

KBDM Questions for “Prayer for Today” Discussion

KBDM—Should the WSC give conceptual approval to remove the “Prayer for Today” from Conference Approved Literature?

Framing/Background:

During its June 2015 meeting, the Literature Committee began discussing requests from two different members in different Areas for changes to the “Prayer for Today.” This prayer is included in the *Just for Today* Wallet Card (M-10) and Bookmark (M-12), as well as on page 101 of *How Al-Anon Works for Families & Friends of Alcoholics* (B-22, B-32). (It is on page 103 in editions printed prior to 2008.) The first member felt that although it is beautiful, it is clearly a religious prayer, and should be revised or discontinued. The second member requested that the words “O, Divine Master” in the second paragraph of the prayer be changed to “God.” Because the prayer is included in the Newcomer Packet (K-10), she felt it could give many newcomers the idea that Al-Anon is a religious program.

The current wording of the “Prayer for Today” is as follows:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light, and where there is sadness, joy.

“O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Using the Knowledge-Based Decision-Making Process for an Informed Group Conscience (KBDM), discussion on this topic continued in October 2015. Prior to this meeting, Committee members answered the five KBDM questions via the discussion board on e-Communities. At the meeting, the Committee had a thorough discussion of all aspects of the information from the KBDM document. It reached a unanimous consensus to recommend removal of the “Prayer for Today” from the *Just for Today* Bookmark and Wallet Card, as well as from *How Al-Anon Works*. The Committee also decided to have a discussion thread in its Community on AFG Connects to brainstorm ideas on what, if anything, it would recommend to replace the prayer where it is featured.

At the Literature Committee’s December meeting, it recommended that, if the Conference agreed to remove the “Prayer for Today,” the text on the Bookmark and Wallet Card could be enlarged without adding any other material, and that page 101 in *How Al-Anon Works* could end with a quotation from the last paragraph in *When I Got Busy I Got Better* (P-78), so that it would read as follows:

“*When I Got Busy, I Got Better* offers invaluable information about this crucial area of recovery. Perhaps nowhere is the spirit of Al-Anon service more clearly articulated than in the last paragraph of this booklet:

“We have the opportunity to contribute not only what we can *do* but, more important, who we can *be*. By sharing our recovery, we strengthen its workings in our own lives. By seeking to allow a Higher Power to work in and through us, we come to feel, more fully, the presence of that Power.

“In giving, we receive.”

What follows are responses from the Literature Committee members to the Knowledge-Based Decision-Making questions on this idea. In general, these comments are based on English-speaking

realities in the World Service Conference structure, and may not reflect the realities of other structures. They show the diverse and sometimes contradictory opinions of the Committee members in the course of the discussion, and reflect the opinions of the individuals who gave them.

Question 1:

What do we know about our fellowship's needs, wants, and preferences that are relevant to this discussion/decision?

- We are a spiritual program, not a religious one.
- We know that many members feel this is a beloved part of our fellowship, and that others feel this prayer is too religious.
- The prayer is very identifiably Catholic. There are parts of it that are the antithesis of recovery in Al-Anon. But, we also know that it is important to many people in the fellowship, and that they are free to use any prayer, from any religion, in their own recovery - just as they are free to use any literature in their own recovery.
- From the *2015 Membership Survey*, 64% of members belonged to or practiced a specific religion before coming to Al-Anon and 76% of members had a spiritual inclination. Many members in our Area have commented on prayers in general, asking for less religious prayers to be used. There have been discussions on appropriate prayers to use in our Closing. Also, our Area Web site includes the topic of prayer under Frequently Asked Questions. I do not know how many of these questions have mentioned the *Just for Today* prayer.
- Some people have had "bad" religious experiences before coming to our program. Thus, they are afraid that prayers mean religion, not spirituality. Many people have turned their backs on God. They blame God for their problems in their life. After coming for a while, they accept the spirituality of the program.
- It is the prayer that some people use as a part of Step Eleven. In some places, it is called "The Peace Prayer." It is also called "Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace" prayer. Some versions use the word God only at the beginning. It was first quoted in a Quaker article.
- I rarely hear it used in a meeting. Thus, what we use in our own recovery is our business. As people continue to attend Al-Anon, acceptance of prayer takes place.
- Our fellowship often looks to the WSO and WSC for guidance on divisive issues. The use of specific religious prayers such as the prayer of St. Francis is often divisive as it is part of a specific religious cannon that is not shared by all Al-Anon members. Al-Anon members of other religious faiths or none are consequently excluded by use of this prayer in our Conference Approved Literature. Some members will be very attached to this prayer despite the fact that it will be viewed as religious (rather than spiritual) by other members.
- I know that if we are discussing this there must be a reason; in my Area, I have never heard a complaint about the prayer. We have used the Bookmark at many meetings, and neither newcomers nor longtime members have brought up the prayer. I will say that when I came in, I personally thought the prayer was a little strongly worded. I was angry with God, but I accepted this was part of the literature, and it must be working. I'm still here, and I love the prayer.
- In my Area, the *Just for Today* Bookmark is widely used and often times is the focus at a literature meeting. But rarely is the prayer referred to or quoted. The focus is usually on how the individual is living or working their program "Just for Today."
- This is a spiritual program based on no particular form of religion. Everyone is welcome, no matter what affiliation or none. One of the "Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon" is discussions concerning specific religious beliefs. We are a program of equals - inclusive, not exclusive.

