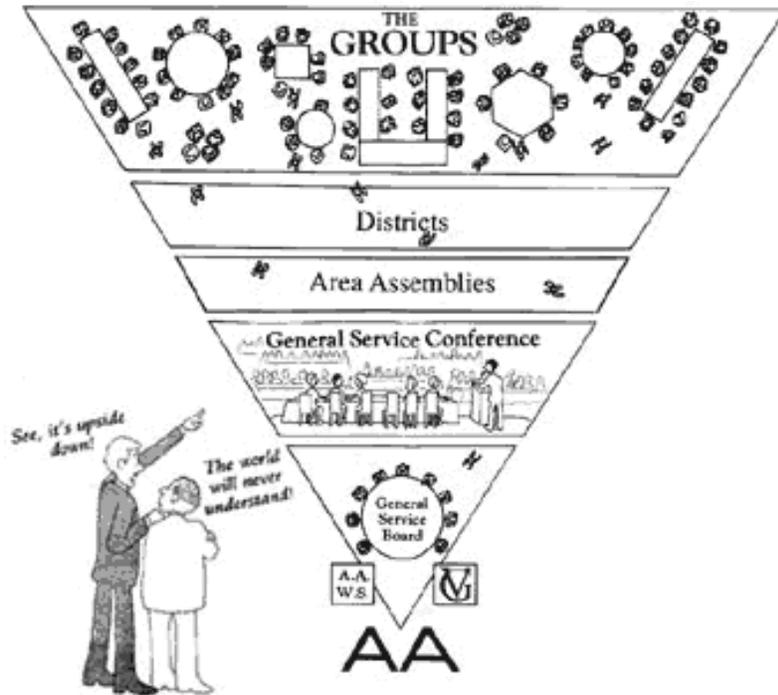




## Do we serve or do we govern? Vancouver and the A.A. Service Triangle. Which end is up?

*Bill W eliminated barriers to AA membership  
Why kick alcoholics to the curb now?*



The inverted triangle of Alcoholics Anonymous service structure is fundamental to our society. To serve—not govern—differentiates AA from other societies. Ignoring this principle for a specific agenda or other exception will invite a cast of unintended consequences ranging from hard feelings to a total compromise of our system, forfeiting our fellowship as we have known it for over 78 years.

The inverted triangle is AA's protection from tyranny. Two tyrannies are described by Bill W. in the Twelve Concepts<sup>1</sup>. The two risks are the tyranny of the majority as well as the tyranny of

the minority. This inverted triangle prevents the threat of a minority within AA having their rights trampled on. As well, special interest groups can't railroad the agenda.

Most democracies work the other way around with the power held by a few at the top. They dictate rules, policy and enforcement upon the masses. Some of the inefficiencies, corruption and divisiveness we see in everyday politics are largely avoided in AA. Our inverted service structure is largely to thank for that. Upend this triangle— *leaders* at the top and members and our groups at the bottom, instead of members and groups at the top and *trusted servants* at the bottom—and we have the same struggles, lobbying, politics and inequity inside AA as we see in the world outside. Much of what Bill W. observed as causing the downfall of organizations that came before us have been solved or prevented, so long as we maintain the integrity of our code of love and tolerance.

Predictably, when someone tries to subordinate groups and members with *leadership* the language used is, "This is an emergency." Just as skilled interrogators can spot the *tells* of a liar, a supposed AA emergency is a *tell* that someone is on a power trip.

For our non-alcoholic trustees who find their way to the AA General Service Board of Directors, one of the intriguing lessons about AA is an expression heard in Board meetings, “There are no emergencies in A.A.” The reason for that is our inverted triangle that sustains our unique society.

