

67th General Service Conference: Supporting Our Future Conference Workshop Summary

On Tuesday, April 25, 2017, members of the 67th General Service Conference participated in a workshop titled: “Anonymity: The Spiritual Foundation.” Conference members were divided into ten separate groups, with each group given four discussion questions about anonymity in A.A.:

1. What are some of the ways groups/districts in your area foster awareness of our principle of anonymity?
2. How has misinformation about personal anonymity among A.A. members been an obstacle in Public Information (P.I.) and Cooperation with the Professional Community (C.P.C.) service?
3. What is the experience of members in your area regarding social media with regard to A.A.’s anonymity Traditions?
4. How well do we practice “genuine humility”? As members? As a Fellowship?

The following is a summary of the sharing that took place during the workshop. This includes comments that reflect individual experience and viewpoints.

In response to the first question, ***“What are some of the ways groups/districts in your area foster awareness of our principle of anonymity?”*** each of the ten workshop groups — without exception — offered the solution: “Have workshops.” One group clarified themes to be shared within an anonymity workshop or at an A.A. event. In their view, a workshop or an event that addressed this topic would be successful if it focused on teaching members about A.A.’s anonymity. First, they would remind all that the principles of the A.A. program come first, and anonymity *is* a principle. The group proposed that those who participate in the workshops “share what anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous *is* and *is not*.” This workshop group then listed a multitude of ways to explain the principle of anonymity. Chief among them were using A.A.’s extant literature, such as the “Twelve and Twelve” to best understand Tradition 11 and Tradition 12: “Anonymity is part of our program name and our Fellowship name. We encourage reading our recovery and service material to enhance our understanding of this essential principle.” Finally, the group proposed to share with these future workshop members how “anonymity protects Alcoholics Anonymous, the Fellowship, and the still suffering alcoholic — not just the sober members.”

A number of Conference workshop groups listed social media users as the specific audience upon whom they believed accurate information about anonymity would have the greatest impact — and thus foster awareness of this critical principle. Raising the most alarm bells and triggering the most responses were the breaches of anonymity caused by A.A. members using social media sites, such as Facebook. Workshop group members had many examples to share about ***why*** we need to foster awareness of our principle of anonymity (i.e. “People get press, radio and film, but don’t seem to include the Internet and social media yet”). The majority of workshop groups noted breaks on social media sites.

For instance, one group stated that the main problem on Facebook was that someone will offer congratulations to another A.A. member, other people become inadvertently informed, and thus is anonymity broken. One group shared that “We have major issues with photographic anonymity issues because of the beautiful environment where conferences are held. Some members post the photos on Facebook.” Another member detailed how A.A.s get “excited at conventions” and, “in the heat of the moment, they text or send pictures out.”

All these breaks on social media did come with solutions offered by workshop group members. One Conference workshop group responded to the question, “What are some of the ways groups/districts in your area foster awareness of our principle of anonymity?” by sharing that a workshop called “Did you post your anniversary date on Facebook?” was offered to local A.A. members. Members who answered in the affirmative learned about the anonymity challenges with such a posting. This discussion then set the stage for more information sharing about how to remain anonymous while using social media sites, such as what “secret groups” are and how to use them. Many groups outlined the need for social media users to be aware of not just what they post, but whom they tag. Still another group lauded the young people in A.A.: “Our young people are very good about helping to explain how to manage your online presence anonymously.”

Finally, members from other groups in the workshop cited the importance of “Discuss[ing] social media and Facebook issues such as photographs, postings, tagging, and posting anniversary medallions.” Groups also shared that, as members, we must remind ourselves of “the value and need of humility, checking our motivation prior to taking an action, leading by example, making necessary materials readily accessible, reviewing available materials and reminding all of the availability of these materials.”

In fact, managing risk and preventing anonymity breaks were a topic that generated many solutions — and not just how to prevent anonymity breaks on social media sites, but how to avoid anonymity breaks in general. Chief among the solutions were what A.A.s do very well: Face-to-face discussion, sharing, and talking with fellow members — in particular, newcomers.

