

CHAPTER THREE

GROUP CONSCIENCE

Discussion of group conscience generally focuses on either the process or the principle and prompts questions for most N.A. members. What constitutes a group conscience? How can we invite a loving God to be expressed in our group conscience? Does group conscience only apply to groups, or also to service committees and boards? What issues are to be decided by the groups? Who can vote? Is the group conscience for a group with fifty members weighted the same as that for a group with twenty-five members when it comes to Fellowship business? What is the responsibility of the trusted servant in relation to group conscience? These and many other questions are routinely asked.

It is essential to understand the concept of group conscience as a fundamental guide for conduct and procedure within Narcotics Anonymous. Our recovery and our service efforts are dependent upon this concept. In fact, rejection of the principle and/or the process would undermine and damage the Fellowship upon which our very lives depend.

DEVELOPING A GROUP CONSCIENCE

One of the miracles of Narcotics Anonymous is that we can get a large number of addicts to work together, individuals with differing personalities and opinions that may conflict. This tends to set forth a rocky ground over which we must travel to achieve the goals of the Fellowship at group, area, regional, and world services. By applying the spiritual principles of Narcotics Anonymous, we learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. We learn that when we act with fear, anger, or resentment our motives are usually based in ego. However, when we suppress our individual wants and self-obsession in the interest of the Fellowship, our decisions are based in love. To make these decisions based in love at times when we may not feel very loving is a gift of our recovery.

The primary purpose, as stated in our Traditions, calls for us to provide an atmosphere of recovery in our meetings in order to carry the message of recovery to other addicts. Unrestrained or uncoordinated efforts by all of our members to accomplish this primary purpose would lead to mass confusion and duplicated efforts. We must avoid this and move toward coordinated activities as a unified Fellowship. The starting place for this is in the decision-making process we call group conscience.

Group conscience is a difficult term to define and a process that has many variations in its implementation. Group conscience cannot be defined in clear authoritative terms (although our need for clear and specific direction might call out for an authoritative definition), but is rather described as a process.

There are many different interpretations of what group conscience is, how it is derived, and what it means. Nearly every member has his or her own understanding and when we explain our own version it is a little different from the next member's interpretation. This is understandable since Narcotics Anonymous does not require regementation or conformity in personal beliefs. We are concerned about unity, and our decision making process should make provision to strengthen unity, even when there is little regementation of thought or conformity of practice.

To understand group conscience we can examine some traditions that relate to the purpose and practice of group conscience. "Our common welfare" and "N.A. unity" as they are presented in the First Tradition clearly declare that a decision-making process is involved. We could not arrive at a practical understanding of what our "common welfare" is unless we went through a decision-making process. The same is true for "N.A. unity." The determination of what detracts from our unity or promotes unity implies a decision-making process. We must remember that once a group conscience decision is reached, it is time for us to put aside our personal differences and work together in the spirit of N.A. unity to accomplish the task at hand. If the decision is opposed to our personal point of view, we should do our best to surrender to the group conscience. By refusing to participate, quitting the group, or acting negatively towards the group conscience decision, we are stating that it is only a "good" group conscience if it coincides with our opinion. This resistance weakens the unity upon which our common welfare depends. Even if we disagree we can work with the group and trust a loving God with the results.

The Second Tradition clarifies this process by telling us that our efforts to arrive at a group conscience is a manifestation of the authority in our Fellowship which comes from a loving God. This should tell us that group conscience should include guidance from our Higher Power rather than the strong personalities or preferences of our members. If a loving God is involved in our exercise of group conscience, then we should be instruments of His expression rather than bullhorns demanding our way.

"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, " should mean more of a heartfelt search for a common understanding of the issue than for a demand that one view is right while another is wrong. A loving God is not expressed by fearful, punitive, or resentful actions. Group conscience decisions should not be made to punish individuals or place restricting directives on the Fellowship it serves. Group conscience actions should be made in light of our primary purpose and reflect the spiritual principles of N.A. The importance of this simplistic approach cannot be overemphasized, and if we do this many unnecessary problems can be avoided. This spiritual process of inviting a loving God to be expressed through our group conscience as stated in Tradition Two is closely related to the concept of spiritual anonymity which is set forth in our Twelfth Tradition.