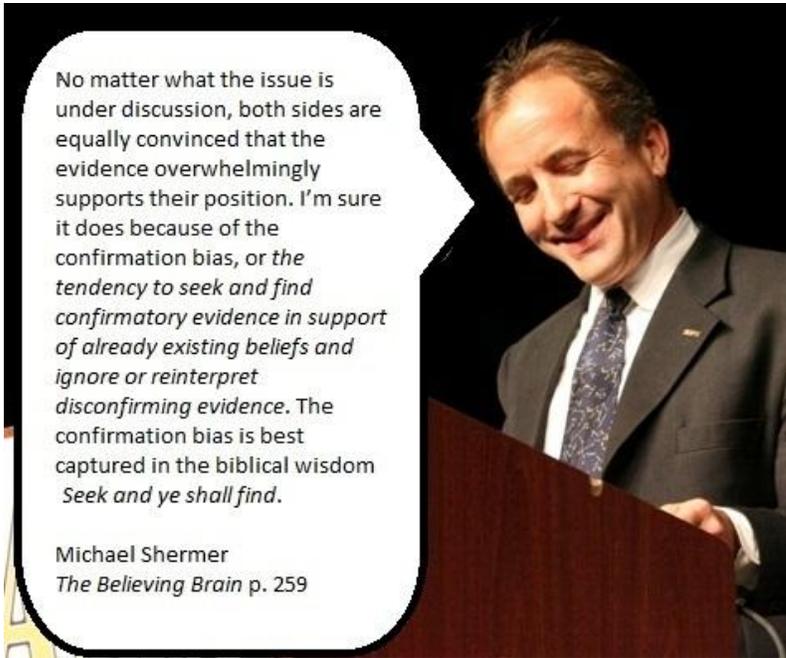


Vancouver is on AAs’ mind for their winning bid for the 2025 World Convention. In 2015 we are in Atlanta, 2020 we head for Detroit, then many will gather in Canada’s *Left Coast* capital for what I am sure will be a great gathering. That’s not exactly living in the moment, I suppose, but having lived in Western Canada for a

significant period of my sobriety I can say that our fellowship is in for a treat, or at least those of us who are still around. Right now, Vancouver is in the AA spotlight from another reason.

Vancouver’s Intergroup has a nefarious power play going on. The situation compromises the integrity of our cherished inverted triangle service structure. While we need not meddle in specific issues of a specific Intergroup, this case is worth examining because it encapsulates a mean-spirited attitude that has implications for the whole of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Am I biased on this issue? More than most of us and I will happily disclose my vested interest. While it clouds my judgement, it need not cloud yours. I won’t feign objectivity but I do have a unique position that I will candidly put to you for your consideration. I suffer from the same *confirmation bias* described by Michael Shermer as does the powers that be at the Greater Vancouver Intergroup Society (GVSI). My hope is that I can make my point, fairly represent theirs, and you can be objective. This matter does impact all of us.



No matter what the issue is under discussion, both sides are equally convinced that the evidence overwhelmingly supports their position. I’m sure it does because of the confirmation bias, or the tendency to seek and find confirmatory evidence in support of already existing beliefs and ignore or reinterpret disconfirming evidence. The confirmation bias is best captured in the biblical wisdom *Seek and ye shall find.*

Michael Shermer  
*The Believing Brain* p. 259

What looks like a simple question of “are agnostic AA groups AA enough?” is a slippery slope, slipping out of the spiritual safety net of AA’s Twelve Concepts and Twelve Traditions. As I lay out Vancouver’s position, I contend that it is only defensible by ignoring the inverted triangle (groups on top, trusted servants below).

To be fair, I don't know what other people are thinking or what motivates them. I am guessing here, drawing on what I am like when I think I am on *a mission from God*. I say this metaphorically, of course but who hasn't been so sure we were right that we only see what we want to see. I have done it; I have been overly zealous. When I am like that, it's tempting to think the end justifies the means. I not condemning Vicki; who is the GVIS General Manager who emailed all of the Vancouver Intergroup reps or Jim J who authored an 18 page document called *Report on Agnostic Group(s)*. I am questioning the agenda, however. Actions suggests that whoever has removed AA groups from the directory and called for the urgent attention to get the blessing from the Intergroup reps for this discrimination, sees themselves as the leader, guiding the discussion, setting the parameters, and executing whatever executive privilege he or she deems that "the emergency" warrants. I just happen to disagree that there is an emergency or anything that needs intervention.

Here are the facts of the Vancouver issue, as described by Viki's email to Intergroup Reps and Jim's 18 page *Report on Agnostic Group(s)*:

1. In 2012 We Agnostics Group registered their group with General Service Office in New York and provided their particulars to the (then) GVISI manager and We Agnostics was included in the meeting directory for the Greater Vancouver area.
2. In the spring of 2013 Sober Agnostics followed the same process described above.
3. By executive decree, the Fall 2013 Intergroup elite removed the two AA groups from the meeting directory, deeming them unfit.

Viki's email to Intergroup reps states, "In January there will be discussion about this submission and a decision made as to what constitutes a 'listable' group."

