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The Other Side of the Story-Expelling a Local Group

Editor's Note: Last month we led with an article that was one opinion of the brewing controversy about the Service Committee refusing to recognize a local group as an AA Group. Here is another opinion. More to come next month.

Donna H read this to the Intergroup body from the podium at the 6/12/2011 Intergroup Meeting:

"At the Intergroup Meeting on Sunday, May 8th, the Service Committee reported that it had removed an AA group from the directory – this struck me as not right. After hearing the basis for the group's expulsion and not agreeing the "governing" that the Service Committee was doing, I asked to be added to the agenda at the June 9th Service Committee meeting to state an opinion.

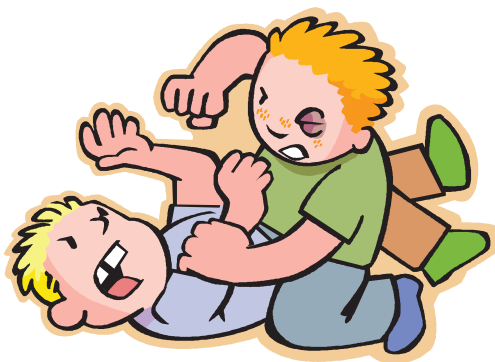
Last Thursday night, Service Committee met and I was on the agenda. My remarks were prepared with a great deal of thought, prayer & conversation with my sponsor and other AA's, research of conference-approved literature and the love and respect I have for Alcoholics Anonymous. Simply, the Service Committee has greatly overreached its boundaries (they are trusted servants, they do not govern) and have completely ignored at least six of our Traditions.

There was neither respect nor careful consideration; neither trust nor love. Personalities were everywhere and sadly not one Service Committee member asked themselves if there "might be another way to deal with this" or "maybe we should consult the traditions" or even "let's decide not to decide tonight". Instead there was a pound on the table, the decision made (not voted on mind you) and the meeting was ended. And bless the member of the expelled group – I can't even convey the disappointment I felt for the way he was treated. His group, by the way, is still acknowledged by the GSO as an "AA GROUP".

Now I ask you this –which AA group will the Service Committee next decide isn't complying with the rules and send "members" to assess the group's activities? Could it be yours? This is the very essence of my disagreement with the actions of the Service Committee, their lack of reliance on the very Traditions that keep our groups safe and ensure our great liberty in Alcoholics Anonymous. "

Below are the prepared remarks that Donna delivered to the Service Committee on June 9.

"Thank you to Service Committee members for your time, your service and your love of Alcoholics



Anonymous and Indianapolis Intergroup. I appreciate the work that you do as service committee members, having walked in your shoes several years ago.

Thank you too for recognizing the fifth concept of world service –allowing me the opportunity for a "right to appeal". This concept assures us that "minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered". Thank you for your careful consideration.

I was greatly disturbed after last month's Intergroup Meeting on May 8, 2011 when the Service Committee report for its May 5th meeting was given. In particular it was reported that an unnamed group was "voted" out of the directory by a Service Committee vote. This struck me as a violation of our traditions and I felt as if the wind were struck out of me.

After the meeting, I asked Bob, why this had occurred and was informed that Service Committee had been dealing with the issue for sometime, had determined that the group was not using conference approved literature and that that they would not be comfortable referring AA members to the meeting. I was still confused and that knot in my stomach got tighter.

So after much reading of conference approved literature, prayer, conversation with my sponsor and meditation, there are several points in our Twelve Traditions and literature which I believe deserve to be consulted as you carefully reconsider your decision from last month. *Perhaps as many as six of our traditions have been violated.*

Tradition One –Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.

♦ With regard to "an individual's right to think, talk, act as he wishes. No AA can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled" (pg.129 12&12). It further states that "it becomes plain that the group must survive or the individual will not". The tradition closes with the story of Eddie Rickbacker and how his courageous company lost at sea and "how well they saw how their common welfare came first".

