

To: The Fellowship
From: Jack Bernstein, Chairperson
World Service Board of Trustees

At the 1986 World Service Conference the Board of Trustees (BOT) presented articles on five recurring issues that the Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous has been struggling with. We had asked for your input so that your views could be included in the revised articles to be presented at the 1987 WSC for approval or disapproval.

We have discussed the wisdom of voting on these articles at the Conference and are unanimous in our belief that a vote need not be taken.

The Board of Trustees has been discussing these subjects for at least two years and we have attempted to blend our experience with the input from many members, groups and service committees. The process of refining our opinions with input received from the Fellowship has been both enlightening and spiritually fulfilling. Indeed, the opinions presented here reflect our present understanding of these issues, and in time may very well change. These prospects for change and growth can strengthen, rather than diminish, our courage to be firm in applying this knowledge now.

From the original five articles, two of them have reached completion and are included here. As the others progress and become finalized, they will be published in upcoming issues of the Fellowship Report. With all of these articles, we welcome continued input from the Fellowship.

The opinions presented here represent our efforts to provide guidance which is founded in our collective experience, spiritual principles, and sincere interest in the future of N.A. Each member of the BOT supports these positions, and the Board as a whole believes that this type of guidance is what the Fellowship has asked for.

Two areas of common concern were present in both the input and Board discussions. One of these was the concept of the BOT taking on a controlling or regulating function, and the other was preservation of the groups' autonomy as well as the group conscience process.

None of us see ourselves or our service board as performing any type of regulating, controlling or rule-making function. Our positions and opinions are not intended to be used as rules, nor as enforcement tools. They are offered for use by N.A. members, groups, and service committees to utilize in exploring and resolving issues which relate to any or all of the Twelve Traditions. We believe that the issues addressed in these articles are all interrelated with our common welfare, unity and our primary purpose.

We believe our role is to advise the Fellowship and present the opportunity for these issues to be discussed amongst our members, service boards and committees. The BOT, both individually and collectively, have unwavering faith in the group conscience process and in group autonomy. This faith and trust applies to every element of N.A.

The BOT has examined its motivation and purpose. Our intent is to help our Fellowship, and our sole objective in providing the following articles is to offer guidance to the worldwide Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous.

OPEN AND CLOSED N.A. MEETINGS:

The purpose of the World Service Board of Trustees in addressing open and closed N.A. meetings is to help N.A. members understand precisely what N.A. meetings can offer to both addicts and non-addicts, and how different types of N.A. meetings have different purposes. Awareness of this need for guidance has been sparked by letters and communication from the Fellowship at large. This communication has revealed the need of the Fellowship to know what Narcotics Anonymous is and how we carry our message.

The population at large is gaining an increased awareness of our Fellowship and an increased interest in our meetings. Input which the Board of Trustees has received highlights examples of confusion which can exist when interested non-addicts or people who are uncertain of their status, attend N.A. meetings. This confusion can be magnified when these individuals participate in our meetings.

Our message of recovery in meetings can be clouded or diluted if anyone other than an N.A. member participates. In our meetings, confusion can be created when people such as parents, spouses, therapists, members of other Fellowships, or other people who are not N.A. members share and speak at N.A. meetings.

We always encourage respect, tact, and diplomacy when confronted with circumstances where non-addicts attend regular N.A. meetings. Most of these occasions do not present continuing problems for our groups. However, with continued growth and increased awareness about N.A., all of us must look ahead. It is our belief that, by gaining clarity about open and closed N.A. meetings, our members can be guided well in how we all carry the message of recovery from drug addiction to addicts, as well as to all others who are interested.

For these reasons and in the interest of Narcotics Anonymous, the World Service Board of Trustees recommends the following guidelines and definitions:

1. A Narcotics Anonymous meeting, whether it is open or closed, is an addict sanctuary. It is the one place where a drug addict can go and hear about and participate in recovery from the disease of drug addiction. As much as we might sometimes like, we cannot be all things to all people.
2. An open meeting is an N.A. meeting which may be attended by anyone interested in recovery from addiction. However, verbal participation is limited to N.A. members only. An open meeting in Narcotics Anonymous serves several functions. It allows people from outside of the Fellowship (for instance: judges, probation officers, professionals, family members) to observe what Narcotics Anonymous is and how it functions. It provides a place for anyone to gain information regarding the disease of drug addiction and how to find recovery. This can be very helpful to those individuals who are striving to reach a decision regarding their personal status as an addict. An open meeting in Narcotics Anonymous is one method our groups use to achieve their primary purpose of carrying the message to the addict who still suffers.
3. A closed meeting in Narcotics Anonymous is only for those individuals who are there because of their own drug addiction problem. These meetings do not generally exclude people who are undecided about identifying as an addict; however, participation is still limited to drug addicts only. A closed Narcotics Anonymous meeting provides the freedom which is necessary for a more personal and intimate sharing by Narcotics Anonymous members.

