

Group Conscience Meetings and The Twelve Traditions

SA is ten years old at the national level today. Many groups in SA are getting to the place where there is continuity of membership and sobriety for the first time. Increasingly, various matters are coming up requiring decisions that should be made by the group as a whole. Group conscience meetings, proven invaluable in AA, are now becoming a way of life for us in SA.

What Are Group Conscience Meetings?

Group conscience meetings are to the group what the tools of the program are to the individual. The healthy functioning and growth of the group are vital to the healthy functioning and growth of individual members. We find that without participating in the fellowship of recovery we cannot survive for long. Thus, we dare not take the group for granted, regardless of what stage of growth it is in. "*Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on SA unity*" (Tradition One).

Group conscience meetings happen when group members get together and discuss and act on matters affecting the group. They take their rise from the decisions that must be

made any time two or more sexaholics get together to meet. Since "for our group purpose our only ultimate authority is a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience," we simply get together and decide matters by group conscience. "*Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern*" (Tradition Two).

Why Group Conscience Meetings?

Group conscience meetings bring into play the principles of the Twelve Traditions, and without the Traditions, we would not last long either as a group or as a fellowship.

One of the most important aspects of our recovery program is a willingness to be part of the business—and stresses—affecting the group. An experienced friend in AA says, "If people are not committed enough for business meetings, you don't really have a group; all you have is a social or psychological group of some sort—not a *program* group. One's commitment must be to meetings and to others making up the group. Thus, the importance of being committed to regular attendance at a home group. Merely taking from the group without making a direct contribution to its functioning is no good for the individual and no good for the group."

Another reason for regular group conscience meetings is that the group needs a sense of history. We need to know that we are part of a larger whole, a family. Engaging in the day-to-day life of grandparents and younger children and grandchildren makes one part of his or her larger biological family and gives a feeling of security and belonging. So many of us wander about as aliens, isolated and alone, even attending meetings. The difference is when we actually become *part* of the group as spiritual family. And being involved in the mission and responsibilities of the group is one of the best ways to do this.

We've found that just as with the individual, getting our own house in order *as a group* must come first if our primary purpose is to be achieved. And each group has but one primary purpose—"to carry its message to the sexaholic who still suffers" (Tradition Five). Notice that this says the message the group carries is *its* message. I as an individual may bear witness to the truth of my own experience to another individual one-on-one, but when that person comes into a meeting, it's the message of *the group* he or she gets. And what is the message of my group? Is it sobriety or insobriety? Support for the sickness or support for recovery? This is another reason why we need regular group conscience meetings, to periodically reassess the condition and orderliness of our own house. Just as the only thing to which I can really bear witness is the truth of my own experience, whatever that is, so the group only bears witness to the truth of its own experience. For this reason, some groups do periodic group inventories, measuring themselves against each of the Traditions.

How Do We Conduct Group Conscience Meetings?

Just how do we go about doing it? As well as we can! Half-measures avail us nothing in our own personal sobriety, and half-measures get us just about as much for the sobriety of the group. We need some structure when we get together to discuss these matters, just as we need a regular meeting format. Without structure, group conscience meetings can degenerate into chaos, where resentments may be ignited.

The home group I took root in used a very simplified form of common parliamentary procedure as a guide to assure democratic process and order. It saved the day many a time.

A group conscience meeting should have a Chairperson and Secretary. The Chairperson moderates the meeting, using the procedure and format the group has decided to use. The Secretary takes notes on items discussed and voted on, prepares the minutes for the record, and reads the minutes for approval at the next group conscience meeting. The notebook containing these minutes forms the essence of that group's history. There will be times when reference will have to be made to those minutes to clarify prior decisions. Usually the group's Treasurer reads and posts the financial report at each business meeting.

A group conscience meeting format can be very simple, but there should be a format. Something as simple as the following usually proves adequate:

- Chairperson calls the meeting to order.
- Open with the Serenity Prayer.
- Reading of the Twelve Traditions.
- Reading of the minutes of the last business meeting.
- Vote on approval of the minutes.
- Financial report.
- Old business.
- New business.
- Closing prayer.

It seems to work best if groups designate a minimum sobriety requirement for *voting* on business matters, even though all members may attend. This not only helps uphold our sobriety imperative but brings to the decision-making process a degree of experience and temperance that would otherwise be lacking.