Listable? I looked for that word in *the AA Word Service Manual* and again in the pamphlet "The A.A. Group" and I don't find it. I looked again under "A.A. Guidelines: Central or Intergroup Offices, (G.S.O. MG 02)." I hit Control-F on my keypad, type in "listable" and no luck. Neither *listable* nor *unlistable* are part of the 78 year old service structure lexicon of Alcoholics Anonymous. *Listable groups* is a made-up expression to describe a made up emergency.

AA has been here before; Woman, African Americans, LGBTQ and young people weren't welcomed with open arms, at first. Bigotry darkened AA's history. Today of course, men's women's, LGBTQ or young people's groups exemplify how the majority accommodates the needs and wishes of the minority. Each group governs itself without supervision, scrutiny or the fear of expulsion. Disagreement, disobedience and nonconformity are no threat to AA unity. AA is self-correcting. If a group gets it wrong, it fades out by itself; no intervention required. We don't judge. We don't interfere. We certainly don't expel members or their groups. We remember what Bill W. writes about our history:

We built a fine-mesh fence right around A.A.

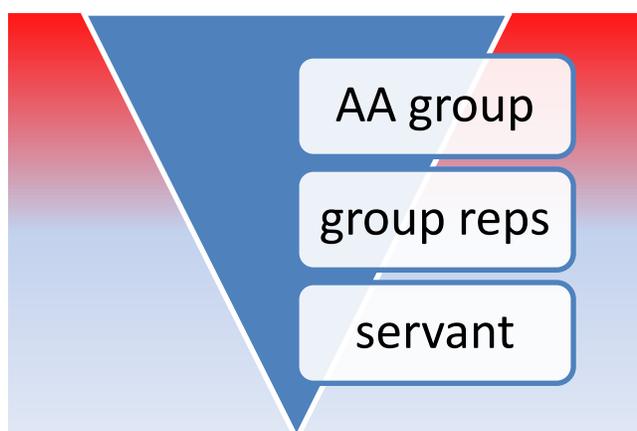
"Maybe you think we oldtimers were pretty intolerant. But I can tell you there was nothing funny about the situation then. We were grim because we felt our lives and homes were threatened, and that was no laughing matter. Intolerant, you say? Well, we

were frightened. Naturally, we began to act like most everybody does when afraid. After all, isn't fear the true basis of intolerance? Yes, we were intolerant."

How could we then guess that all those fears were to prove groundless? How could we know that thousands of these sometimes frightening people were to make astonishing recoveries and become our greatest workers and friends? *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* p. 140 – 141

The *Report on Agnostic Group(s)* claims that we have to *burn forbidden books* and demand conformity. I expect the *good intention* of delisting rogue groups is to preserve the integrity of the AA message. Jim sees himself as a righteous Intergroup protector and steward of the AA way of life. He has, as I will argue, slipped on a power-trip and taken liberties that no AA trusted servant should indulge in. The Intergroup police force's rationalization for implementing the un-AA-like practice of judging and refusing service to groups they find disagreement with is that their ends (which Jim and Viki feel are in line with AA's ends) justify their means. But the means embrace what we avoid in AA—the *seat of perilous power*.

There is no perilous power in AA's inverted triangle. Groups are autonomous. AA has over 114,000 groups according the January 2013 survey<sup>ii</sup>. That is over 100,000 ways that our rituals are expressed, what we take and what we leave, with no one evaluating our *listability*. Only our group conscience dictates to the meeting. Guiding the group, we believe in a higher power, be it a creator-God or power of example and democracy within the rooms. That's Tradition Two.



Our General Service Office has no say on our group's affairs. Neither does Intergroup. Every member gets one vote and the group as a whole decides, keeping our Traditions in mind.

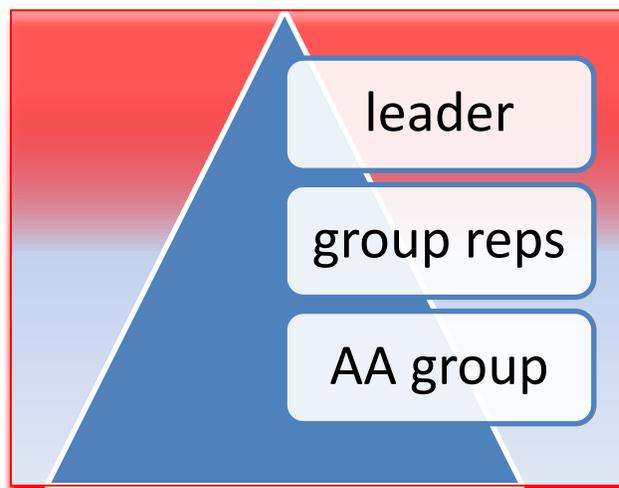
Alcohol impairs an alcoholic's perception. Drunk, we fear things that aren't real. The alcoholic's ego gets warped at times. Power can intoxicate and impair our perception, too. Who hasn't heard "this is a disease of perception." When drunk on power, our world is turned upside down—including the AA service structure. We see this upended service structure in Vancouver judging group fitness. Here are Vancouver Intergroup's arguments.