4. Our service structure provides the only appropriate avenues for non-addict participation in Narcotics Anonymous. In addition to recognizing the need and value of non-addict trustees (*Temporary Working Guide to the Service Structure*) and non-addict special workers (Tradition Eight), the Fellowship has approved material (A Guide to Public Information) which provides for Public Information/Community Meetings. These meetings are the vehicle for service committee efforts which are aimed at communicating information about our Fellowship to the general public. These are not regular N.A. meetings and are the preferred approach to informing the general public about Narcotics Anonymous. This approach avoids confusion, presents no threat to anonymity, does not affect the N.A. message in regular meetings, and allows us to satisfy our recovery and service needs while at the same time meet the needs of non-addicts who are interested in N.A.

SPECIAL NEEDS -- COMMON NEEDS

THE PROBLEM

We have been asked to discuss "Special Interest Groups," meetings such as "men's meetings," "women's meetings," "gay meetings," young people's meetings and meetings that take into account the special needs of the deaf, the blind and others who are physically disabled. The question is whether such "special" meetings are in accord with Traditions One (*"Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on N.A. unity"*), Three (*"The only requirement for N.A. membership is a desire to stop using"*), Five (*"Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry the message to the addict who still suffers"*), and Ten (*"N.A. has no opinion on outside issues; hence the N.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy"*).

Some members believe these meetings impede recovery by setting some addicts apart from others and violate our spiritual principles by a process of exclusion. There are others who believe that such meetings - if they do not refuse any addict who wishes to attend - not only enhance recovery, but promote N.A. unity by improving some addicts' ability to identify with other addicts in the same Program.

DISCUSSION

Even N.A., as a whole, maintains a certain degree of exclusivity in order to exist as an entity. We insist that our requirement for membership is a desire to stop using drugs. For our members, the disease of addiction manifests as drug abuse. Our purpose, however, is not to promote differences. Rather it is to provide parameters of identification that enable us to address problems that are specific to us.

We believe that the term "special interest," is itself, a problem. The word "special" reminds us of the rationalizations we used in active addiction. Calling ourselves "special" kept us separate, isolated, alienated, apart from the rest of humanity.

The overwhelming majority of the letters that we have received on this subject attest that isolation and alienation are not the result of these "special interest" meetings. These meetings bring together addicts with common needs. They are a coming-together in what many addicts consider a "comfortable" place to share certain problems.

Perhaps then, it's time to look at this another way. Instead of talking about

"special interest," let's talk about "common needs."

Meetings that serve the common needs of addicts are an appropriate and successful way to carry the message of N.A. recovery. If their primary purpose is to discuss addiction and recovery, and if they are still available to any addict seeking the N.A. message, then men's meetings, women's meetings, gay meetings, and young people's meetings are not in violation of our traditions. Whatever the focus of a particular meeting, the group can dispel any appearances of "specialness" by making it clear in their directories that all addicts are welcome. An example of this might be: Gay Meeting (all addicts welcome), or Men's Meeting (although women may attend), etc.

In keeping with all N.A. meetings, "common needs" meetings are never an appropriate setting for discussion of anything but addiction and recovery. For example, a women's meeting is not the place to talk about the Equal Rights Amendment or the pros and cons of child custody laws; nor is a men's meeting the place to discuss dating practices, football games or how to fix a Chevy. When common needs meetings address the needs of a group of addicts, without excluding any addict, they work. This is the strongest argument in their favor.

FELLOWSHIP INPUT

From the letters we have received, it is apparent that instead of causing N.A. disunity, meetings that address common needs are often the place where some addicts first begin to feel at home in N.A. as a whole.

One members writes, "I found myself feeling very uncomfortable in mixed meetings. This was a fear that I have worked vary hard at overcoming. I started to attend an N.A. women's meeting. Since that time, my life has changed dramatically. The women who attend that meeting have helped me more than I could ever say."

One gay man wrote that, "Our experience has been the total contrary of isolationism." He says that before his area started a gay N.A. meeting, "Practically all gay people seeking recovery" felt they had to seek it in another Twelve Step Program. But, since the gay N.A. meeting has been underway, "I have come out of my closet of feeling isolated from my fellow addicts, and I have been able to share with addicts who happen to be heterosexual. But, first I had to come to terms with self-acceptance, with which the Tuesday Gay Discussion helped me immeasurably."

A straight man told us, "I have found all the love, acceptance and understanding that I needed when I first came to N.A. I do not believe that the same is true for other--gays, women, adolescents, etc." He supports meetings for those common needs.

Another member says, "We need to get newcomers into meetings where they feel comfortable until they themselves know this is safe place to be, no matter what meeting they are in."

Many addicts who sent their input wrote that these meetings helped them feel secure enough to share their fears and hopes with addicts with whom it was easy to identify and lay the foundation of recovery.

One woman put is this way, "I don't think that I could ever thank the women who have helped me to stay clean by telling me what I needed to hear and not what I wanted to hear."

One member reminded us of the program cliché, "The men with the men, the women with the women." What better way to insure this than by having men's and women's meetings? In our women's meetings, women can talk about what's bothering them without being afraid of being judged. Every week, at least thirty to forty women attend this meeting. This is no mistake. There has got to be a reason for it, and the reason is, IT WORKS!"