♦ Bill W. writes about Tradition One (pg 76 LOTH). "Alcoholics Anonymous has no musts. Few AA groups impose penalties on anyone for non-conformity." Was the decision to remove the group from the directory a "penalty for non-conformity" because this group is composed of like-minded individuals of agnostic and atheist views? He continues to write "...the moment any action seriously threatens the common welfare, group opinion mobilizes to remind us; our conscience begins to complain....." – I guess that would be why I am here this evening.

♦ Did your actions threaten our common welfare? If the issue were to have been brought to the entire body of the Indianapolis Intergroup, would they have felt their group's conscience was threatened?

♦ Bill W. wrote in "God As We Understand Him: The Dilemma of No Faith" (pg 251 LOTH) and the importance of these five words in providing an open door, whose threshold leads many unbelievers to the realm of faith. He points out his personal experience when he realized how "very dead faith can be—when minus responsibility".

♦ Finally, Bill W wrote in July 1946 (LOTH pg 33) "In fact our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most antisocial, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new AA group has been formed. Anti-God; anti-medicine, anti-our recovery program, even anti-each other –these rampant individuals are still an AA group if they think so."

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The Other Side of the Story, continued

Tradition Two: For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as He may express himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern.

- ◆ It is my opinion that the action of the Service Committee constituted “governing” and as “trusted servants” your obligation was to bring this matter to the intergroup body and let the group conscience determine the course of action. Further, it feels to me like an inventory of this group was taken—but instead of by the group and its collective conscious by those outside the group, and who are not parts of the home group.
- ◆ If Service Committee can determine the “rules for compliance” then are there other groups that you will be seeking to comply?
- ◆ This group filed for and received a group number from GSO last year and in reviewing the pamphlet *The AA Group: Where It All Begins* appears to be conducting itself within the suggestions of the pamphlet.
- ◆ I had the opportunity to attend the group meeting with my sponsor to see for myself what this meeting was about. It was like any other meeting – a bunch of drunks staying sober one day at a time. There was a guest at the meeting stating that “his sponsor” suggested he attend this meeting because he had a sponsee who was having a problem with the “god idea”. Here was a person who called his higher power God but who needed what this meeting had to provide so that he could help another drunk.
- ◆ Bill W. writes in *LOTH* regarding the second tradition “though AA groups are basically the same, each AA group does have its special atmosphere, its own particular state of development. We believe that every AA group has a conscience. It is the collective conscience of its own membership. The group begins to recognize its own character defects, and one by one, these are removed and lessoned”.

Tradition Three –The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

- ◆ In the 12&12 the tradition cites the history of AA with membership requirements and rules. At one point in the essay it states, “If all those rules had been in effect everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined AA at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear.” It goes on to discuss how, in looking back, this phase seemed almost comical but that the intolerance of this period of our development was fear based. Are we anxious or fearful of the independence of this group?
- ◆ It suggests that we “neither punish nor deprive any AA of membership that we must never compel anyone to pay anything, believe anything or conform to anything?” Weren’t the actions of the Service Committee contrary to the very core of this tradition? Experience taught our founders that “to take away any alcoholic’s full chance (of recovery) was sometimes to pronounce his death sentence and often to condemn him to endless misery. Who dared to be judge, jury and executioner of his own sick brother (pg 141 12&12)?
- ◆ And finally, our early members asked themselves when faced with whether a particular drunk should be allowed into their meeting--What would the master do?

Tradition Four – Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.

- ◆ “Every AA group can manage its affairs exactly as it pleases, except when AA as a whole is threatened”.

- ◆ This courageous tradition declares that each AA group is an individual entity, strictly reliant on its own conscience as a guide to action. That groups must not do anything that would injure AA as a whole or affiliate with anything or anybody else. Can you explain to me what this group was doing that was injuring AA or with whom else they are affiliated?

- ◆ {Note from DH 6/10/2011– the “group” had been affiliating with another organization. At the Service Committee meeting the group’s representative agreed to “unaffiliate” immediately.}

“...the actions may have violated at least six of our traditions...”

