

The Twelve Concepts for ACA World Service

draft version 02.11.2021

for submission to the Concept Study Group to the Service Network Committee for inclusion in the draft ACA Service Manual as introduction to the Twelve Concepts of ACA World Service

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The 12 Concepts of Service are intended to be practical applications of the basic spiritual principles represented in the 12 Traditions and 12 Steps. They evolved as guidelines for service through trial and error, initially within the AA program. They were later adopted by the ACA program and continue to evolve, ensuring that our distinct program has the structural and service-related integrity in place for all members, at all service levels. The 12 Concepts of Service create a link between the traditional structure of our fellowship and the legal framework governing the business operations of the ACA World Service Organization.

Origins

In the early days of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), one man approached another with a gift of recovery. It was said that one could keep their sobriety by passing on the gift of recovery to another who was spiritually sick and suffering. The 12 Steps were written to provide a reproducible structure for this process of recovery.

In essence, it simply took one alcoholic to carry the message of recovery to another, and soon, one person turned into two working together. Two turned into three, and three turned into more. As groups began to form and more questions arose, internal conflict within these groups and external distractions threatened not only their unity, but also the new-found sobriety of their members. The 12 Traditions were written to help meetings function effectively by establishing clarity of purpose and operating principles designed to support this purpose.

As the fellowship continued to grow and its needs grew, it became apparent that centralized service offices could help with meeting some of those needs; particularly the need for providing information to people seeking meetings. However, there was concern these service offices could assume ultimate authority – and it seemed imperative to clarify that power rested in the fellowship as a whole. While groups remained autonomous, a Conference was established with delegates from each group coming together to vote on how to run these service offices. The 12 Concepts of Service clarify the relationship of delegation and accountability that exists between the Conference and its service arms, including the General Service Office of AA.

As new programs were born from the successful model developed by AA, the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts were adapted to meet the particular needs of each new fellowship. Adaptation ensures that the primary purpose of each program can be clearly established, and its particular needs met, while the foundation of recovery through unity and service is passed on, anchored in what has become known as the three legacies of the 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Concepts of Service.

In the late 1970s, the fellowship of Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) grew from the collaboration of members of both AA and Al-Anon, coming together to address specific needs that arose as a result of growing up in alcoholic families; needs they found difficult to address in their primary programs. By 1984, enough of these meetings had formed to warrant establishing ACA as an autonomous 12 Step and 12 Tradition organization, with the primary purpose of helping people recover from the effects of growing up in alcoholic or dysfunctional families. The initial body of literature of this new program included suggested 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, the Problem, and the Solution.

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As the young fellowship quickly expanded, conflict arose. A new document was developed to address the danger of losing personal recovery and endangering the very existence of the program by acting out on old (that is, unrecovered) behaviors, such as taking care of others, controlling, rescuing, being a victim, etc. while offering service to the fellowship. This document is known as “The Suggested Commitment to Service.” Since 1990, Board members in the ACA World Service Organization have been required to sign this document.

In 1994 internal conflict and resulting money troubles became so pressing that the office maintained by the World Service Organization (WSO) had to be closed. As a result, the record of WSO activity for the next years is fragmented, and we know little about any discussions preceding the adoption of the 12 Concepts of Service into the body of ACA literature. We do know that a version of the Concepts was adopted in January 1997 and incorporated into the Commitment to Service later that year. When ACA published its own fellowship text in 2006, both the 12 Concepts of ACA Service and the Suggested Commitment to Service were included, thereby becoming part of the foundation of ACA service work.

Recovery – Unity – Service

The three legacies of 12 Step recovery: the 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Concepts, are often compared to a three-legged stool – when one leg weakens or breaks, the stool wobbles or falls. Just as in the world of geometry a triangle with three equal sides is the most stable, this is also true in the world of recovery. Each leg of the triangle needs attention, care and understanding as an individual works a program of recovery. What role do the Twelve Concepts for ACA World Service play in maintaining the unity of our fellowship and supporting our personal recovery?

Service is a necessary part of carrying the message of recovery to adult children who still suffer – this includes providing resources to the fellowship, such as meeting information and literature, resources that allow us to connect with fellow travelers worldwide and to learn about the Experience, Strength, and Hope of others on the path to recovery. The Twelve Concepts guide us in keeping our world services and groups focused on carrying a consistent ACA message while maintaining a service structure responsible to the fellowship voice.

Concept III recognizes the need to clearly define the working relationships existing between the ACA meetings, the ACA WSO Board of Trustees, and its staff and committees. Concept VI acknowledges that the Annual Business Conference (ABC), consisting of delegates from meetings across the world, has the principal responsibility for the maintenance of world services, as well as the final decision respecting large matters of general policy and finance. Concept VI further delegates to the Trustee members of the WSO the chief initiative and the active responsibility for implementing decisions made about these matters by the ABC. By doing this, Trustees of the WSO are granted the authority to interact with legal and financial institutions outside of ACA, acting on behalf of the fellowship (Concept VII).