Newcomers, because they are new, often do not fully comprehend what is meant by “anonymity” in Alcoholics Anonymous. One group shared, “Explain the risk of breaking anonymity to newcomers, who are proud of becoming sober and want to talk about it by helping them to understand Tradition 12.” Other groups echoed the sentiment with statements such as: “[Have] one-on-one discussions with newcomers”; “Teach about anonymity at newcomer meetings”; “[Use] repetition in keeping members informed — with a continual big influx of newcomers [we must] talk, talk, talk”; and, of course, use sponsorship to communicate the principle of anonymity.

Although there were ten groups, each one comprised of several members, the suggestions shared were often identical or closely related. Of the ten groups, seven suggested either reading A.A.’s Anonymity Statement or adding another type of reminder for anonymity at the beginning of meetings. Still another group claimed, “No one is paying attention at meetings, so instead of talking about anonymity at the beginning or the end of the meeting, change it up!”

Using either method, the frequent suggestion to interject reminders about the importance of anonymity into the meeting underscored the usefulness the group participants thought it had on fostering awareness of our principle of anonymity.

Another “tried-and-true” method for fostering awareness is studying the A.A. Traditions, particularly Tradition 11 and Tradition 12, either through Traditions meetings, district/area workshops, group/district/area inventories, and other A.A. events. More than one group stated the importance of sharing about the Traditions regarding anonymity when taking meetings behind the walls and within institutions. These are the future members of A.A., and sharing with them the vital importance of anonymity to our Fellowship will have positive lasting effects.

Finally, “we aren’t a glum lot”! Workshop members proved this true as they shared some fun and creative ways to encourage A.A. members to talk and learn about anonymity:

- One area panel presented an “Anonymity Jeopardy Game.” In the game, categories created are about different types of anonymity issues;
- Use role-playing games where a member assumes the role of an anonymity breaker or someone who is asked: “how do you know so-and-so?”;
- One area P.I. committee did a travelling road show about anonymity in the digital age. The group member shared how effective it was “to be very personal with how we share and the mistakes that we have made”;
- Create or perform a skit about anonymity and how we do or don’t protect it;
- Make a game about anonymity by collecting picture cards. Ask members, “Which picture threatens or breaks anonymity?”

Members in each of the ten groups gave much thought to the second workshop question: ***“How has misinformation about personal anonymity among A.A. members been an obstacle in Public Information (P.I.) and Cooperation with the Professional Community (C.P.C.)?”***

As many responses show, misinformation about personal anonymity among A.A. members has been an obstacle in P.I. and C.P.C., impeding efforts to reach the still-suffering alcoholic. One workshop member stated, “If you are worried about your anonymity, don’t get into Public Information.”

Other responses, however, took a different tack: “Many members seem to think anonymity is absolute, they don’t understand that we need to let professionals know about our availability; the members fear being seen at events.” Indeed, as the A.A. Guidelines for Cooperating with the Professional Community states, “When approaching C.P.C. service work, some A.A. members are concerned that revealing their identity to members of the professional community constitutes an anonymity break, since the Eleventh Tradition states that ‘Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films’ ... However, the purpose of C.P.C. and P.I. service work is to share with the general public what A.A. is, what we do, and how to get in touch with us. Our hope is that an alcoholic, or a concerned friend or relative, who hears about A.A. will know that we offer a solution to alcoholism.”

Though this material is widely available, the workshop group wrote: “Members seem to have little knowledge that P.I./C.P.C. materials and committees are available to provide knowledge and materials to assist with and staff these events.”

Regarding personal anonymity, another group stated: “Members are confused within the Fellowship”; “Some won’t go to health fairs because they are fearful of their anonymity.” Furthermore, members of this same group noted that “there’s a misinformed belief that providing information is breaking anonymity,” and this obstacle is preventing A.A. members from providing service and information to those who could help the still-suffering alcoholic.

