

Tradition Two

This article was written by Sally E., a member of the World Service Board of Trustees, in November 1984. It represents her views at the time of writing.

Two of the most perplexing controversies experienced throughout the fellowship are finding workable and comfortable interpretations of when a group conscience is appropriate and how much latitude a trusted servant should be allowed to exercise.

This article will hopefully provide some insight on these issues. Experience gained over the years can best be conveyed by using real examples and discussing the reasoning behind each action. The approach will be used to discuss the issues we are concerned about. Actions taken at the World Service Conference provide the basis for many of the controversies concerning group conscience and action by trusted servants.

Each year, for instance, the WSC Policy Committee has proposed revisions to the service structure. Nearly every page of these proposals is the subject of different regional group conscience votes which are frequently conflicting with one another. One region may send its RSR with instructions to amend a paragraph in a certain way, and another RSR arrives with different instructions for the same paragraph. Near unanimous endorsement may be found among the conference participants for one or the other, and these are easily adopted. However, it obviously changes the document that all of the other regions considered and gave a group conscience on. If the fellowship group conscience concept is carried to its fullest extent, as many demand, then the revised language should be sent back to the full fellowship and final approval made in another year. However, at the next conference, a new paragraph could certainly

be changed and the process repeated year after year.

Sometimes this is done, but more frequently the conference participants adopt the item without sending it out to the full fellowship again. Usually the majority of the conference participants leave feeling they have properly exercised their responsibilities as trusted servants on such issues. Many times this has been accepted by the fellowship without comment.

For example, a proposal was made by one region at the conference in 1982 that a fellowship magazine be created by the conference. This proposal had not been sent to the fellowship for consideration. The conference approved it, appointed a committee, and within a few months they began selling subscriptions and publishing issues. It was not until two years after the original action by the conference that the fellowship was afforded the opportunity to consider the issue, and then only on the matter of conflicting operational policies proposed by different service committees. One of the proposals was adopted, but it was amended prior to its adoption. Here again is the question of whether or not the Conference-adopted version, as amended, should then have been sent out to the fellowship for a vote at the conference the following year.

There was opposition to the original proposal; in fact, it was nearly defeated. But even many of those in opposition to the original approval felt that approval of the magazine would represent a proper exercise of the authorities of trusted servants at the world level. In the action to amend and then adopt the amended policy two years later it was also the consensus of the conference participants that such action was within the scope of their responsibilities and authorities.

The world level trusted servants (WSC, WSB and WSO) have not received any written complaints concerning these major decisions on the magazine.

In a matter affecting the voting right of the WSO office manager as a conference participant (the manager had been a voting participant of the conference since 1979), it was proposed at the 1984 World Service Conference to remove the manager's vote and transfer it to the president of the World Service Board of Directors of the WSO. No advance

notice was given to the fellowship that this issue would be presented. It was adopted by a unanimous vote of all conference participants and again the world level trusted servants (WSC, WSB and WSO) have not received a written complaint.

On the most persistently discussed issue at the conference, the voting rights of non-RSRs, it has been sent to the fellowship in advance of the conference in two separate years. Additionally, the matter was raised at two other conference meetings without advance notice. In all four instances, the vote of the conference was to keep all voting participants as they are currently detailed in the service structure.

Following each of the four conferences that this issue was voted on, the World Service Board of Trustees received letters from a few individuals, a few area committees and one or two regions declaring either that the action was a violation of traditions or that all of the acts of the conference are void because more than just the RSRs voted.

The World Service Conference Administrative Committee in recent years has properly complied with the requirements to send to the fellowship all of the material proposed by the committees for adoption at the conference. However, as these items are reviewed around the fellowship, some regions approve instructions that their RSR is expected to carry to the conference for a vote that did not go out for a fellowship-wide group conscience. There seems to be four ways that the fellowship is currently handling this circumstance:

1. The RSR attends the conference with instructions to vote as they have been instructed, based on the group conscience of the region, and only on those things that have gone out to their members for review and for which a group conscience has been taken.
2. The RSR attends the conference with instructions to vote as they have been instructed, based on group conscience of the region for those items that they were given advance notice of and they are authorized to use their best judgment on other issues that may arise for which the region could not have obtained a group conscience.
3. Other regions look at the enormous amount of material sent out for their consideration and

decide that spending time discussing and then voting on every item by each group is not only a waste of time, but this is what the RSR was elected as a trusted servant to handle.

4. An interesting variation of the first two options arise when the region instructs the RSR to introduce a certain item originated within their region for the conference to adopt.

Different RSRs have responded to these situations with varying degrees of consternation. At one conference, an RSR who had been specifically instructed insisted on taking the time of the conference to voice his objection to issues his region had not been advised of and insisted his vote be recorded as abstaining. Others with greater latitude were able to act on the variety of items as they were proposed or amended. The RSR with strict instructions was, in reality, unable to fully represent the membership that sent him because of the instructions limiting his participation. It has frequently been observed that regions using this approach could save the money of sending the RSR and simply send in their votes by mail.

The conflict between action by trusted servants and group conscience desires, is not limited to actions when the conference is meeting each year.