- ◆ In *LOTH* (page 80) Bill W. wrote in March 1948 that tradition four was built on the principles of, common welfare and the group conscience. He states “with respect to its own affairs, the group may make any decisions, adopt any attitudes that it likes. No overall or intergroup authority should challenge this primary privilege.

Tradition Nine – AA as such ought never be organized but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible for those they serve.

- ◆ Bill W. stated in 1948 (*LOTH* pg 93) on the NINTH tradition“This tradition breathes democracy: our leadership is one of service and it is rotating; our few titles never clothe their holders with arbitrary personal authority; they hold authorizations **to serve, never govern**. Were the Service Committee action of last month governing or serving?

Tradition Ten—Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion of outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

- ◆ Bill W. wrote (*LOTH* Pg 90)....“Each group, society and nation is saying to the other –you must do as we say or else. Political controversy and reform by compulsion have reached an all-time high....Being like other men and women how can we expect to remain forever immune from these perils? Probably we shall not. At length we must meet them all. We cannot flee from them, nor ought we try. If these challenges do come, we shall go to meet them gladly and unafraid. That will be the acid test of our worth”.
- ◆ “Our best defense? This surely lies in the formation of a tradition respecting serious controversy so powerful that neither the weakness of persons nor the strain and strife of our troubled times can harm Alcoholics Anonymous. We know that AA must continue to live or else many of us and many of our fellow alcoholics throughout the world will surely resume the hopeless journey to oblivion. That must never be.”
- ◆ It is my belief that if the action of last month’s Service Committee vote are not reversed, the Service Committee will be drawing our fellowship into *serious controversy*.

Again the actions last month may have violated at least six of our beloved traditions.

Please carefully reconsider. Please consider the By-laws and Charter of the Indianapolis Intergroup; our beloved Traditions; your role as a trusted servant to Indianapolis Intergroup and all who say they are an alcoholic; and the impact of your decision on the still suffering alcoholic. Please place principles before personalities.

Again, thank you for your service and careful consideration.

In love and service,

Donna H.

Editor’s note: We would love to hear your opinion on this. Also, please get with your intergroup rep to make sure your group is fully informed .

From Our Delegate

Of the things I've learned through service within the A.A. structure, probably the biggest lesson is that when it comes to making decisions in Alcoholics Anonymous, nothing is simple. My experience as your Area 23 delegate at the last two General Service Conferences has magnified that lesson. For every drunk there's an opinion, point of view and experience. We can be passionate about this program that has given us another chance at life. Tempers flare and personalities dominate... which is exactly why Bill W. came up with the 12 Traditions.

As Bill points out in the *12 Steps and 12 Traditions*, the traditions were hammered out on the anvil of experience. In other words, it took a lot of screwing up in order to figure out how not to. Just as the steps help us individually to recover from alcoholism, the traditions keep a bunch of drunks who would normally not mix, unified in Alcoholics Anonymous.

What we have here in Indianapolis is a conflict between what the Intergroup Service Committee sees as its role in the local A.A. community and what the We Agnostics group sees as its rights as an AA group. While it can be painful and scary, often controversy and difficulties can lead to growth and increased understanding of our beloved principles and traditions. The challenge is remembering to practice all Twelve Traditions rather than just focusing on one or two that seem to be most pertinent to the issue at hand.

In that light, I'd like to offer an alternative view regarding the committee's recent decision to remove the agnostic group from the print and online directories. In the lead article in the July issue of *The Paper III*, Stephen U. stated that "This action was taken in accordance with the G.S.O. (General Service Office) guidelines regarding the role of intergroups in recognizing 12-step groups as "A.A." groups or not. The G.S.O. specifically advises or recommends that intergroups not sanction groups as "A.A." groups where the group has re-written the 12-step to fit the group's views or philosophy."

This statement is incorrect. In accordance with a 1972 Advisory Action by the 22nd General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous, G.S.O. does not involve itself in local disputes or misunderstandings. What Stephen U. referred to "G.S.O. guidelines" was actually an e-mail from a G.S.O. staff that neither advised nor made recommendations. The content of that e-mail shed light on the collective experience of A.A. relative to listing groups.

