History and development of the
Twelve Principles of Service for Narcotics Anonymous

Narcotics Anonymous is changing. In fact, it may be that we are now facing some of the most important changes we have ever seen in our history. We have experienced an explosion of growth in the last decade, the proportions of which are difficult to clearly appreciate. We have gone from an estimated 2,000 groups in 1982 to perhaps 15,000 groups today in almost forty countries. That is a quantum leap.

During this exciting period of rapid growth, our world services have gone through a total transformation. A World Service Conference that was, as the Eighties dawned, searching for a basic direction and struggling with serious disunity problems, began to get focused and unified. The early Eighties saw the approval of several new pieces of literature, including our Basic Text. The mid-Eighties saw a whole new level of unity, as world-level trusted servants geared up for the humbling tasks ahead of them. The entire decade saw our World Service Office grow from a small one or two person shipping and receiving operation to a businesslike world service center employing a full time staff of over forty people, with a branch office in London.

The late Eighties have brought with them something that is not new for us, either as individuals or as a fellowship, but something that never really gets easier to face. We have come to another period in which our way of doing things and of looking at things has begun to be challenged by an ever growing number of us. There have been several heated controversies around major projects undertaken by world services, and the service community itself has seemed to many to be mired in inefficiency and to lack direction.

This essay, prepared by the World Service Conference's Ad Hoc Committee on N.A. Service, is an attempt to look very frankly at these problems, to put forth some thoughts about what may be causing them, and to point to some possible solutions. In other words, the time has come for a good inventory of our world services--to take a good look at our development over the years in an effort to see how we got where we are today, and where we may need to go from here.

To some degree, a close examination of N.A.'s history will involve taking a look at some aspects of A.A.'s history. Though we are a distinct, autonomous fellowship that has evolved in directions of our own, we were modeled after A.A. from the beginning; we adapted their steps, their traditions, and most of the basic elements of their recovery program to our needs. There are some interesting parallels between their development and ours that bear close examination. We'll start out with a look at the basic outline of A.A.'s historical development, and then take a good look at our own.

A.A. started out in 1935 when one alcoholic sat in another's living room, carrying a message of hope. They had no idea of what was to come. There was no fellowship, no book, no steps or traditions. There was just one alcoholic talking "the language of the heart" to another--something later poignantly described in N.A.'s Basic Text in the words, "The heart of N.A. beats when two addicts share their recovery." That heartbeat that we were to inherit some twenty years later was just beginning its very faint pulse.

As the heartbeat grew stronger, and a group of recovering people began to form, the organizational structure began to take shape. Its earliest elements were a book and something called "The Alcoholic Foundation." The pioneers of A.A. had a dream that if they put some structures in place that preserved their most fundamental principles, perhaps the gift they'd been given could be shared on a much broader scale.

New groups formed slowly at first, keeping in close touch with the founders of the movement and the New York headquarters. In the early Forties, after some significant media exposure, they began to experience the kind of explosive growth that N.A. has seen in the Eighties.

Their "Big Book," as it came to be called, their founders, and the Alcoholic Foundation were clearly at the center of this growing movement. By the late Forties, as the founders looked ahead to a day when they would be gone, they began to think seriously about adopting a new set of principles for the fellowship that would preserve unity over the long haul, without any specific individuals at the helm of the movement. That's when they began to draft the traditions and introduce them to the fellowship.

The N.A. reader must really pause for a minute to appreciate the significance of that fact. Never has there been a time when our fellowship has had to function without traditions to guide us. A.A. existed for fifteen years before traditions were developed and adopted. During that time the founders themselves provided the guidance. The task of persuading the fellowship that such principles were necessary was a major one for A.A.'s founders. It was no small step to add the traditions--a new body of principles of such far-reaching importance--to a proven program that most members felt worked just fine without them. Ultimately the fellowship trusted the vision of its leadership, and the traditions took their place alongside the steps to form the core of the overall program.