Other workshop participants offered advice on how to correctly protect personal anonymity and how to dispel misinformation. They stated that “giving out your full name at functions or events is allowed, because you are a future contact for A.A. help.” Also, members stated that we need to talk more about the “difference between open and closed meetings and the reasons for their existence.” Another group answered the question by sharing some advice about how to educate members about personal anonymity and P.I./C.P.C. work:

- Discuss how to attend booths at various events;
- Educate members that we are not a secret society;
- Use the “Speaking at Non-A.A. Meetings” pamphlet;
- Insure full names and faces are not recorded;
- Discuss ways to inform the media about our anonymity Traditions;
- Educate, educate, educate.

Though many members in the workshop groups identified some obstacles caused by misinformation, there was one member who said “It’s not an obstacle. We do a lot of national TV across Quebec using the back of the head. We do a lot of radio PSA work. We do some large magazines. We have so many methods of participation in large media.”

Workshop members delved into the third question, **“What is the experience of members in your area regarding social media with regard to A.A.’s anonymity Traditions?”** Member responses to the question contained serious cautions, warnings and numerous tales of broken anonymity, as well as equally passionate tales of success and hope. One member made the comment that this was “hot button topic.”

Many answers were critical and pinpointed problems. One group answered:

“A.A. has been slow to respond to this issue and has offered little guidance. Social media users seem to not understand that little or nothing on social media is actually secret. Users have no knowledge of who is viewing the postings, or why... There seem to be several misunderstandings about anonymity in this situation which include humility, the unintended breaking of someone else’s anonymity, especially including the practice of tagging of individuals in attendance at an AA event when the photo was taken. This problem with social media seems to be deep-rooted, reaching members of all ages, as well as all positions from trustees to home group members.

Group members contributed many cautionary statements, such as “there is no such thing as a private page” and “anyone can see the names and postings in your private group.” Some commented how you can “search for anyone” and “If you’re on social media, you will be tracked. Anyone interviewing candidates for positions will find out all about you. From a professional point of view, you must be very careful.” Other comments urged vigilance, that “even using [A.A.] quotes online can be looked at to show membership.” Another member acceded that an online comment, made on social media, may have no issues with anonymity, but those that see it may post something that reveals membership in A.A.: “Your online post might be good, but beware of comments on your post.” Concern was even expressed about a person’s tattoos — including the tattooing of A.A. prayers, sayings and sobriety dates — that might identify people as members.

Many comments seemed to eschew the use of social media: “What we are doing doesn’t need to be on social media.” In two groups, members commented that the Hispanic A.A. community does not use social media widely. In another group, one member shared about an issue on YouTube and other video pages: “Speaker tapes are being posted and posted without permission. My A.A. talk was collated with my professional talks. We have a need to broaden the conversation to protect all the Traditions.”

On the other hand, other comments from group members seemed to suggest that there is hope for A.A.s using social media sites without disregarding our spiritual principle of anonymity. For instance, someday we may use it appropriately and not name our friends as fellow members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Members shared that “We need to at least try it and show people how to do it.” ... Other groups echoed this sentiment, commenting that this is “an ongoing conversation. We are still talking and we need to figure out more.” Others agreed, commenting that “if we save lives, we need to use it. We will make mistakes, but be tolerant.” Still other groups expanded on this, viewing social media as a tool for communicating to the public and to alcoholics, it is best to “use all the tools” of communication. Another referenced Bill W. and reminded members that he believed that we have to keep up with the changing trends of communication.

In one group, several members commented on the value they found mixing their A.A. program and social media: “[I am] thankful for social media and [I] use secret meetings. The posts that are sent may be to a certain group, not everyone.” Another in the group agreed, saying that he or she “uses social media and has good results.”

Some A.A.s shared hope and turned negative experiences into positive ones. A workshop member described a Facebook post where a group picture was posted as an A.A. birthday. A person, not in the picture, was named. The good news? The member had a concrete example of how NOT to use social media. Continuing in this hopeful vein, another said the “topic is very important to a member who is active on social media because the member feels responsible for setting an example of how to use social media.” Members like this — active on social media and striving to keep the spiritual foundation of anonymity — are not alone. One member posited that “this is an issue about people, not platforms. People are guided by Traditions. I ... have to protect my own and others’ anonymity on television or the Internet.