- We know that, at least in the last 14 years, this is the first time the concern has been brought to the Literature Committee. It was brought up by two different members from different Areas. The WSO staff has heard a few comments over the years from members who felt the religious nature of the prayer was inappropriate for our literature, but they never sent in a suggestion for change, despite being told they had that option.
- It seems if only two people were bothered by this from our large fellowship, it must be working. I think we need to mention over and over this is a spiritual fellowship and not religious.

Question 2:

What do we know about the “capacity” (resources) and “strategic position” of our fellowship that is relevant to this discussion/decision?

- Our fellowship has a diverse population, some of whom feel it is important to keep Al-Anon a spiritual program with minimal references to “God,” while others feel the loss of these references would deter their recovery.
- We know that our fellowship has weathered other changes, and that our fellowship continues to evolve as our culture evolves. The question here is not so much about the word used for the God of our understanding as it is about a prayer that is distinctly identifiable as from a specific religion.
- We know that Al-Anon has the ability and experience to understand different points of view. Further, we know that Al-Anon is exploring changes continually and tries to make changes which will sustain us in the years to come.
- Al-Anon is composed of a diverse population. As people get more involved in the program, their understanding of spirituality broadens. Since it is associated with one of the last Twelve Steps, it is a while before a person understands the hope promised in the prayer and is able to use it.
- Our members have the capacity to evolve and grow as our fellowship evolves and grows. Our membership is (slowly) becoming more diverse, and it behooves us as a fellowship to embrace our diversity, both to ensure that all prospective members feel welcome and to keep our Conference Approved Literature relevant for our increasingly diverse fellowship.
- Knowing that Al-Anon has been around for nearly 65 years, we welcome anyone who says they are a member, regardless of religion, non-religion, culture, etc. Without a doubt, Al-Anon is a spiritual program, and I believe our literature reflects that fact. I don't believe that we become non-spiritual or religious because of a prayer. What about the Serenity Prayer and using the word “God”?
- In the decades I have been in the program, in two different Areas, I have seen the evolution away from the use of traditional Christian prayers at meetings—taking a back seat or being eliminated—an example being the closing “prayer” and the focus shifting to more spiritually-based diverse reflections.
- Members of the fellowship have the ability to look at similarities as well as differences, and acceptance of both, and make changes necessary for unity of the fellowship in our one purpose to help families of alcoholics (Tradition Five). Our cofounder, Lois, realized the importance of growth and review in *Lois Remembers* (B-7), page 194: “But the survival of our ‘A’s’ depends on growth—growth in spirit more than in numbers. We believe the principles upon which A.A. and Al-Anon are founded are fundamental for all time and all people. And yet our individual acceptance and application of these principles must continue to grow or we as societies will perish. For stagnation is retrogression. There is no standing still.”
Additional references in *Many Voices, One Journey* (B-31):
Page 199: Flexibility to make changes if needed, but also protect the essential integrity of the book *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (B-6).

Page 199-201: Use of Tradition Six for “protection and unity of the fellowship worldwide.”

- The Suggested Preamble states, “Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination,....” Steps Three and Eleven refer to the God of our understanding. Tradition Three states we “have no other affiliation.” Tradition Six states “we never endorse.” The first Obstacle to Success in Al-Anon, Discussions of Religion, states, “Let us not defeat our purpose by entering into discussions concerning specific religious beliefs.”

Question 3:

What do we know about the current realities and evolving dynamics of our fellowship’s environment that is relevant to this discussion/decision?