1. Toronto delisted groups so Vancouver can, too.
2. Books are being read that aren't *conference approved*.
3. The General Service Conference is the custodian of the Twelve Steps. Anyone who modifies the Step, forfeits their status in the fellowship of AA.

Toronto did de-list two agnostic groups and then gathered to throw out a third one. For the record, I am a member of one of these original groups sent to the curb. Only someone who sees themselves at the top of a pyramid scheme could justify another Intergroup as an authority or precedent. If there are no leaders, there is no follow-the-leader.

Two wrongs don't make a right. There are hundreds of agnostic AA groups and most are rights-bearing equals among the other groups in their districts (or Intergroups). When people understand AA's structure you don't have to doubt God to support agnostic groups. Most people who support gay and lesbian groups or woman's or young people's groups have never had been to one—who cares what *they* do at *their* group. "It's not my business. They are a group if they say so."

Exactly the same drunk-on-power Kool-Aid is being consumed in other jurisdictions, including Indianapolis, Des Moines and Toronto. By the way, of note to Vancouver AA that was not covered in Jim's 18 page report is this: since the Toronto agnostic vote, agnostic groups are multiplying and attendance is growing. Conversely, group contributions have been below budget at Toronto Intergroup ever since the *listability* question (to borrow from Viki's vocabulary). I don't know if the discriminatory vote followed by the decline in Intergroup contributions is connected. Bill W did talk about "the power of the purse." It is mere speculation to consider that Toronto is having another vote—voting with group contributions, showing disapproval for their Intergroup.



Toronto's fight was not between those who believe in a creator-God and those don't. It was a stand on which end of the pyramid is at the top and which end is at the bottom. Most member's don't support scapegoating minorities or discussing *other* groups' affairs in *their* business meetings. That is un-AA. In an inclusive society, like AA, the majority reduces barriers and accommodates minorities. We don't vote them off the island.

Banned books? Are you kidding me? A power tripper might see General Service Office atop of their service pyramid (pictured above), approves the books that we print and disapproves of books that AA doesn't print. In reality, what members or groups read is not GSO's concern. GSO sees its role as supporting the needs of the groups (at the top)—no policing, just service. Having written one of these books that renders a group *unlistable*, I will devote another, more humorous, blog post about forbidden readings in group rituals. But, thanks Jim, for getting the word out.

Appendix E in *the A.A. Service Manual* is the BYLAWS of the General Service Board, Inc. Here's what it says and this—I think—is the biggest cause of confusion and the most emotionally charged issue:

The “General Service Board” (or the “Board”) claims no proprietary right in the recovery in the recovery program, for these Twelve Steps, as all spiritual truths, may now be regarded as available to all mankind. However, because these Twelve Steps have proven to constitute an effective spiritual basis for life which, if followed, arrests the disease of alcoholism, the General Service Board asserts the negative right of preventing, so far as it may be within its power so to do, any modification, alteration, or extension of these Twelve Steps, except at the instance of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. (S111, *the A.A. Service Manual combined with Twelve Concepts of World Service* by Bill W.)

To whom is this statement so emotional? Those who revere the Twelve Steps as sacred get a little testy about this turgid decree. On the other hand, if you see the Twelve Steps as suggestions and not a requirement for good standing in our Fellowship, or loosely articulated principles, the wording of such, being optional—then you would see agnostic Steps as imaginative—not sacrilegious. “Good for you; whatever works.”

What oversight does “asserts the negative right of preventing, so far as it may be within its power so to do, any modification, alteration, or extension of these Twelve Steps” imply? Who does it govern and who is doing the governing?

The answer to the above questions depends on what triangle you envision for AA service structure. If GSO (or Intergroup) is at the top, the Board takes action against any member, group or service body that takes artistic liberty with our Twelve Steps That’s because you would see the BYLAWS at the pointy top of the pyramid, governing all that are below.