Addicts tend to be very sensitive people. This should imply a sensitivity to others but more often it means we are easily hurt. Our personality, self image and self worth may be right on the surface of things we do. If we understand this and apply the spiritual principle of anonymity that is stated in our Twelfth Tradition to our participation in group conscience, we are less likely to become defensive or aggressive, and God is more likely to be expressed. This principle teaches us to quell our egos in the interest of the Fellowship and to place principles before personalities.

Two of the stumbling blocks to a spiritually based group conscience process are: (1) the issues become identified with people who propose or oppose them, and (2) we become emotionally involved. For group conscience as a process, it should not make a difference who is involved in the discussion or who or what is the subject of the discussion. We must deal with the principle, not the personality. This sounds so simple, but in fact is very difficult. It may take years for us as individuals to mature enough to leave our emotions out of our discussions of issues. This can be especially true when the issue is related to money, power, the Traditions, or N.A. as a whole. These must be overcome, especially by those who are most trusted in the group conscience process. It is hard for some of us who are heavily involved to let someone else have the last word in a discussion, but it may be that we should speak less and have faith that a loving God can express His will through others too.

Group conscience is a process which facilitates a group decision. Group conscience requires the group's awareness of the principles involved in their

motives and actions. The group should closely evaluate its decision-making process to insure it is acting in harmony with the spiritual principles of Narcotics Anonymous, the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions. The awareness of each member of a group will vary according to that member's personal circumstances in recovery. Therefore, the awareness of the group as a whole will represent a combined mixture of the spiritual recovery of each of its members. This general notion of awareness is only the beginning of understanding group conscience.

Group conscience is the method by which we process the mixture of factual information, personal opinions, and experiences. All of these are ingredients which exist in varying proportions in every group. The built-in catalyst and safeguard is the loving God Who is referred to in Tradition Two. Without this spiritual ingredient, the group conscience becomes an expression of our will rather than the will of a loving God.

The most crucial part of the group conscience process is involving a loving God in our decision making. Most of us have experienced group conscience situations where a loving God was expressed despite our clumsiest efforts. We have also experienced situations where group conscience was forced and subsequent disharmony resulted. Usually in these painful situations we have somehow blocked the expression of a loving God, by our own actions. Powerful personalities, rushed actions, misinformation, and/or lack of information are the underlying causes of our problems. These underlying causes can result in a group conscience that is not the best course of action and may even be destructive. Our group conscience will usually twinge uncomfortably as a result of these mistakes. When this occurs it is the responsibility of the group conscience to take stock of itself, focus once again on our primary purpose and N.A. principles, and then make the necessary group conscience decision to correct the mishap.

We can avoid unnecessary struggles by allowing a loving God to be expressed through our group conscience. This can be enhanced by providing full information, allowing ample discussion of all sides of the issue, keeping an open mind, and inviting God into the proceedings via a group prayer and/or moment of silence. Striving for substantial unanimity can enhance discussion, however this ideal cannot always be attained and our goal is to gain a mutual understanding of the issue. Our group conscience is a collective conscience of our individual consciences. This necessarily entails the efforts of each individual to set aside his or her ego, personal wants, and prejudices in an effort to reach what is best for the represented Fellowship. Clearing this clutter from our minds allows the spirit

of a loving God to be expressed through the channel of our collective group conscience. This allows us the joyous experience of humbly putting aside our individual wants and differences to work together in unity. While each member is an individual and each group is autonomous, it is important during the group conscience process to ascertain if our actions will possibly affect other people, groups, or even N.A. as a whole. This application of our Fourth Tradition allows us to experience the spiritual principle of rising above our own wants in the interest of others.

The more we develop and practice spiritual principles and apply the Steps and Traditions in our lives, the better our capability of inviting a loving God into our group conscience to provide the best possible direction. This spiritual component is essential to group conscience both as a concept and as a process. Because of this stabilizing ingredient, group conscience provides a process which can eliminate decisions based upon fear, self-will, resentment, retaliation, and other character defects. While no member of a group will be free of character defects at any given time, the group as a whole need not be guided by them as long as each member employs his or her personal Higher Power. In this process, the group takes on a collective Higher Power.

GROUP CONSCIENCE AND THE TRUSTED SERVANT

The Second Tradition states that for our group purpose our ultimate authority is a loving God Who may be expressed through our group conscience. It goes on to state that our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern. Obviously, these trusted servants have something to do with our group conscience or they would not have been mentioned in our Second Tradition.