The G.S.O. staffer explained that agnostic/atheist groups are listed in some directories, including in the U.S./Canada/and International directories produced by the General Service Office and that they don't investigate groups to see what is or isn't being read and/or changed. A helpful example of what G.S.O. includes in their directory was cited:

"As embodied in the Fourth Tradition, the formation and operation of an A.A. group resides within the group conscience of its members. While, hopefully, every A.A. group adheres closely to the guiding principles of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, A.A.W.S. neither monitors nor oversees the activities or practice of any A.A. group. Groups listed in this directory are listed at their own request. A directory listing does not constitute or imply approval or endorsement of any group's approach to or practice of the traditional A.A. program."

The e-mail author went on to explain that when G.S.O. hears of a group using altered steps, they send a letter requesting them to call themselves something other than A.A. Period. End of sentence. They don't censure the group, they don't sit in their meetings to check on what is said, stop taking their contributions or remove them from their lists. (In fact, G.S.O. has never removed a group from the list.) They send them a letter (just like they do to people with very public anonymity breaks) and continue listing the group **as long as the group wants to be listed**. That is because the General Service Office exists to provide SERVICE. It is a service entity, not a governing entity.

Intergroups and central offices are groups and in the spirit of our fourth tradition (autonomy), can decide whether or not to list groups. I absolutely support that right. But I would suggest that the real topic for discussion is considerably broader than "shall we or shall we not list the We Agnostics group." The real conversation is what is the role of Indianapolis Intergroup? Is it to provide a service to A.A. groups of metropolitan Indianapolis and surrounding towns? Or is it governance? These are legitimate questions that need legitimate discussion... by the entire body of intergroup.

What do the A.A. groups in Indianapolis want their intergroup to be and do? Govern or provide service? If governance, will all groups be checked out or only when someone complains about a specific group? *The Paper III* author cited "affiliation with a national organization of a like-minded non-AA organization" as additional rationale for "de-listing" the group. What that means is the group's meeting time and location was listed on a website for AA groups of atheists and agnostics.

Does that mean when a church lists the time and day of an A.A. meeting in their facility, the group should be removed for breaking the "affiliation tradition?" How about when a local newspaper prints times and locations of A.A. groups? Does that affiliation apply to Indianapolis Intergroup? It's listed on a non-AA website: <http://anonpress.org/phone/in.asp>. Perhaps, rather than affiliation, it's providing relevant information to the public so they know where to find us.

What criteria will be established to determine which groups are really A.A. groups, and what ones aren't? Within the last 12 months, an A.A. member requested that a certain Spanish speaking group be removed from the directory because they didn't talk about A.A. at all, changed or otherwise. He was told no, that intergroup doesn't remove groups. But clearly intergroup does. Where will the line be drawn?

I can find all sorts of tradition breaks. Individuals and groups are breaking or ignoring the traditions, they're not doing it right, they're not doing it well, and they're certainly not doing it the way I was taught to do it. It can get a person crazy. But I go back to what Bill wrote in a July 1946 article about our third tradition:

Point three in our A.A. Tradition looks like a wide-open invitation to anarchy... It reads "our membership ought to include all who suffer alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend on money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group." This clearly implies that an alcoholic is a member if he says so; that we can't deny him membership; that we can't demand from him a cent; that we can't force our beliefs or practices upon him; that he may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most antisocial, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our recovery program, even anti-each other—these rampant individuals are still an A.A. group *if they think so* page 33, *The Language of the Heart*

Perhaps there's some middle ground here... traditions, with all their shading and nuance, to be studied and discussed, opinions waiting to be heard. The General Service Conference is taking its first ever inventory and it will occur over the course of three years. How about an intergroup-wide inventory? Perhaps it's time. And perhaps we're on the verge of a great growing and learning experience.

Yours in service,

Virginia R., delegate

Panel 60/Area 23 southern Indiana

"...service or governance?"