The Twelve Concepts for ACA World Service outline the responsibilities involved in running the ACA WSO, as well as the authorities required to do so effectively. Concept XII further specifies that “none of the Conference members shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others” – what this means is that any authority granted is always clearly defined and thereby qualified, for example by a job description for a specific service position. As Concept I states, the ultimate (that is, unqualified) authority for ACA World Services should always reside in the collective conscience of our fellowship.

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Participation is Key

Whether chairing a meeting, organizing an Intergroup or regional service body, participating in the ABC as a delegate from their home group meeting, volunteering on a WSO Committee or serving as a Trustee on the WSO Board, none of this would be possible without the participation of individual ACA members giving service. The collective conscience of our whole fellowship is constituted by individual members coming together in service; service begins by showing up to a meeting, thereby making the meeting available to others.

To ensure that every ACA member has the opportunity to participate fully in this process, the Concepts identify three basic rights that every member of our fellowship is granted, whether or not they are actively involved in a specific service role: the Right of Decision (endowed to all trusted servants), the Right of Participation (ensuring effective functioning), and the Right of Petition (ensuring minority opinion and grievances will be heard and considered). In concert, these rights ensure that every member can and will be heard in the process of establishing the collective conscience of our fellowship. These rights prevail at every level of service, from the WSO to the ACA meetings we participate in for the benefit of our personal recovery. By granting every member of our fellowship these basic rights, we ensure that information about the will of the fellowship can freely flow and be acted upon within a relationship of mutual trust at every level of service.

Service Depends on Recovery

Authority, Responsibility, Trust – these are terms we struggle with as adult children, coming from dysfunctional family environments in which authority was often abused, responsibility was ill defined, and trust was therefore impossible. While Tradition Two reminds us about the importance of trust in service leadership, many adult children do not understand what that means. We may be tempted to act out on our Laundry List traits within the service positions we assume, such as our fear of authority figures or our overdeveloped sense of responsibility.

This dilemma is addressed in the Suggested Commitment to Service which reminds us that we practice service so that the program will be available for ourselves, while possibly benefiting others, and that we keep ourselves fit for service by working our own program of recovery. This document is not found in other 12 Step programs and is presumed to be unique to ACA. It acknowledges that the survival of our fellowship depends on a recovery-oriented approach to service and offers the guidance needed to foster a healthy relationship between service and personal recovery. As we study the Suggested Commitment to Service, we are reminded that we perform service to practice our recovery, and that healthy service and the unity of our fellowship depend on a continued commitment to personal recovery.

Learning to Trust

While the Suggested Commitment to Service offers guidelines for a healthy relationship between personal recovery and service work, the Concepts provide structure and guidance for a healthy relationship among different service arms of our fellowship. They offer a framework for what it may mean to practice trustworthy leadership. They outline ways in which (service) responsibility can be defined and (service) authority can be qualified in the context of specific relationships of delegation and accountability. By practicing the Twelve Concepts for ACA World Service and incorporating them into our service work, we have the opportunity to experience healthier ways of being in relationship with our fellow travelers and the world.

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A Trustee Reflects on her Experience, Strength, and Hope with the Concepts

I think of the Steps, Traditions and Concepts like a house. The Steps offered the way into a loving family home of recovery. The Traditions, like walls surrounding us providing safety and stability. The Concepts, a protective roof, responsible for the contents of our home; the service structure, the fellowship voice, matters of over-all policy and finance.

As members in early recovery, rarely do we climb to the roof, yet it determines the current and future functioning upon which the fellowship remains strong and safe.

Though I entered ACA by The Steps, further along the journey I found The Traditions to be a path of spiritual principles bringing a sense of peace and clarity, not only to service relationships, but to all of my relationships. Those principles became a practice of accepting a higher purpose at work in my life.

It is said The Steps are how I work on the relationship with myself, the Traditions on my relationship with others and the Concepts on my relationship to the world. Given the many gifts I received practicing The Steps and Traditions, how could I not want to go further and learn about The Twelve Concepts?

Living within my core values of connection and spirituality, there are certain words that catch my attention repeatedly within The Twelve Concepts. They are unity, collective conscience, rights, responsibility and authority. These act as the lights within my house to guide decisions.

My first introduction to the Concepts as a member in service was working on a presentation for the Annual Business Conference. I could clearly see the importance of the Commitment to Service as a sort of inventory to the working of The Traditions and The Concepts. Regardless of the service role we may have, perhaps at the group level, being part of a WSO committee, or serving as a Board member, we work in unity with the collective conscience of the service body. We honor the rights of decision, participation and petition of all its members.

As members we place our trust in our ABC delegates, committee chairs and Board members to manage the business of ACA. We entrust the Board with the serious care and concern of financial and legal matters for the welfare of our organization.

In my time on the Board I have been blessed with the opportunity to observe and participate in thorough discussion and debate on matters big and small. Final decisions are made using the principle of substantial unanimity, and always the minority opinion is given serious consideration.

For my personal recovery, this experience has strengthened my commitment to humility, to put getting things right above being right or taking the easy or quick way out. It has required that I face uncomfortable situations in the interest of healthy future functioning. Gratitude for a life changing program strengthens my commitment to be guided by the Concepts so that others may continue to receive the gift of recovery.

Erin D.