



A rebel's welcome to new AA Chairperson, Terry Bedient

By Joe C. © September 10, 2013, Rebellion Dogs Publishing

From Box 4-5-9, Vol. 59, No. 3 / Fall 2013 edition, Terrance M. Bedient, of upstate New York, is reintroduced to AA as our latest Chairperson of the General Service Board. Selected to the board as one of seven rotating non-alcoholic Trustees in 2008, Terry comes to AA from an Employee Assistance Program background and has been active in Public Information, several other committees and, most recently, AA's Treasurer.

Terry is most impressed with AA's Responsibility Declaration; "When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be. And for that; I am responsible." To that end, according to Bedient, "The key issue facing A.A. is membership growth and engagement."

Terry Bedient was introduced to AA in 1975. He has seen our fellowship reach one million members, peak at 2.2 million ten years ago, only to struggle, never eclipsing that high-water mark in the decade to follow. The month of September is Recovery Month in America. We, the greater community of those who have overcome addiction, has grown over the last few years from 20 million to 23 million Americans while AA's population has faltered as a percentage of the whole (AA membership in the USA is 1.3 million members).

Both engagement of the current membership and the attraction of new members will mean stemming the tide of decline. America is changing, Terry. What do you plan to do to help AA catch up with this change? For any of us that think AA can stubbornly stay the same AND be entitled to growth, that's where Step Two comes in to play, Terry. Any class B (alcoholic) Trustees will happily discuss their own personal experience with Step Two, "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Wanting things to change without being willing to change—that's nuts.

Taking a sober look at the strengths and weaknesses of Alcoholics Anonymous, the challenges to Terry's vision for AA's future, can be better framed by a new study that describes how America looks at and struggles with a changing culture. AA, I am sure you will agree, is facing the same growing pains inside our meeting rooms, as is going on just steps outside our doors. In February 2013, Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), in partnership with the Brookings Institution, conducted one the largest surveys ever fielded on immigration policy, immigrants, and religious

and cultural changes in the U.S., spanning the political, religious, ethnic, geographic and generational horizon. 4,500 people were surveyed.

An easy way to stem the tide of falling AA population is to better serve our growing minorities—atheists, women, visible minorities and youth. The greatest possibility of growth is in this under-served subculture of AA life. *The Citizenship, Values, & Cultural Concerns: What Americans Want From Immigration Reform* (Findings from the 2013 *Religion, Values and Immigration Reform Survey*) speaks to American core-beliefs which have to be understood in any effort to engage or enlarge AAs population.

By the numbers, AA doesn't keep pace with societal change. Our own 2011 membership survey tells of our cultural anomalies when compared to other available data.

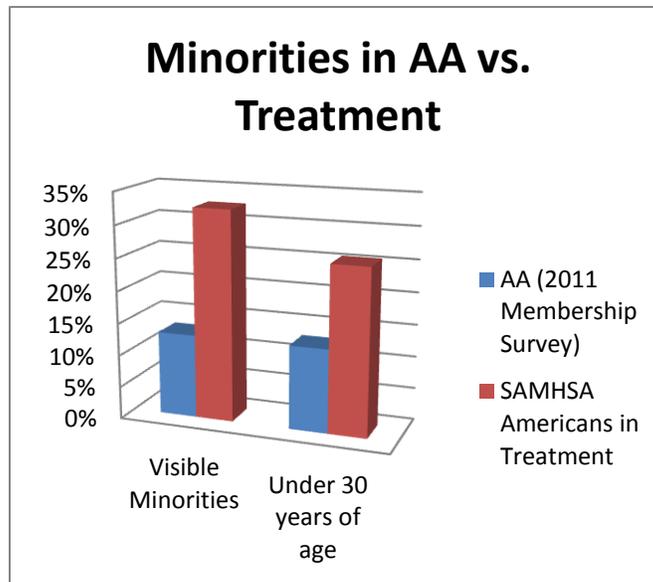


Drawing from the 2011 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) surveyⁱ of who needs and gets treatment for alcoholism in the USA, AA is more Caucasian, more male and older than the Americans that are being introduced to our fellowship. In 2011, 68% of the people being treated for alcoholism were white, while 87% of AA (2011 Membership survey) are white. The AA population of under 30 is 13%—one half of the 25.7% of youth who received treatment in the USA.

One possible reason that many come to AA, but only a certain demographic stay, is a condition known to human rights or human resources personnel as “systemic discrimination.” Terry, we say that we want the hand of AA always to be there for one and all, but what makes us more attractive to a whiter, older, male population, compared to the greater population seeking recovery from alcoholism.

