

My name is Justin and I am an alcoholic. The questions presented are:

- 1) when changes to original texts are proposed, should there be a threshold for review for our Founders' writings; and
- 2) how would those changes be formatted on the page?

For our purposes, the Founders' writings are limited to the first 164 pages of Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 and 12. Our Conference Charter provides a process for changes to the Twelve Steps and Traditions, (which in and of itself has evolved).

To be clear, the issue before us is **NOT** whether the Founders' writings should be changed. We are simply being asked to consider whether a process can be put in place for fairly reviewing, discussing, and deciding these proposals.

With increasing frequency, proposals are being offered to consider changes to the Founders'

writings, often with the intent of being more open and inclusive to the still suffering alcoholic.

Lets begin with information:

According to the publication, SMF-132, the *Estimated Worldwide A.A. Individual and Group Membership*, during our first three decades A.A. grew from 2 to approximately 232,000 members and over the next 30 years to approximately 1.7 million. **However**, between 1996 and 2020, we hovered around 2 million. In 2021, we were under 2 million.<sup>1</sup>

***Does our inability to steadily grow over the last three decades indicate that change is necessary?***

As members, we are responsible to ensure that the hand of AA is always there<sup>2</sup>. As a group we ask ourselves, are we carrying out our primary purpose?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Estimated Worldwide A.A. Individual and Group Membership (SMF-132)*

<sup>2</sup> *Responsibility Statement* and "Responsibility Is Our Theme," in the July 1965 Grapevine (as reprinted in *The Language of the Heart*, p. 328)

<sup>3</sup> *The AA Group..Where It All Begins (P-16)* at p. 29

The vigorous debates over the Founders' writings reflects our **deep love for AA.**

It seems that every year, or every other year, we spend countless hours debating about potential changes to the Founders' writings.

Still, one wonders whether there are consequences to this nonstop debate.

**First, a structural question. Is our current Conference practice consistent with our literature?**

Every Conference, The General Service Office receives numerous proposed agenda items surrounding changes to the Founders' writings.

This is unsurprising given our universal desire for A.A. to live on. Potentially, the problem is built into in our procedural practice that "no Conference is binding on the next" <sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> *Advisory Actions of the General Service of Alcoholics Anonymous 1951-2022* (eF-191) at p. 158  
"Conference Committee on Trustees"

The first instance of “no conference being binding on the next” occurred in 1956, regarding the Trustees’ reimbursement for certain out-of-pocket expenses. This action was taken “with the understanding that this is only suggested policy and does not constitute a policy that shall be deemed binding in any fashion on future Conferences “. <sup>5</sup>

The next published use of the “non-binding” notion was in 1995, in regards to whether the Conference would be smoking or non-smoking and other housekeeping details. <sup>6</sup>

These are the only two references to “No Conference being non-binding” I could find.

Our Conference seems to have expanded the “small t tradition” of applying “non-binding on the next Conference” to all its affairs, including considerations around the Founders’ writings. One need only scan the scores of proposed agenda

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Id. at p. 115 “Policy and Admissions”

items seeking to reverse previous Conferences' actions

On the other hand, our literature, specifically the pamphlet P-16, *The A.A. Group... Where It All Begins*, instructs that on sensitive matters we seek an informed group conscience, whereby “pertinent information has been studied and all views have been heard before the group votes.”<sup>7</sup> Our deference to an informed group conscience is a bedrock practice.

**Does our current practice for examining something as sensitive as the Founders' writings allow for the spiritual expression of an informed group conscience?**

Concept I embodies our First and Second Traditions. We read in the *12 Concepts of World Service*, “the fact had to be faced that the founders of AA were perishable ... we see in our Fellowship a spiritualized society characterized by enough enlightenment, enough responsibility and enough

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<sup>7</sup> *The AA Group..Where It All Begins* (P-16) at p. 29

love of man and of God to insure that our democracy of world service will work under all conditions. We are confident that we can rely upon Tradition Two, our group conscience and its trusted servants”<sup>8</sup>

*How It Works* reminds us that we are not saints and no human power could have relieved our alcoholism<sup>9</sup>. For reasons that defy Bill’s own words and actions, many canonize and deify Bill and Bob, and deem the Founders' writings untouchable.

