Not a Religion' came from the 'We Agnostics of NYC' group. This would appear to be a request somewhat along the line of another request which was submitted by the Southeast New York Area Assembly in December 1995 and passed on to the 1996 Conference Literature Committee. That request was to consider a pamphlet directed to the concerns of the non-believer (atheist and/or agnostic) alcoholic.

The 1996 Conference Committee considered that request in their deliberations and made no recommendations. The subcommittee feels that in the absence of other similar requests that the 'no recommendations' stance of the 1996 Conference Committee stand.

2000-2001

Summary: In late 1999, the trustees' Literature Committee received several letters from atheist / agnostic A.A. members, requesting that they consider producing a pamphlet for the nonbeliever or a pamphlet explaining that A.A. is a spiritual rather than religious program. The trustees' Committee appointed a subcommittee to consider this matter, which met throughout 2000 and early 2001. The subcommittee was in favor of a pamphlet describing and specifying the spiritual aspects of A.A., and passed its work to the Conference Literature Committee at the 2001 Conference. The Conference Literature Committee did not recommend the production of this pamphlet.

Letters were received from at least 5 A.A. members, most of them from the New York area, in November and December 1999, rallying around the concept of creating a pamphlet for the nonbeliever or a pamphlet clarifying the spiritual aspects of A.A. The trustees' Literature Committee discussed this in January 2000.

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, January 2000:

Pamphlet for the Non-Believer

Following a lengthy discussion regarding the focus of a pamphlet for the non-believer or a pamphlet explaining that A.A. is a spiritual rather than a religious program, a subcommittee was formed to give this further consideration and report back to the trustees' Literature Committee at the July meeting, The subcommittee will be chaired by Beth R. and will include David S., Jan P., George Vaillant and Lois F., secretary.

➤ Trustees' Literature Committee, July 2000:

Pamphlet Explaining that A.A. Is Spiritual Rather than Religious

Beth R., chair of the subcommittee overseeing a pamphlet explaining that A.A. is spiritual rather than religious, reported that the subcommittee met by conference call on Wednesday, July 19, 2000 to share ideas with regard to the direction this pamphlet should take. Various approaches were discussed and the

subcommittee unanimously agreed that there is a need for this pamphlet for many reasons. The subcommittee plans to meet again on Monday, July 31 when the General Service Board Meeting adjourns to continue discussing ideas.

The full committee discussed this proposed pamphlet and suggested that it should emphasize the inclusiveness of A.A. pointing out that A.A.'s principles are culturally adaptable. The essence may include a definition of spirituality.

➤ *Trustees' Literature Committee, October 2000:*

Proposed pamphlet on the spiritual/religious aspects of A.A.

Subcommittee chair Beth R. reported on the outcome of the October 10th conference call. All members of the subcommittee agreed to continue working on development of a draft pamphlet to describe the spiritual aspects of A.A. for the benefit of newcomers and interested professionals. The subcommittee plans to meet Monday, October 30, 2000 to discuss proposed titles and proposed contents - whether to include individual stories and a process for collecting stories. All committee members and guests were invited to send their own working definition of spirituality to the committee secretary by December 15, 2000.

➤ *Trustees' Literature Committee, January 2001:*

Proposed "Spiritual Variety" Pamphlet

Subcommittee chair, Beth R., reported that this subcommittee has met twice since the last committee meeting. Beth presented a report on this proposed pamphlet outlining the purpose for such a pamphlet, suggested title options and a suggested format. The committee agreed to forward this report and two letters expressing opposition to this pamphlet received before January 15, 2001 to the 2001 Conference Literature Committee.

➤ *Conference Literature Committee, April 2001:*

Additional Committee Considerations:

The committee discussed the trustees' Literature Committee proposal for a new pamphlet that includes a variety of spiritual experience and took no action. The committee suggested that the trustees' Literature Committee consider adding or clarifying existing pamphlets such as 'This is A.A.' and 'A Newcomer Asks' to address a variety of individual interpretations and individual experience of spirituality in Alcoholics Anonymous.

The committee suggested that the trustees' P.I. and C.P.C. committees consider addressing in their literature that A.A. is not allied with any religion.