So AA's population isn't reflective of the American alcoholic population despite the fact that over ½ of AA's population is American. Three areas that AA's board could look at, even in an inverted triangle service structure, are (i) statistical data, (ii) policies and procedures and (iii) organizational cultureⁱⁱ. Looking at one place AA faces an ongoing problem—the delisting of agnostic meetings in Toronto Canada, the provincial human rights regulator (Ontario Human Rights Commission) offers this look how organizational culture inadvertently favors the majority and marginalizes minorities:

“Organizations can have their own internal cultures which, if not inclusive, can marginalize or alienate racialized persons. For example, an organization that values a particular communication style based on how people from the dominant culture tend to communicate may undervalue a different, but equally effective, communication style used by a racialized person. Similarly, social relationships and networks that are an important part of success may sometimes exclude racialized persons.”



Toronto would be a clear case of majority intolerance of the minority (atheists/agnostics). As the agnostic groups assert their rights to communicate in a “different, but equally effective, communication style,” they were banished from Intergroup for nonconformity.

Maybe the fact that women remain underrepresented in AA has something to do with communication style, too. One hundred men wrote the Big Book in a communication style that may not speak to women with the ease to which it speaks to men. Maybe there are cultural traditions that, while AA doesn’t intentional discriminate, we marginalize youth, people of color and minority creeds, too.

AA knows that we have a history of aversion to change. That isn’t an alcoholic tendency; it’s human nature. This year’s *Religion, Values and Immigration Reform Survey* offer some important insights as to tribal tendencies that have to be addressed. Here are some highlights of what this survey discovered about Americans and their attitudes:

1. Majority of Americans (54%) believe that the growing number of newcomers from other countries helps strengthen traditional America customs and values. 40% see newcomers as a threat. The balance sees newcomers as having no impact.
2. American society has changed dramatically over a single generation; 71% of (Americans) age 65 and older, identify as white Christian. By contrast, 28% of Millennials (age 18 – 29) identify as white Christian (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic).
3. Millennials (13%) are four times more likely to identify as atheist or agnostic than seniors (3%). Another 31% of Millennials are religiously non-affiliated compared to 11% of the 65+ club. In other age groups, of Americans in their 30s and 40s, 22% are religiously unaffiliated, and 16% of 50 to 64 year old Americans are religiously unaffiliated.
4. Who is nostalgic? Whiter older Americans feel like American culture and way of life has eroded since 1950. Younger people and people of color think it has improved.

If you are a young Hispanic gay atheist American, you find it hard to make friends. The one change that would improve your popularity more than anything is feigning belief in God—if you can afford to forgo authenticity for popularity. Atheists are the least-liked minority in the USA with only 10% of our fellows believing nonbelievers have something good to offer American life. “In God we Trust—or else!” Four out of ten of our neighbors think America would be better if atheists left town. Americans have a more negative attitude towards atheists than Muslims, the non-religious, immigrants, queers, the Tea Party and youth, all of which face dislike from at least one out of four in the USA. Imagine having that many people believing you were making society worse.

| | Positive Change on USA | No Impact | Negative Change on USA |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Atheists | 10% | 46% | 39% |
| Non Religious People | 16% | 48% | 31% |
| Muslims | 18% | 44% | 27% |
| Tea Party | 24% | 30% | 30% |
| GLBT (Gay/Lesbian) | 24% | 42% | 29% |
| Immigrants | 38% | 26% | 28% |
| Hispanics | 39% | 35% | 20% |
| Asians | 40% | 43% | 9% |
| Young People | 43% | 21% | 30% |

Public Religion Institute, Religion, Values and Immigration Reform Survey, March 2013

What can these attitudes tell us about attitudes inside AA and AA’s prospects for adapting to a changing face, creed and culture of people knocking on our door? Compared to the general population outside of AA, inside our rooms our nearly 80-year-old fellowship still looks like the 1950s that our more nostalgic Americans pine for.

On the chart above, only 10% of Americans believe atheists make their country better. A staggering 39% of Americans think their society would be better without nonbelievers. No wonder why atheists are the forgotten minority in AA. Yes, nonbelievers have been with AA from the very beginning but when you look at how little celebrations of atheism there is in our literature, the success of the Twelve Steps without a belief in an interfering/intervening deity is AA’s *dirty little secret*, more than our power of example. Aboriginal North American members are under-represented in AA and they have a pamphlet devoted to them. Women do, the GLBT community does and so do young people and African Americans. AA wants these minorities to feel welcome and equal.

