

WORLD SERVICE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

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TO: The Fellowship
FROM: World Service Board of Trustees
DATE: August 16, 1995
RE: The Steps and Traditions Language Issue

Introduction

At the 1993 World Service Conference, the Australia Region made a motion to remove gender specificity from the wording of the steps and traditions (Motion #39). This motion, along with recommendations from a work group, began to be discussed throughout the fellowship. Based on the recommendations from a work group at the 1994 conference, the fellowship was further asked (Motion 88) to explore whether the wording of the steps and traditions reflected the spiritual principles of our program and if the proposed changes of Motion 39 adequately addressed members' concerns.

For the past three years, then, we have all been encouraged to discuss whether to make specific changes to the wording of our steps and traditions. Unfortunately, the discussion on this issue has become defocused and unclear over this three-year period. Discussing the gender specificity issue in a broader context has offered the opportunity for a healthy exchange of viewpoints. We believe, however, that we have all become somewhat confused about what the precise question we are being asked is, and how it can be answered.

Primarily because of this lack of clarity, Motion 47 was passed during the 1995 World Service Conference. The motion states:

In order to clarify exactly what the fellowship is being asked to decide and to define how a decision would be reached, we propose the following: To set aside all previous conference actions of WSC 1993 Motion 39 and the recommendations from the work group from WSC '93 and WSC '94 Motion 88. This would allow the WSB to develop a paper on the issues and present it to the fellowship by August 1995. Further, the WSB will provide a recommendation to the fellowship in the 1996 CAR on how to resolve these issues.

This paper addresses the first part of Motion 47. Its intent is to clarify what the groups need to decide and to provide a framework with which to focus discussion on the issues related to the language used in the wording of our steps and traditions.

What Are We Ready to Make a Decision About?

The discussions held throughout the fellowship over the last three years were important. Not only did we have an opportunity to explore removal of gender from the wording of the steps and traditions, but we also began to discuss the larger issue of whether the word "God" adequately allows for the individual interpretation of our Higher Power. Some suggestions were offered to replace the word "God" with "Higher Power" or to change "God" to "god". While this stimulated much discussion and controversy, no motion to propose changing the word "God" in the steps and traditions accordingly came forward. It appears that, at this time, the only question before the fellowship is whether to remove gender-specific language from our steps and traditions.

Some of the main arguments made by those who support the language change are that individuals' beliefs are excluded by the current wording of our steps and traditions; that the use of "Him" and "His" in reference to God implies specific religious beliefs or shapes and defines one's understanding of a Higher Power. This is seen to be in conflict with our philosophy, which encourages us to develop and establish a relationship with a Higher Power of our own understanding. Many of these members believe that this wording may lead newcomers or professionals, who might refer addicts to NA meetings, to perceive us as a religious, not spiritual, program. As a result, addicts may not feel attracted to NA or out of place in our meetings; they may either not get to our program at all, or leave before the spiritual nature of the NA program is understood. In addition, supporters often believe that the current wording of the steps and traditions fails to reflect the multicultural, global nature of today's NA community. These members suggest that making such changes to the wording may help us better further our primary purpose. Some state that non-gender specific language has been used in the text of new literature (e.g. *It Works, Just for Today*) and should be changed in the wording of the steps and traditions for consistency.

Some of the major arguments made by those who oppose the change are that the steps have worked the way they are written for years; it is the individual who needs to change, not the wording. Many of these members state that they, too, had some difficulty with the wording at first, but that the literature and other members helped them to overcome their difficulties. Some argue that it is impossible to remove gender references and retain the meaning of those steps and traditions affected. Some state that removing gender-specific language is based on consideration of political correctness. There are others who state that they support the proposed changes in the wording of the steps and traditions in concept; however, they would not support actually changing the wording for fear of the effect on the fellowship. These members often point to the disunity which resulted from the changes made to the White Book or the fourth edition of the Basic Text. Many have offered the suggestion that there be a footnote or a separate page added to our literature explaining that Narcotics Anonymous espouses no specific beliefs about a Power greater than ourselves, and leaves this to the interpretation of the individual member.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Any action as significant as changing the steps and traditions would, of course, require a significant percentage of our groups to participate in making the decision. Members must also have a strong voice in accepting and implementing a decision-making process that directly includes our groups. At this time, we have no defined process in place to receive a direct conscience from each NA group. The process we develop to allow us to hear the voices of groups regarding this issue will serve us to receive consciences from groups on any similarly significant issues in the future. *In the 1996 CAR, the second part of Motion 47, a decision-making process, will be proposed.* In the meantime, in order to move forward on this issue, the fellowship should consider the following questions and begin discussing them at the group level:

1. Are you willing to make any specific changes to the wording of the steps and traditions? (Yes or No)

2. If the wording of the steps and traditions is altered to eliminate reference to gender, would the following wording be acceptable?

Step Three: "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood God.*"

Step Seven: "We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings."

Step Eleven: "We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood God*, praying only for the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out."

Tradition Two: "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--that of a loving God as may be expressed in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern."

The Board of Trustees has scheduled time at its next meeting to further discuss this issue. We will keep you updated on our discussions and any other recommendations we may have.

If you have any questions or comments about the text of this paper or wish to receive the Motion 39/88 issue statement and guidelines for workshops which were distributed last year, please contact us through the World Service Board of Trustees coordinator at the World Service Office.