In the mid-Fifties another change of really grand proportions took place: A.A.'s General Service Conference was formed. Prior to 1955 the foundation, now called the General Service Board, made the major decisions for the fellowship with strong guidance and influence from the founders. The role of the founders was to be in touch with the fellowship at large and with the trustees of the General Service Board, guiding and advising both. When one of the founders became gravely ill, it became apparent that something would need to be there to replace them. It would have to be something that could play that same role: to be in close touch with the trustees, who were managing the day to day world service operation, and with the N.A. groups, whom world services existed to serve. Their solution was to form the General Service Conference to play that role of leadership and mediation.

Once again, the fellowship had to be educated and persuaded that there was a need for this move. They had gone along just fine without a conference for twenty years. They didn't know the trustees, or even what they or the General Service Office did, really, but they trusted them just fine. Wouldn't this conference politicize the fellowship? How could such broad-based decision-making possibly work in a fellowship scattered all over the globe?

The conference plan devised by the founders was carefully designed to leave the groups free to do what they are designed to do--carry the message--and yet provide a means by which the groups could choose their own representatives to guide the trustees in the implementation of world service business. The Conference

Charter was a sort of "constitution" which laid out a balanced plan by which the fellowship could delegate its own representatives, who were in touch with the rank and file concerns of the fellowship, to guide the trustees as they managed world services.

By the early Sixties, with a few years' experience in striking all the delicate balances necessary to have efficient operation of world services, it had become clear that yet another set of principles would need to be drafted and offered to the fellowship. This new body of principle, called "The Twelve Concepts for World Service," carefully mapped out all the principles related to the balance of authority and responsibility for getting the work of the world service community done.

Before we move on to look at how the same kinds of issues developed for N.A., let's look at a general pattern in A.A.'s growth. They started from a central point and spread outward. The control over their world services was centralized from the beginning, and after twenty years of growth they had to work hard to persuade the fellowship to take the reigns of "ultimate authority" over world service operations.

Now let's take a similar look at N.A.'s development. Without clear written documentation or a history book about N.A. to guide us, we'll need to do the best we can based upon first-hand accounts available to us.

We know that other organizations calling themselves "Narcotics Anonymous" had sprung up in different parts of the country before ours did. Documents dating back to the Forties, and some from the early to mid-Fifties, show that we weren't the first or only organization to use this name. We are the only one remaining, however. So for our purposes, we are discussing the movement that began as a small collection of addicts in Sun Valley, California, and grew to become the Narcotics Anonymous of today.

N.A. began in Sun Valley in much the same way as it has since begun in other places: addicts who had gotten clean in A.A. banded together seeking a closer identification than they had found in a fellowship geared for alcoholics. They borrowed the basic elements of the A.A. fellowship and modified them so that they would apply to addiction, regardless of the particular drug involved.

The A.A. program consists of three separate bodies of principle: the steps, the traditions and the Twelve Concepts for World Service. They call them the "three legacies": the principles of recovery, unity, and service. Some N.A. members have asked, "Why did we only adopt two?" The simple answer is that the Twelve Concepts had not yet been written in 1953, when N.A. was founded. The General Service Conference was still meeting as an experiment, not yet given final approval by the A.A. Fellowship. When those things were finally adopted by A.A., Narcotics Anonymous was still in its infancy. The handful of early groups had no use for a body of principle outlining in intricate detail the many specific aspects of running A.A.'s world service operation. The Twelve Concepts went unneeded and unnoticed by N.A. for many years.

The very first pioneering N.A. groups in Southern California had no place to write or call for guidance in developing their groups. When they stabilized, they decided to provide that kind of service to the N.A. groups that might form in other places. They put together a pamphlet called *Narcotics Anonymous* (now commonly called "The Little White Booklet"), established a P.O. box and a telephone number, and became the "World Service Office" of N.A.