The word ultimate means final; this automatically implies that there are other, lesser authorities. Though the final authority rests within the N.A. groups, they have the right to delegate certain responsibilities and the corresponding authority to get the work done. There are some decisions the N.A. groups will always want to participate in directly such as, changes in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, new literature approval, or any change in the nature of our Fellowship. Otherwise, the N.A. groups have delegated much of the active responsibility for N.A. services to their trusted servants through the adoption of the N.A. Service Structure.

The words leaders and authority may have negative overtones when we first arrive in Narcotics Anonymous. However, as we gain new insight on their meaning

and relationship to our spiritual Fellowship, we view them as they are stated in our Second Tradition. The word authority is defined as the right to act. In Narcotics Anonymous authority does not represent government, but the capability to perform the necessary functions that allow our Fellowship to grow and provide its services. This authority enables the trusted servant to perform his or her delegated responsibilities within the confines of those responsibilities. N.A. leaders are not the conventional types of leaders most of us have been accustomed to. N.A. leaders are trusted servants; they do not govern. N.A. leaders lead by example, not by directives. They maintain a mutual respect with the Fellowship they serve. Their example prompts us to want to support their efforts as they have developed our trust.

In choosing a trusted servant it is important to select a member who is an example of N.A. recovery. The member should have the necessary skills and/or spiritual attributes that suit the position. It is important that we select the best possible choice and not base our decision on popularity or availability. Effective trusted servants will have experience in working the steps, for only through an application of the steps in our lives can we begin to understand the spiritual principles underlying the traditions. They will have demonstrated in their service experience the ability to fulfill their terms, commitments, and responsibilities. They must be able to put principles before personalities in conducting their service responsibilities and themselves. They should be resources for guidance in areas concerning their responsibilities and yet be able to say "I don't know" when they are unsure and then research to locate the source of the answer. The trusted servant should be willing to bring about compromises, yet always adhere to N.A. principles. Most importantly, N.A. trusted servants must be open-minded, even to their critics, since they must always be looking for the most effective way to serve the Fellowship.

The reason N.A. leaders are called trusted servants is because they are placed in a position of trust by the group conscience of the Fellowship they serve. By trust we mean that we are placing with them the authority to act responsibly within their best judgment. The reason we place trusted servants in these positions is so they can perform the general administrative and related personal services that are necessary to the ongoing needs of Narcotics Anonymous. This insures that the message of recovery will continue to be available not only to the present members but to the addicts who are, and will be, stumbling blindly through the darkness and horrors of drug addiction. These services that are handled by the trusted

servants free the N.A. groups to focus on the primary purpose and provide the personal service that is the trademark of Narcotics Anonymous.

Trusted servants have decisions to make in performing their duties. Part of our trust is allowing them to make these decision. They are usually the ones with the most hands-on experience and information regarding the needs of the particular situations they are handling. If we insisted that they return to us with every decision, they would not be trusted servants at all, they would simply be messengers. If we made every decision for them, it would quickly demoralize them and take away their effectiveness. However, it is very important that the trusted servant keep the Fellowship informed of the actions they have taken in conducting their responsibilities.

Another part of our trust is giving them the right to decide which issues they should handle and which need wider consultation and subsequent direction. We must remember that we elected them to a position of trust and that they will use their best discretion and report to us on their actions. We should not expect them to bring every issue back to us for us to decide if we should handle it. This would make N.A. just another red tape bureaucracy which most addicts tend to revile. We must remember that any action that the trusted servant may make in error can be corrected by the Fellowship they serve. And we can be quite sure that the trusted servant will be promptly notified of our concerns. Though the trusted servant has been delegated these responsibilities and the right to make decisions, if there is any uncertainty with the decision, he or she should seek the experience and counsel of members, groups, or service committees, prior to the decision and its implementation. The Fellowship that is being served should receive a report on all actions taken by the trusted servant. Nothing can change the fact that some members are simply not interested in what they may see as "politics." We cannot force people to get involved or informed. Even when the members appear disinterested, the trusted servants have an obligation to inform and provide the opportunity for group conscience to take place. Reporting to the Fellowship on actions taken removes the potential for distrust that accompanies actions not reported on or explained.