From another female member, "If it is true that no one better understands recovery than the recovering addict, and that there are certain challenges within our recovery that are particular to our own sex, then is it not also true that recovering addicts of our own sex coming together to share our experience, strength and hope is an excellent tool?"

It isn't only the women who report that they find a special atmosphere of honesty in their meetings. One man wrote, "My experience with men's meetings is an air of comfortability and ease that I enjoy. There are some issues I don't want to discuss in front of members of the opposite sex."

And this from a gay member, "Many of my gay sisters and brothers are too frightened to be open at straight meetings, so they lie. It makes no difference that you and I may know that dishonesty is unnecessary. They believe it, and as a result they are prevented from being honest." He adds, "That doing away with meetings that fulfill common needs of gay addicts in particular, would make it considerably more difficult to enter the Program and to stay in recovery."

The input makes a strong point that "common needs" meetings foster spiritual principles of honesty and openness among those addicts who attend them. As one member put it, "People go to these meetings not to be outlaws, but to get recovery."

But what about the rest of the Fellowship? Here are some examples of how these meetings can attend to the needs of the Fellowship as a whole. We were told about one meeting, "...which is attended by men only. Women can stay if they want, but it doesn't happen, mainly because there is a women's meeting five blocks down the street."

In another area: "We have had several occasions on which a man showed up at the women's meeting for one reason or another. At one time it was more fair and convenient to allow him to stay, and we did. At another time it turned out to be more reasonable for me to drive him to another meeting, and I did. We have been careful to refuse no one."

A woman from another area writes: "The group conscience was that should a male addict come to our meeting seeking recovery, we would not turn him away." She tells us that the men's and women's only meetings are held on the same night at the same location, right across the hall from one another, with yet a third co-ed meeting somewhere else. "I feel with this situation, no addict who seeks recovery will be turned away."

A gay member tells us, "We wanted a place to come where all addicts, no matter what their sexual preference (or confusion), could come and share their fears, hopes, strength, and program without rejection. In our meeting we practice anonymity in two ways. We honor each other as addicts seeking recovery, and then as gay men and women. Whomever attends our meeting need never worry about their privacy. Heterosexuals are welcome and invited to attend. We only ask that they come with an open mind and leave with a closed mouth."

To present another point of view, one member wrote to voice his concern for areas where there are not many meetings. He suggested that on nights with only a "common needs" meeting available, some addicts might be prevented from attending a meeting where they feel welcome.

From the letters we have received, we see that it is very rare for an addict to rely on "common needs" meetings alone and avoid regular N.A. meetings altogether. One letter in particular summed it up very well for us, "I would not want to go to ONLY women's meetings, because in that way I would cut myself off from at least half the Fellowship, and at least half the possible avenues for God to speak to me. But once a week, it has helped me to have a place where I can be honest, where I can be loved without sexual overtones, where I can grow into the person God intended me to be."

PHYSICALLY IMPAIRED ADDICT

What about the physically impaired addict? They have needs in common with each other too. A WSC Ad-Hoc Task Force defines them as "Additional Needs" addicts, who are "those individuals for whom receiving the message of recovery is limited, impaired, or inaccessible due to physical, audiological, or linguistic difficulties or handicaps." For these addicts it is not a matter of having meetings especially for them, instead, we believe it is necessary to make our meetings available to them. We need to have meetings with wheelchair access, with ASL signers for the deaf, and with other facilities and services so that our message of recovery may reach them as well.

SUMMARY

Our traditions encourage us to place spiritual principles above personalities. Narcotics Anonymous does not judge anyone, does not fear anyone, does not discriminate against anyone. Narcotics Anonymous tells us that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using. The Fellowship embraces us in a spirit of faith and love and acceptance. There is no place in N.A. for a meeting that tells any addict that he or she is not welcome.

We believe that any N.A. meeting addressing the common needs of a certain group of addicts - without excluding any addict in need - not only upholds the traditions but promotes our common welfare by improving the chances of recovery of those needing some extra attention. We believe that such meetings help fulfill our primary purpose by delivering the N.A. message of recovery in an environment of respect, value and acceptance.

As our Fellowship continues to mature, all N.A. meetings will eventually accept with equanimity men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, young and old. The necessity for "common needs" meetings will disappear as regular meetings become more closely identified with our primary purpose and more able to discuss non-judgementally any subject relating to recovery, no matter how delicate.

We believe that the principle of unity is achieved when N.A. members and groups agree to be guided by the spiritual principles that motivate our program of recovery. However, we also believe that groups can still autonomously decide what they wish to call themselves, and what topics relating to recovery they wish to discuss.

God is the ultimate authority in N.A. and as long as "common needs" meetings allow for and enhance the recovery of particular segments of our Fellowship, then we must not let our fears and prejudices get in God's way. Just as we believe that a loving God removes these character defects from us as individuals, so also do we believe that any N.A. meeting motivated by the character defects of the group will be removed. We believe that our common welfare is upheld by the spirit of unity, love, and acceptance. We believe that adherence to these spiritual principles is God's will for us and that our recovery depends on them.