Last year, for example, the WSC received a directive from one region regarding how the WSC should utilize the paper for the reports being distributed. The region had elected to inform the WSC that the group conscience of the region felt that the WSC should comply with their instructions. However, the officers of the conference, while exercising their duties as trusted servants, should have been relied upon to use their prudent judgment in this matter. Further, if the WSC trusted servants had blatantly disregarded common sense on this matter, the RSR of the region should simply have, on his own, sent a letter bringing the matter to the attention of the conference officers. The region should not have been bothered with such a trivial matter on which to develop a regional group conscience.

Another example of this conflict will be helpful in understanding how confusing the issue can get. One regional service committee, acting within what they

thought was their authority as trusted servants, decided the region needed an office to serve the needs of their growing membership. A subcommittee was selected and after some consideration they rented a place and began operation of that office. There were some loud and angry opinions voiced that the committee did not have authority to open the office and had violated traditions by not asking permission from the fellowship. In subsequent weeks, the desired regional group conscience was obtained supporting the decision. Some months later financial difficulties arose and the rent payments could not be met. The regional service committee met and concluded that they had been wrong for not having asked the fellowship if they could open an office and reasoned that the fellowship should be polled to get authority to close the office. This was eventually done, but not before additional months of rent had been accrued.

On an issue that is currently evolving, errors in grammar, use of tense, a suspected tradition violation and offensive language was discovered in three stories while proofreading was being done for publication of the Third Edition of the Basic Text. The WSC Literature Committee requested a determination and recommendation from the board of trustees on each problem. The board by unanimous vote recommended the WSC Literature Committee make the appropriate grammar and punctuation changes and that the suspected tradition violation was not in fact a violation. The phrase "I urinated on Stalin's tomb" in the opinion of the WSB, was offensive and it was our recommendation that the phrase be removed. The phrase is a slang expression and is commonly used in the country the story originated in to denote contempt for everyone and everything. Its removal did not alter the meaning or message of the sentence of which it was part.

Many in the fellowship will see this recommendation as the board of trustees simply performing their duties as trusted servants; others may see this as a violation of group conscience. At all levels of service, trusted servants have the same concerns with decisions they make because sometimes controversy erupts and calls go out for a group conscience. In other areas of the fellowship, the membership often does not want to be involved

and feel the trusted servants should in fact make many of these decisions and not bother them with every little thing that comes up. A commonly expressed feeling of those in service is simply, "damned if I do and damned if I don't."

The *Temporary Working Guide to Our Service Structure* allows for all the approaches we use. However, as long as one approach is held as superior and all others are held as violating the traditions, the situation becomes one of right and wrong, inferior and superior. "My way, my group's way, or my region's way is the only way and everyone else is in violation of Tradition Two" is divisive and an incorrect approach to a loving fellowship.

There are times when individuals or groups of individuals on the using side of the vote of an issue strive to keep the issue on the front burner in the fellowship by claiming violation of group conscience. The WSB, WSC and WSO each year receive a few letters accusing one, two or all three branches of world level service of violating Tradition Two, on one issue or another. This occurs, despite the fact that no group conscience was taken on the issues of their concern, and the person writing the letter is assuming what the group conscience of the fellowship would be, if in fact it were taken.

A reasonable solution to the controversy revolving around Tradition Two lies in understanding and applying all the traditions and guidance from our service structure. All levels of service need to operate within guidelines approved by their membership. It is neither feasible nor desirable that every decision made by trusted servants or committees be referred for group conscience, at the area, region or world level. If that was the desired course of action, groups would be spending all of their time making decisions, and there would be little need for trusted servants and little time to work on recovery or carrying the message of recovery to others.

As addicts, most of us enter the program of Narcotics Anonymous with distrust and paranoia. As we progress in our recovery we should begin to develop trust in each other and ourselves and less and less feel that the world is out to get us. Some of

that distrust and paranoia is evident when we find ourselves insisting that Tradition Two demands that everyone participate in every single decision made by every committee from all levels of service. If we still have the viewpoint that we must tell WSC how to use paper, or we must be there to approve or disapprove the removal of inconsequential but offensive slang from a story, or that an office should not be closed until a group conscience is obtained even though it is losing money, then we have not progressed in our recovery over the paranoia and distrust we came in with.

If we have the attitude that NA will go down the tubes if the entire fellowship is not involved in one decision or another or if wrong decisions will be made unless we are involved in it, we are missing some important elements of our recovery. This attitude also reflects a lack of faith and confidence in our acceptance of a Higher Power. Narcotics Anonymous exists as much, if not more, because of a Higher Power, higher than the collective efforts of all the most enlightened trusted servants combined. We are going to make mistakes, of that there is no doubt. But as long as we are willing to make mistakes, be forgiven for them, and do so with a loving heart, our fellowship will survive a lot of mistakes by trusted

servants. Of course, there will arise some situations when a trusted servant is not being responsible to the members who selected them. If this situation does occur, then those members can direct the trusted servant to change whatever was done and if that fails, they have the final option of removing that person. There should be no service board or committee that does not have provisions for removal of a trusted servant who is not responsible to the fellowship. However, removal must be sparingly used and only as a last resort.

We must, as members of the fellowship, always communicate with our trusted servants, asking them for reports and information and sharing our opinions but we should give them trust and support to do their jobs. We need not constantly peer over their shoulders on every issue or they will not serve us well. If our paranoia and distrust overtakes our judgment, we frequently find ourselves concluding that mistakes will be made which we could prevent. But without the experience that trusted servants gain from doing their work, they will not grow in recovery and our fellowship will be hurt and so will the addict who is still out on the streets using.

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