Growth was slow throughout the Sixties and Seventies, but the pattern of growth was clear. Addicts in A.A. in various cities who were seeking a greater common identification started N.A. groups. The difference between these groups and those initial groups in California is that the newer groups had a P.O. box to write to, a booklet to read from at meetings, and a phone number to call to get some shared experience.

In the mid-Seventies the World Service Conference began meeting on the West Coast, trying to contact and include the known N.A. groups in a world service movement. In the late Seventies--fully twenty-five years after the first N.A. meeting was held--something of monumental importance happened. Work began on our Basic Text.

Up to that period, most N.A. groups had stronger ties to the local A.A. community than they had to the larger N.A. community. The effort to come together to write a text for N.A. was the most serious attempt our fellowship had made yet to unite and act as an autonomous, separate whole.

The late Seventies and early Eighties were marked by an attempt on the part of the growing world service movement to contact and unite all the various scattered groups of N.A. that had formed across the U.S. and in a few other countries. There was no functioning office as we know it today, though there was a central shipping operation for our few pamphlets. There was no service network to bind the groups together as there is today. Our book was written in workshops held in various places around the U.S., and all members were invited to participate. Central management was minimal. Every attempt was made to make the broadest-based decisions possible, involving every group--every *member*, if possible.

In addition to the collection of addicts in the first years of recovery and the few members with more clean time, surely a loving God showed up for these sessions, because by 1982 we had a Basic Text approved by our World Service Conference. Our book bears the earmarks of the process used to write it--it sometimes reads like the cut-and-paste patchwork that such sessions involved--but the heart, soul, and voice of addicts was captured on paper for other addicts to read and find hope.

A remarkable period followed. The book sold in large numbers almost immediately, providing the needed funds to expand and develop the World Service Office. The accomplishments of growth and expansion that have characterized the Eighties stand as an inspiring monument to what can happen when we band together, pool our efforts, and actively seek to carry our message to a world thirsting for it. At this writing, during the winter of 1989, the millionth copy of our Basic Text has just been sold.

So there is very much to celebrate. If we are experiencing some growing pains as a world services community, it's no wonder! We've been reeling with such rapid growth that we haven't really had time to sit down and ask ourselves just how our basic structure must change to accommodate the new, more complex kinds of issues we face. Perhaps that level of complexity has finally grown beyond the capacity of our simple arrangement of service units to effectively address it.

That is why, in the last year or two, a growing number of people in world services have been raising the discussion about adopting something like A.A.'s Conference Charter and Twelve Concepts for World Service. As our own world services community has gotten ever more deeply bogged down in the growing workload, and as we have come under more criticism for a decline in our efficiency and the quality of our work, the need for change has become clearer.

In 1983, a compilation report on how N.A. service had developed to that time was presented to the World Service Conference. So clearly was it a stop-gap measure that the conference called it "The Temporary Working Guide to our Service Structure." The following year, the WSC Ad Hoc Committee on N.A. Service was formed--then called the Select Committee--to further examine our service structure and make specific recommendations for change. It was immediately obvious to the committee that the task put to them was a monumental one, and would not be accomplished in a single year.

In 1985, and again in 1987, review drafts of the committee's work were distributed within the fellowship. They contained discussions of the direction in which the committee was heading, and were intended as vehicles to spark further discussion and input toward a final draft.

Throughout this time, many members raised questions about those Twelve Concepts for World Service that our fellowship had not been ready for all those years ago. Would they now have more application to us, especially considering the degree to which our world services have evolved? As the committee has studied that question over the last couple of years, two things have become obvious. One is that those concepts were very specific to the A.A. structure. We are a different fellowship. There does not appear to be any way that we could simply adapt the language of the concepts to apply to N.A. as we did with the steps and traditions.

The second obvious thing about the concepts is that in studying them we see our current problems discussed in detail, with explicit solutions laid out in clear terms. Even though it isn't realistic to just take them as they are, neither is it wise to simply ignore them during this important period of growth and change for us.