It works better if we do not mix a group conscience meeting with the SA meeting itself. Such business discussions and votes should take place either before or after regular SA

meetings or at some other previously announced time and place. This preserves the integrity and quality of the meeting itself for its primary purpose—to share our experience, strength, and hope with each other for our common problem and carry our message to those who still suffer. It is tempting for the group leader to deal with such matters on the spot when members are right there already in a meeting, but we've found that we're mixing apples and apricots. SA meetings are for Program; group conscience meetings are for business. Thus, when items come up for immediate group decision, the secretary can state, for example, that there will be a group conscience meeting after the SA meeting to deal with it. Items affecting the group significantly, such as election of a new group secretary and other important issues, should be announced far enough ahead of time for all members to be well informed.

Summary

Group conscience meetings test our program, our sobriety, and our serenity, but like life itself, they are necessary for our growth. If we can discover, through our get-togethers, the tools and strength to live and work together—and God does for us what we cannot do ourselves—we prepare ourselves, our groups, and our SA Fellowship as a whole for what God has in store for us next. Yes, there may be trial-by-fire, and our own group conscience meetings are often the place where we feel the heat. But then we were never the kind of folk who were satisfied with the humdrum. The practice we get in relating to others in group conscience meetings seems to be part of the process of recovery and growing up.

If we are faithful to the little we have in each of our groups today, we will be ready for what tomorrow will bring. Our larger decision-making process at the intergroup and national

levels will grow out of our experiences in getting our own houses in order in our local groups. As always with us, it is from the inside out.

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[Note: For the all-important question of what constitutes a valid group conscience see the following AA article, "What's A Group Conscience?" —Ed.]

What's A Group Conscience?

"For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern." (Tradition Two)

One of the most appealing statements to me in all of the AA literature is the twelve words in the middle of the Second Tradition: "a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience." This told me that God was speaking to me through my group, through Alcoholics Anonymous. As long as I listened to this message, I couldn't go wrong. My whole attitude and outlook upon life would change. I would know a new freedom and a new happiness. I would not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. These were the things I was hearing around the tables.

Through the Second Tradition I have also learned to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand Him. In the beginning, when I was first sobering up, I didn't like to hear about God. But a strange thing was happening;

for the first time in my life I was among people with whom I felt at ease. Never had I been with a peer group before. I always felt better than the rest or beneath them—usually the latter.

Here, then, was a group of close friends before whom I could tell my most personal problems; things I once felt would go to the grave with me were now laid out on the table and discussed. A feeling of confidence came to me, and I knew everything was going to be alright.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a very unusual association. Not because of our Steps or the principles by which our members try to live, but because of the Twelve Traditions that hold us together. None is more unusual than this Second Tradition.

All organizations have someone presiding, someone who is entitled to give orders, to pass out directives, and to speak for the entire organization. This is not the case with AA. Recently one of our members, upon learning that he had been elected trustee-at-large for the United States, remarked, "I have finally worked my way to the bottom." Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Whenever we ask for a vote on a controversial issue in our group, should this be called a group conscience vote? It can if it meets certain criteria. Some of the things to consider before calling it a group conscience vote are as follows:

First, is the group well informed? Have both sides been heard and thoroughly discussed? Are we giving respectful attention to the minority's point of view? Many of us feel that AA should not engage in any controversy, but our Tenth Tradition only talks about "public controversy." The AA program was *built* on a great deal of controversy.

Second, if it is an important decision, has there been ample time for members not present to voice their opinion? Or is some eager beaver trying to push through a quick vote before the group becomes too well informed? In AA we should be

very, very slow in making changes. Except in rare cases, there should be no rush.

Third, has the vote been a substantial majority? If we have thirty-one members present, and the vote is sixteen to fifteen, then fifteen resentments walk out the door from that meeting. One of the Warranties of our Twelfth Concept states: "All decisions should be reached by discussion, vote, and wherever possible, substantial unanimity."

If these three conditions have been met, then we can truly say we have listened to a loving God expressing Himself in our group conscience.

For me, AA is not a big corporation with offices in New York City. It's principally just my little home group. If one of our members becomes a big shot and starts passing out orders, we're going to have big problems. Our group could even break up because of it. And without that group, it would surely be back to the gutter for me.