In 1953, Bill said, “Anybody who thinks that those of us who prepared that book were people running around glowing with inspiration and clothed in white robes is very, very much mistaken.” He further explained, “I was not really the author of that book; I was just the umpire of it”<sup>10</sup>

The best evidence against deifying and canonizing our founders, effectively putting personalities before principles, is Bill’s own words. I strongly encourage each of you to please read his article called, “Why

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<sup>8</sup> The 12 Concepts for World Service (2021-2023 Edition at C4)

<sup>9</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* p. 60

<sup>10</sup> 1953: Variations in The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (as reprinted in *Our Great Responsibility* p. 92)

Can't We Join A.A. Too", authored in 1947, reprinted in the Grapevine in 1980 and contained in "The Language of the Heart" at page 108.

In the article, Bill asks whether "so much sentiment for the 'founders' [is] entirely wise?" reasoning that "A.A. may be able to function upon the power of its own fundamental principles rather than on the prestige or inspiration of a highly personalized leadership." He affirms his belief that A.A. "can mostly depend upon God as we understand him working vitally in thousands of hearts rather than a few."

Bill goes on to profess his and Dr. Bob's heartfelt wish "to come and go among you like other people, without any special attention" and pleads with us to "begin to think of [them].. as early A.A.s only, not as 'founders'." <sup>11</sup>

**In asking whether we can examine and evaluate the Founders' writings, are we perhaps guided by 100 forms of fear rather than faith in our**

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<sup>11</sup> A.A. Grapevine October 1947 "Why Can't We Join A.A., too?" (as reprinted in *The Language of the Heart* p. 108)

## **Steps, Traditions, Concepts, and Bill's own words of experience, strength and hope?**

Through Delegates' Reports and personal experience, I have witnessed and heard of people, many of whom were or could be vested in service beyond the group level, step away because of disagreements over the Founders' writings and their tendency to monopolize assembly and Conference time. In turn, vital A.A. business is put aside or ignored.

Imagine if we took all the energy and passion that we annually devote to debating the Founders' writings, and redirected it towards preserving the service arms of A.A. and helping the scores of alcoholics who still suffer.

**So I ask all of you, does the constant debate about these changes discourage people from doing service beyond the group and prevent us from addressing other vital AA business?**



As we have seen, the Conference can choose to delay considering or voting on a matter to give the fellowship more time to ponder the issue.

In this age of distrust, which is beginning to spread into the fellowship, might a better framework be available?

For instance, on sensitive matters such as considering changes to the Founders' writings, designating more time beyond a single conference cycle.

Slowing down and spacing out the time between when proposals can be made and decided may allow for a clearer sense of the collective view to emerge: seeking something more akin to an informed group conscience and more effectively practicing our Second Tradition and Concept I.

My friends, even if we disagree in substance, we are all responsible for the hand of A.A. being there for the still suffering alcoholic.

There are those who say that consideration of any change to the Founder's writings is disunifying.

Just as we come to understand that there is a difference between humility and humiliation, so too is there a difference between unity and unanimity. We have all been at business meetings with disagreeable outcomes. Doesn't our humility teach us to practice taking fearless inventories, accepting the group conscience, and not demonizing the process?

*Might it be time for the fellowship to develop a special process merely for considering potential changes to the Founders' writings, allowing the broad array of voices in AA to be heard, and ensuring we continue to connect in love, unity and service?*

As to the second question, how would the changes be formatted on the page?

It seems like we have two long standing precedents already in existence:

We could use the practice in place for handling updates in factual material, using footnotes with advisories as to the changes in language.<sup>12</sup>

Or, we can follow the actions our Founders' took to correct any erroneous impressions the reader may have. Insert asterisks or some other symbol like the one appearing on page 25 of the Big Book. Whether the original text as written remains or it is updated, we can take our cue from the original 100 AAs and add an appendix, like the *Spiritual Experience*, to further explain.

Perhaps it could be open ended chronicling how we change especially in unforeseen situations, like the pandemic and called “Continuing to Extend the Hand of AA to *Every* Alcoholic who Still Suffers.”

Thank you for letting me be of service.

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<sup>12</sup>*Advisory Actions of the General Service of Alcoholics Anonymous 1951-2022* (eF-191) at pp. 85 (1980), 88 (1988) “Conference Literature Committee”