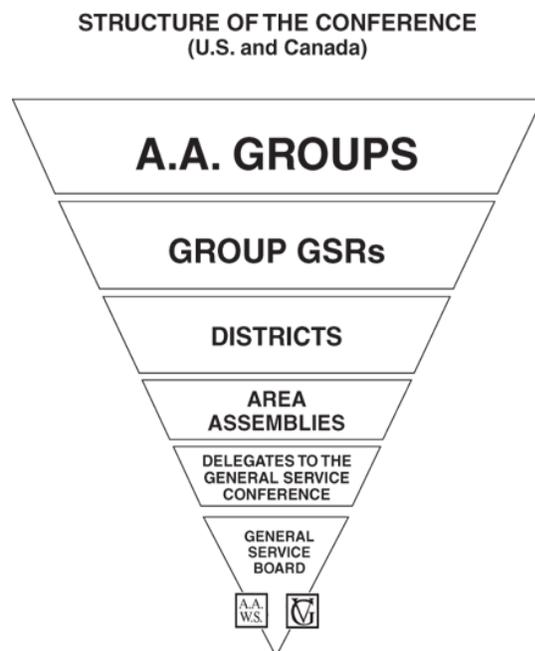
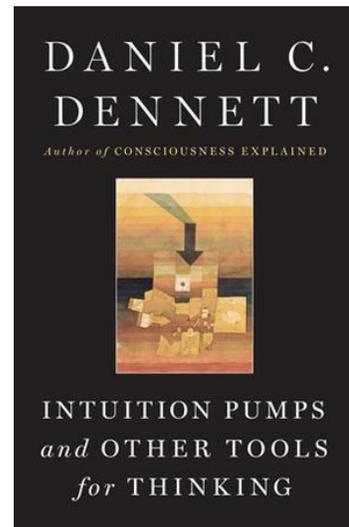
Where’s the pamphlet for atheists and agnostics? It has been easier for our queer community to come out of the closet in AA because it is clear that that alcoholics can be here, queer and welcome. For skeptics and realists, it’s a old refrain I hear all the time; members bite their tongue instead of speaking candidly about how childish they feel, talking about or praying to an imaginary “God as we understand Him” when they neither understand, believe in, nor depend on

any god. They bite their tongue because of the hostile way that they see other atheists treated in meetings or talked about in coffee shops.

While the General Service Conference resists approving the same welcome mat that other minorities enjoy, in places like Toronto Intergroup or Tampa Florida, atheists and agnostics are confronted with the notorious “White Paper on Non-believers”ⁱⁱⁱ which suggests that atheism is the inferior AA and is the scapegoat for many of AA’s woes. The wording used when the Indianapolis We Agnostics Group was delisted in their Intergroup newsletter was, “AA stays pure.”

“When people sense that something they love is under threat, their first reaction is but build an “impenetrable” wall, a Maginot Line—and just to be extra safe they decide to enclose a bit more territory, a buffer zone, inside its fortifications,” is how Daniel Dennett describes what he has coined as *hysterical realism*.

Dennett goes on to describe policies and procedures that start to show themselves in a reifying society, like any book-based society is susceptible to. Terry Bedient, you may find this familiar or it may be strange to you. Either way, engaging and enlarging the membership will require understanding some of the forces thwarting your noble efforts. “This policy typically burdens the defenders with a brittle, extravagant (implausible, indefensible) set of dogmas that cannot be defended rationally,” says Dennett, “and hence must be defended, in the end, with desperate clawing and shouting. In philosophy this strategic choice often shows up as *absolutism* of one kind of another.”^{iv}



The AA story is painted by the numbers. The data referred to here will impact membership growth and engagement. AA’s history shows that when we overcame our fear and intolerance of women, we grew. When we overcame our bias against African Americans, gays and lesbians, as well as young people, we grew in size.

Atheists, Hindus, Muslims and countless other creeds and cultures have come knocking on our door. To welcome everyone, to take our creed of “anywhere, anytime” seriously, we will engage with members who communicate in a modest or dramatically different means as our main-stream “God-conscious” membership. To welcome others

sincerely, we must accommodate a new language and new rituals. Uniformity is not unity.

Mr. Bedient, welcome to the bottom rung of AA's inverted triangle of service. Your primary purpose is a noble one but a goal fraught with challenges inside and outside our fellowship. How we treat each other will certainly have a bearing on how inviting our fellowship is to others.

Engagement and growth will meet with wide approval but it will mean something different to each generations of AA, as well as our liberals and our conservatives. They say that chance favors the brave. It is a brave undertaking that you have set your sights on. I am sure you have contemplated the alternative. Best wishes.

ⁱ <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2011SummNatFindDefTables/NSDUH-DetTabsPDFWHTML2011/2k11DetailedTabs/Web/HTML/NSDUH-DetTabsSect5peTabs1to56-2011.htm#Tab5.41A>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/racism-and-racial-discrimination-systemic-discrimination-fact-sheet>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.164fl.com/wp.pdf>

^{iv} Dennett, Daniel C., *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*. New York: Norton. Pg. 204

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