GSO is at the point but, the point is not the top; it’s on the bottom. These are the BYLAWS that govern the Board and the annual General Service Conference. It is a protection that prevents the few (being the Board of the delegates, trustees and AA employees that make up the Conference) from deciding, on behalf of us groups and members, what changes should be made to the Steps or Traditions. The Board and the Conference work for our autonomous groups whose will is filtered down through the service structure. The Conference conducts AA’s business on behalf of our members and groups. They serve—they do not govern. Perhaps GSO might ask a newspaper to correct a misrepresentation of the Twelve Steps but they certainly don’t tell 114,000 groups what to read or how to interpret the AA program.

Personally, trustees or delegates may disagree with my group writing God out of the Steps. They are entitled to an opinion. But they have no authority to have our group practices obeying their personal image of AA. Again, the theme is serving—not governing.

Just as importantly, the minority of groups that state, “no God please, we’re agnostic,” cannot demand that AA change everything to suit them. There is no tyranny of the minority or the majority. Just because some find god-talk lacking or even offensive, not all of AA is going to change to meet each individual whim. We don’t have to be in uniformed agreement. Each group is autonomous.

Meanwhile, back in Toronto, “Except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole,” is Barbara H’s retort to defend her stewardship of Toronto Intergroup. While she sees agnostic

expulsion as doing God's will, Bill W would have been ashamed of such bigotry. Being inventive about how a group interprets the Steps isn't *affecting other groups or AA as a whole*. The author of our Steps defended any group's right to *de-God* the Steps or reject them completely<sup>iii</sup>.

An Intergroup Chair, drunk on power, could suffer a hallucination of false authority. She or he would see the enforcement role not only as ultimate power but as an ultimate, noble duty. Is this an innocent mistake?

I am not so charitable. *The A.A. Service Manual*, when read in its entirety, has a spirit that is just so obviously inclusive and permissive. Membership requirements: zero. There is no authority over groups. Yes, we hope that groups and individuals understand and practice our Traditions. But members and groups are self-governing. Traditions are not AA rules. They are an expression of our experience—not our expertise. The final page of our Manual makes it so painstakingly clear; there is no punishment for nonconformity; love and service is our code.

I think anyone who wants to impose their AA values as mandatory rules over another autonomous AA group is a zealot. I don't like muckers so I don't go to their meetings. I don't try to run them out of AA; to each their own.

Those of us with strongly held beliefs are sometimes threatened by those with convergent beliefs. The atheist, the poly-theist and the monotheist can't all be right. But we can all get along. "Whenever, wherever a hand reaches out for help, we want the hand of AA always to be there." For some, that means a slightly different way of doing things. The rest of us will accommodate—that's love and tolerance. Accommodation is the AA way, not condemnation.

To judge another is the most un-AA of all. To scapegoat is worse. The service we do in our Twelfth Step is not our recovery. If someone thinks someone else's program need to be talked about and their "listability" should be discussed, that isn't a service emergency. That's a recovery emergency. *We claim spiritual progress, rather than spiritual perfection*. We all have recovery emergencies. There are no service emergencies. Hasty, uninformed and angry majorities haven't made a better AA in Toronto. I hope Vancouver can learn from the mistakes of others. Let's each stick to our recovery and ask how we can be of service to others.

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<sup>i</sup> "...the greatest danger to democracy would always be the 'tyranny' of apathetic, self-seeking, uninformed or angry majorities. Only a truly dedicated citizenry, quite willing to protect and conserve minority rights and opinions, could, he thought, guarantee the existence of a free and democratic society. All around us in the world today we are witnessing the tyranny of majorities and even worse tyranny of very small minorities invested with absolute power." *the AA Service Manual*, p. 24 [http://aa.org/pdf/products/en\\_bm-31.pdf](http://aa.org/pdf/products/en_bm-31.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Box 4-5-9 Vol. 59, No. 2/ SUMMER 2013 reports 2,131,549 members and 114,642 groups as of January 2013 [http://aa.org/lang/en/en\\_pdfs/en\\_box459\\_summer13.pdf](http://aa.org/lang/en/en_pdfs/en_box459_summer13.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> In his chapter on "Unity," from *A. A. Comes of Age*, Bill W writes about Buddhists who said that they would like to be part of AA, but also would like to replace the word "god" with "good" so that the practice of the Steps would be compatible with their non-theistic belief. In 1957, Bill Wilson writes: **"To some of us, the idea of substituting 'good' for 'God' in the Twelve Steps will seem like a watering down of A.A.'s message. But here we must remember that A.A.'s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them, as they stand, is not at all a requirement for membership**

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among us. This liberty has made A.A. available to thousands who never would have tried at all had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written." *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* pg. 81