Addendum

This addendum is adapted from information presented during the Motion 88 panel presentation at the 1995 WSC. It is offered here to provide answers to questions often raised by members as they discuss the steps and traditions language issue.

The Language Issue and Our Traditions

We (the Motion 88 panelists) believe that it is appropriate that the fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous is choosing to continue to discuss the wording of our steps and traditions. In fact, we see this as a natural progression in the types of issues we have discussed and resolved in the past. And we have emerged from these discussions with our unity intact. According to Tradition One, "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on NA unity." Our hope is that we may all open our minds and our hearts to listen to each other, regardless of our personal opinions, and to disagree without being disagreeable. Whereas debate may be healthy for us, we need to keep our primary purpose before us as we engage in these discussions. *How we approach this issue is more important to our unity, survival, and growth than the decision we reach at the end of these discussions.* As we continue to discuss changes to our steps and traditions, it is important that we keep the principles of this tradition in mind.

The ongoing debate over Motion 39 has far-reaching consequences which affect the fellowship as a whole, our primary purpose, and the still suffering addicts who have not yet made it to our doors. Tradition Five states that "Each group has but one primary purpose-- to carry the message to the addict that still suffers." This reminds us that, as we continue to discuss changing the wording of our steps and traditions, we need to consider the effect of that change to the newcomer and to the quality of our message. In order not to divert us from our primary purpose, we would help the newcomer and ourselves if we hold open discussions in a calm, accepting atmosphere.

According to Tradition Ten, "Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence, the NA name ought never be drawn into public controversy." Some members, arguing on either side of this issue, have claimed that this language discussion is inspired by outside issues, such as women's rights and political correctness. Others have seen it as a primary purpose issue, questioning whether the current wording of our steps and traditions clearly communicates to the newcomer the freedom of developing a relationship with the higher power of his or her own understanding. We believe that this has been accepted and discussed, with trust, as an inside issue. As such, we need to treat it as we do any other issue about which we have strong personal opinions. If we focus on the newcomer and the clarity of our message, we will avoid the temptation to create philosophically warring factions. As we continue to discuss this motion this year, we pray that we may keep our primary purpose in mind.

The Language Issue and AA

We adapted the steps and traditions from AA and gained permission from them to do this. Many fellowships have made changes to AA's steps and traditions. Some of these changes have been radical alterations in wording or have even eliminated some of the steps and traditions entirely. It would be inconsistent, then, if AA did not grant our fellowship similar flexibility in altering the original language.

AA has begun asking recovery fellowships who request permission to adapt the steps and traditions to print the original language (AA's versions) as well as the adapted language. Regardless of whether we change the wording of NA's steps and traditions we may be asked to abide by this request.

The Language Issue and the Basic Text Moratorium

The moratorium on the Basic Text was established during the 1993 World Service Conference, which means that it will expire in 1998. If this conference chooses to discuss the issues represented in Motion 88/39 for another year, we would not be voting on a change until the 1997 World Service Conference. If we were to make a decision to change the wording of our steps and traditions in 1997, we would have a year to decide how to implement the change into the Basic Text.

There is already one mechanism in place to effect changes in the Basic Text. During the two moratorium periods, the World Service Conference Literature Committee has been compiling recommended changes to the Basic Text from the fellowship. This change, then, could be one of several following the moratorium, although the conference would have the authority to initiate the change earlier if it so chose.

The nature of the change in language represented by Motion 88/39 warrants thorough discussion prior to the end of the moratorium period. Whereas most revisions to our literature may be accomplished through a normal review and input process, this proposed change is more substantial. The WSCLC, the WSB, and the conference itself have approached this issue many times over the years. It is clear that it cannot be resolved without thorough, extensive discussion throughout the fellowship. Therefore, it is appropriate that we are discussing this change now rather than waiting until the end of the moratorium period.

The Language Change and Cost

It is the practice of the World Service Office to deplete its supply of literature on hand when a piece of literature or service manual is up for approval. At times, a back-order situation occurs, but this is a short-term inconvenience. The cost to the WSO, then, would be minimal since the changes would be made only during the reprinting of an item and would only affect those pages altered. In fact, there is ultimately a profit to the WSO as addicts choose to purchase the most recent editions of our literature.

We are no strangers to revision. Much of our literature has been revised, at least once. When those revisions were made, the conference determined that they were important in that they strengthened our message of recovery. Our fearlessness toward making revisions to our literature suggests that we are most concerned with the quality of our message.

The Language Change and Translations

Any translated literature that may be affected by the language change would experience the same process as that in English--changes would be made prior to reprinting. Works-in-progress would be altered before being published by the WSO.

During the combined WSCLC and WSTC panel discussion at the 1993 WSC, the Motion 39 issue was raised. International members from the panel and the floor affirmed that the gender specificity issue did not affect them or their translations directly.

Any change in gender specificity in our steps and traditions will primarily affect the English language. In most other languages, gender is already assigned to nouns and it is not possible to break that tie. Changing the word "God" would, however, affect our translations in other languages. In fact, regardless of the decision made for English, use of the word "God", the idea of a personal god, and other such issues are already creating translation dilemmas. The Western concept of God may be alien, blasphemous, or simply culturally unacceptable. The language used to express the NA message will necessarily change as that message is translated into the languages of non-Western cultures.