By way of illustration, let's have a look at a few quotes selected from the book *Twelve Concepts for World Service* written by Bill Wilson and published by A.A. World Services, Inc. in 1961. Our quotes and page numbers are taken from the 1987-1988 edition. See if anything sounds familiar.

> It is self-evident that the thousands of A.A. groups and the many thousands of A.A. members, scattered as they are all over the globe, cannot *of themselves* actually manage and conduct our manifold world services. . . . An ultimate authority and responsibility in the A.A. groups for world services--if that is all there were to it--could not amount to anything. Nothing could be accomplished on that basis alone. In order to get effective action, the groups must delegate the actual operational authority to chosen service representatives who are fully empowered to speak and act for them. . . . The principle of amply delegated authority and responsibility to "trusted servants" must be implicit from the top to the bottom of our active structure of service. This is the clear implication of A.A.'s Tradition Two. (p. 10)

> We ought to trust our world servants, . . . otherwise no effective leadership is possible. . . . Knowing that theirs is the ultimate authority, the groups are sometimes tempted to instruct their delegates exactly how to vote upon certain matters in the Conference. Because they hold the ultimate authority, there is no doubt that the . . . groups have the *right* to do this. If they insist, they *can* give directives to their Delegates on any and all A.A. matters.

> But good management seldom means the full exercise of a stated set of ultimate rights. For example, were the groups to carry their instruction of Delegates to extremes, then we would be proceeding on the false theory that group opinion in most world service matters would somehow be much superior to Conference opinion. Practically speaking, this could almost never be the case. There would be very few questions indeed that "instructed" Delegates could better settle than a Conference acting on the spot with full facts and debate to guide it (pp. 13-14).

> So long as our world services function reasonably well--and there should always be charity for occasional mistakes--then "trust" must be our watchword, otherwise we shall wind up leaderless (p. 15).

> If . . . the conference ever begins to refuse the Trustees vote in it, and if the Trustees ever again refuse to let corporate service volunteers and staff members vote at the level of their own corporate and conference work, we shall have thrown all past experience to the winds. The principle of allowing a proper voting participation would have to be painfully relearned. . . . Certainly our Trustees and service workers are no less conscientious, experienced, [or wise] than the Delegates. Is there any good reason why their votes are undesirable? Clearly there is none (pp. 20-21).

These quotes, and the entire text of the document they were drawn from, present a stark and challenging picture for us. Many of our most heated debates in world services today center around just such issues as these. Interestingly, A.A.'s evolution to the point at which these things were being written by its co-founder was from centralization to greater democratization. They were exploring the realistic parameters that should define their move toward fellowshipwide participation in services. Our evolution to the point at which these are our glaring world service issues is in the other direction. Our experiment with full "participatory democracy" is straining, and we're being forced to learn about trust and delegation.

The ad hoc committee's work is now nearing completion, and the recommendations we're making include a call for greater levels of just those things: trust and delegation. We have studied the N.A. structure with great scrutiny, and we have studied a great deal of source material, including the Twelve Concepts for World Service. We have completed work on a document called "The Twelve Principles of Service for Narcotics Anonymous" that we see as forming the basis for the rest of our work to follow.

The Twelve Principles of Service are not a simple restatement of the concepts. They instead represent a concerted effort to glean the main body of principle from the concepts, and apply it to N.A. Rather than focusing solely on world service, these principles are intended to apply to the entire N.A. service structure. And we have added principles that have grown out of N.A.'s own experience.

These principles, and our final drafts of *The Guide to Service* that will follow shortly, are presented to the fellowship in the hopes that we will all put aside our preconceived notions, and consider with an open mind just what kinds of changes the adoption of these documents would bring about. We are convinced that the changes would be forward-moving, positive ones that would stimulate the development of our fellowship in the direction it must go to effectively handle the challenges it now faces, and will face in the years to come.

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