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Panel # Diversity in A.A.: We are responsible for A.A.'s future

The Hand of A.A.: Inclusive Never Exclusive

Recently I have stopped saying the Lord's Prayer and chanting at the end of meetings. I look around the room during the prayer and to my surprise; there are a few newcomers and a few old-timers with their eyes open and also looking around. I do use this time to ask my higher power which I call God, to guide me where he will.

When I was asked to present here at PRAASA, I was of course nervous but thrilled to hear my topic assignment, "The hand of A.A.:Inclusive never exclusive" Panel #4 Diversity in A.A. We are responsible for A.A.'s future. This topic has come up over and over again in Idaho Area 18 and I'm sure in every other Area. Of course this topic could mean many things. It could mean making sure we are including people with other addictions, as long as they have a desire to not drink. It could mean that we make sure we are taking care of special needs. It could be about the chanting at the end of a meeting (we don't want anyone thinking we are a cult now, do we?). Or we could be talking about helping people read (you know "God could and would if he were sought".) But I think that when we say "Inclusive never Exclusive" we all think of the same thing. Religion! The Lord's Prayer. Now the Lord's Prayer is not a bad thing. I personally like it. But, that's my personal opinion. As I started doing my research to write this very heartfelt and deep moving presentation, I came across, from all places... an Agnostic and Atheists AA facebook page. I could not have written it better. I have asked them if I could use part of their article and they have given me their permission, so here it goes.

When reading the Bible and leading prayer in U.S. schools was outlawed in 1963, it was due to action brought by a Unitarian minister on behalf of his son. The district court ruled in his favor, saying:

“The reading of the verses, even without comment, possesses a devotional and religious character and constitutes in effect a religious observance.”

If a vote had been taken, prayer and Bible reading would certainly have been retained in the schools. Many Americans were outraged that a tiny minority, sometimes a single child, could keep them from expressing their faith. Billy Graham said: “[i]n my opinion ... the Supreme Court ... is wrong. ... Eighty percent of the American people want Bible reading and prayer in the schools. Why should a majority be so severely penalized ...?”

The U.S. Congress drafted over 150 resolutions to overturn it, but it remains law. Today, many believers still feel like a persecuted majority. Some choose private schools for this reason. But the court reasoned that public schools must be kept neutral regarding religion since kids were required to attend.

But AA isn't like America; there is no Bill of Rights. Meetings are run by simple majority, referred to in Tradition Two as the ‘group conscience’ which is said to be the expression of a loving god. Each meeting is autonomous and can do whatever the majority wants. If you don't like a meeting, you can go to another one. This is the same approach businesses and churches take. Shop-owners can display Hindu shrines or crucifixes. If you don't like it, you can go elsewhere. If you don't like the Lord's Prayer in a church service, you can go elsewhere.

So A.A. is more like a church or a business than the public schools. There is no minority protection and no expectation of religious neutrality. If you don't like a meeting, you can go elsewhere.

Do we want to say this to our fellow alcoholics? Is mixing religion and AA in line with our primary purpose? Or is it simply more comfortable for the majority?

My view is that separation of church and AA is best for the newcomer. It is the most inclusive stance we can take. This goes against 75 years of AA tradition, so we have to consider how important tradition is. Tradition is usually thought to embody distilled wisdom and provides a source of familiarity and comfort. When we think about prayer in AA meetings, we have a choice: we can show that mixing religion and AA is best for AA members, or give up some comfort in favor of being more inclusive.

Now A.A. is a spiritual program. That's the whole point of the 12 steps. "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps". But my job is not to tell someone what kind, when or how they should have that spiritual experience. My job is to share my experience, strength and hope with others, which ironically includes praying to a God of my understanding.

Remember "To us, the Realm of the Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive, or forbidding...." *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 46.

We are responsible for A.A.'s future, let it begin with us.