Responsibility and trust is the beautiful balance within Tradition Two that captures the spirit of mutual respect that is necessary to effectively operate our services. Trusted servants, living examples of the principles of our Steps and Traditions, necessarily have been delegated the immediate responsibility of conducting our service affairs. In order to reasonably carry out these

responsibilities a certain amount of authority has to be delegated. If this were not the case, we would have one group with all the responsibility (trusted servants) and another with all the authority (the NA groups). Back and forth we would go, accomplishing very little in actual services. As a Fellowship we have a principal obligation to the addict who still suffers. If our services are ineffective and unable to respond, addicts will not recover. Granting our trusted servants the ability to act in accordance with our principles is how we can best serve our needs as a Fellowship.

This delegated authority and responsibility does not come without checks and balances. To insure the right relationship between delegated and ultimate authority, the NA groups should give careful consideration when choosing members to represent them. If their choice proves to be unacceptable they can always recall them or, in cases of great importance or urgency, they may withdraw all support of the service structure. If the groups don't support the service structure it will crumble. This is ultimate authority and shouldn't be used unwisely or in haste, but always exists if the N.A. groups feel it necessary to correct unacceptable actions of its servants. This is the full implication of Tradition Two, a right balance, providing our trusted servants with the ability to actively respond, keeping in mind to whom they must ultimately be responsible.

Our program is a set of principles that when applied provide a constant source of guidance for us all. Individuals as well as groups know too well the consequences of intolerance or indifference to them. Addicts will die and groups may dissolve. We must have faith that these principles will guide our trusted servants actions according to the will of a loving God Who guides us all. Mutual trust and respect between servant and group, and group and servant, will insure that N.A. services always remain responsible to those they serve.

Much confusion arises over the carrying of group conscience. Trusted servants frequently face challenging group conscience situations. A group conscience issue can be voted on by the Fellowship which is being represented and later, additional information may be available which sheds new light on the issue. At the service meeting, the issue could be amended to a point where it is quite different from the issue that was originally presented to that representative's Fellowship. This is where the right of decision takes place. The representatives must decide whether these changes are significant enough to be returned to those they serve. If not, the representatives utilize the trust bestowed upon them to make a decision based on the best possible understanding of the issue. In essence,

we instill our confidence in our trusted servants as a matter of course when they assume the duties and responsibilities of the position to which they have been entrusted.

As we can see, there are difficult situations that may arise requiring informed choices, and our trusted servants need to know that they have our loving support, confidence, and trust when handling these challenges. One of the ways the trusted servant earns and facilitates this trust is by regular communication. Presentation of information should be objective and fair with adequate explanation.

Realizing that these trusted servants are entrusted with the right of decision in handling and voting our group conscience issues places a new light on group conscience. Since we trust them to handle these responsibilities, it becomes apparent that group conscience is not only formed by the N.A. groups, but also by the service boards and committees that serve the N.A. Fellowship. Committees and boards are also given the right to decide which issues to handle and which to return to the service body to which they are responsible. This entrusts the most informed and experienced members to make decisions affecting their area of service expertise. It is important that we recognize the right of these committees and service boards to handle their responsibilities. They are made up of trusted servants and have correspondingly been delegated the responsibility and related rights of decision by the N.A. groups via the adoption of the N.A. Service Structure. They also operate according to our Ninth Tradition that states that we may create these service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve. The Fellowship has a deep commitment to insure the continuation of the service boards, committees, and trusted servants that make up the N.A. Service Structure. Further, it is the responsibility of the Fellowship which created this service structure to support it financially, emotionally, and with the human resources--the trusted servants themselves.

Over the years, service committees have adopted a variety of procedures to conduct their business. In many places around the Fellowship, the question of who participates as a voting member of a particular service body has stirred a great deal of discussion. Many arguments in our groups, area or regional committees and even the WSC have centered on who has the right to vote based on who does or does not "truly" represent a group conscience. It is not our desire to decide or dictate to our service committees how they should answer these questions. Each service body in N.A. should decide for itself, its voting participants.

(Each duly elected trusted servant is representative of the collective conscience of the members who so elected him, whether they be a group secretary, area subcommittee chairperson, regional treasurer, or trustee.)

As we can see, group conscience is not always a cut-and-dried issue. However, its spiritual basis in trusting a loving God will always adequately guide us as members and as trusted servants. Group conscience will continue to work as long as we let it.