I have to embrace humility [about] what I share in A.A. and about A.A. You can apply all of our Traditions and use social media. I participate on many mediums in relation to my recovery and helping others. I use Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, and more. I do it all with my anonymity protected and with others' anonymity protected. I do not post about recovery in public spaces without protecting my anonymity and that of others. I post mostly about public info on Twitter, I use Facebook for fellowship, I use Skype and some others for meetings, and I use Reddit to help newcomers. Reddit pages host over 60,000 anonymous followers who actively seek help every day."

Workshop members also responded to the topic with many suggestions about how to maintain our spiritual tradition of anonymity in our digitally driven world:

- Have and adhere to guidelines when recording speakers;
- Remind A.A. participants at events not to record or take pictures with members in the background;
- Society knows the code "Are you a friend of Bill?" It doesn't work to keep anonymity safe;
- Think our online actions through and practice "restraint of click and send";
- Pay attention to the "Privacy Setting" on our posts. Can friends of friends see our posts?;
- Use our Class A trustees;
- Have workshops on "secret" groups and "private" groups;
- Do not add people to social media groups without their express permission.

Lastly, workshop members in each of the ten groups considered the final workshop question: ***"How well do we practice a genuine humility? As members? As a Fellowship?"***

Turning the focus inward, members of the workshop gauged how well they practiced the genuine humility referenced in Tradition Twelve — how well they were able to place principles before personalities. Members practiced a genuine humility on a personal level (as A.A. members) in a variety of ways: "when I humbly accept gifts received from my Higher Power and the collective Higher Power of the Fellowship which saved our lives" and "when I'm concerned about others, admitting and taking responsibilities in a humble way for others' sake, not my own."

Workshop groups shared that the "practice of Tradition Twelve needs to be the guiding principle of A.A. at all levels" — keeping in mind that "the practice of genuine humility is different at the different levels of A.A."

As a Fellowship and as members, we practice a genuine humility when we realize that "People respect the positions we hold, not the individual. We need to honor the position." Practicing humility — genuine humility — entails "being right-sized. We find out who we are — because that is where we are most effective." Along these lines, another workshop member strived to have "no name and no aspirations in A.A."

Members also had much to quip about humility: "As soon as you think you have humility, you've lost it" and "Not thinking less of yourself, but thinking less about yourself." And, as A.A. members, we "get rid of self-centered thoughts that crowd out the rest of our life."

Two groups referenced Dr. Bob, and shared that we are not practicing a genuine humility when we “break anonymity at a public level” or when we are so anonymous that we do not know one another. “We must have anonymity on the outside,” shared one group, “but not on the inside.”

As a delegate, one member redoubled efforts at a genuine humility, and admitted that he or she did not have all the answers necessary to address issues in social media. Another group member identified the difficulty of ego and being elected delegate. Members noted that the delegate often seems to be put on a pedestal — especially when sharing turns to how service is such a large part of recovery. It was commented, “Ego does not enter when group members do not forget that 'we' not 'I' do things.” “Ego is the enemy of humility,” shared another. “Watch for it and curb the spotlight!”

In other groups, members noted that the “sacrifice of the G.S.O. staff and the delegates were a testament to humility.” Another noted that “when we find ourselves taking the inventory” of another (person or group), we are not practicing a genuine humility and we are not placing principles before personalities. One member practiced “genuine humility” by “finding love in fellow members — despite their faults.”

One workshop group presented a summary of member feelings and thoughts on the question, “How well do we practice genuine humility?": “It was felt that this came back to sponsorship and that the use of last names is ego driven... Humility and responsibility go hand in hand... It is the delegate’s job to simply pass on a message of depth and weight. We must try not to rest on our laurels, but to remain focused and keep working. Humility is simply being a member of the group.”

One workshop group shared that, as a Fellowship, “we also practice genuine humility when we avoid talking about A.A. as the best solution. Instead, we just say 'We can help.'” Another member provided a pertinent reminder that we should not “keep the treasure,” but pass it on.