- Our fellowship is seeing more people who are of different ethnic backgrounds and religious experiences.
- Our members are diverse—encompassing many different beliefs and ethnic groups.
- We have a fellowship of widely varied backgrounds—including some who are Christian Catholics.
- From our *2015 Membership Survey*, we know our membership’s average age is nearly 60 years old, and is more than 80% Caucasian. In our Area, it is my observation that younger members (under 45) appear to have somewhat different perspectives on prayer, religion, and spirituality.
- There was also research about newcomers conducted in 2013-14 in cooperation with the WSO. We can refer to those studies, if useful; they are posted on the Members’ Web site under Individuals/Surveys.
- Our fellowship comes from a diverse religious background. Many persons have had very little exposure to anything that resembles spirituality in their lives. In today’s world, other things, i.e. sports, music, etc. take up more and more of a person’s time. We do not like to get out of our comfort zone when we first come into the program. As we come, we hear others share their experience, strength, and hope, and we accept that the program is spiritual, not religious.
- As our membership, and the larger culture of which we are a part, become more diverse, there is an expectation of multiculturalism, which gives every ethnic and religious identity equal respect. We will increasingly look to our fellowship to be flexible in adapting to this reality. Using a prayer from one specific religion may be seen as inappropriate in this context.
- I believe that the *2015 Membership Survey* results were skewed—incorrectly reporting the “current realities and evolving dynamics” of our fellowship. In my huge bilingual Area, we are not all female, 60 years old, and Caucasian. I believe that the next survey needs to be formatted in such a way that all of our younger and culturally diverse members are surveyed. That would support what I see in my Area—that we are a fellowship consisting of widely varied backgrounds that are focused on spirituality and not on old-timey Christian prayers.
- We come to the program with varied religious and spiritual backgrounds and some with none. For many, this prayer encompasses the principles of the program and serves as a guide for changed attitudes to help develop and define the God of our understanding for spiritual growth. Many in my Area concentrate more on the “Just for Today” portion as meeting/sharing topics. The prayer was used as a guide to spiritual growth in personal prayer and meditation, and even long before realizing it was connected to a religious program. This had no bearing on the spiritual growth preference.
- Evolving dynamics include that in 1972, Alateen developed its own *Just for Today* (M-11, M-13) with its own non-affiliated prayer. By at least 1976, the title of the “Prayer of St. Francis” on the M-10 Card and M-12 Bookmark was changed to “Prayer for Today.” Within the last couple of years, a WSO Task Force on the Newcomer Packet recommended removal of the *Just for Today* Bookmark from the packet to the Executive Committee. Because of the “Prayer

for Today,” the Task Force was concerned that newcomers would think that Al-Anon is a religious program. The Executive Committee did not follow the Task Force recommendation.

Question 4:

What are the ethical implications of our choices? (pros/cons)

- Pro: The prayer says what we actually are striving for in working our program and relying on a Higher Power. Con: It is a well-known Christian prayer.
- Pro: By changing or removing this prayer from the *Just for Today* Bookmark and Wallet Card, it would be more in keeping with the “spiritual” aspect of our program by keeping “religious” prayers out of our literature. Con: Making this change may offend some of our members who feel this is a beneficial part of our program.
- Pro: The prayer on the Bookmark gives me direction on a better way to think and act. Isn't that what Al-Anon is about? That's what Tradition Five says to me. Con: It is a Christian prayer, but in all my years of meetings where we discussed the Bookmark, this fact did not seem to bother newcomers or longtime members.
- Pro: The first half of the prayer seems in alignment with Al-Anon principles. Con: The second half of the prayer almost negates the Al-Anon teachings, and it is a very sectarian prayer.
- Pro: We could try some careful and minor changes in this prayer to learn if less religious terminology could attract and retain members. We can reassure some members we are not religious. Con: Current members who like the literature as it is may not want to see any changes. Some members might wonder if such changes could lead to attempts to revise the God terminology in our Legacies.
- Pro: People who come to the program may stay if they see we are a spiritual, not religious program. They will feel comfortable in our meetings. It is an important part of recovery for some persons. Con: Some people who like how it is written now may not like a different version. It may not be as meaningful as before.
- Ethically, we need to foster the equality and inclusiveness of our Traditions and Concepts in all of our Conference Approved Literature. Pro: Eliminating a prayer of a specific religion from our literature does not undermine or negate the spirituality of our program, but instead supports the universality of our spirituality and embraces the pluralism of our fellowship.
- Pro: Moving away from including doctrines from specific religions in our literature sends a message of inclusiveness and compassionate acceptance to our members who are not part of that specific religion. Con: Members who are attached to this prayer, especially those who are part of the religion from which it is taken, may resist any change and even see any change as a personal attack.
- Pro: Removing the prayer does not lessen the power of the “Just for Today” statements that form the reason for the Bookmark/Wallet Card’s title. My experience is that the focus of the Bookmark/Wallet Card has been on the nine statements, not on the prayer. I cannot remember ever hearing the prayer read at meetings. Con: I presume there will be impact if it is eliminated, but I believe it will be minimal, since the Bookmark/Wallet Card does not really need a predetermined “Prayer for Today.”
- Pro: Removal would uphold Al-Anon’s Declaration of Unity as stated in *How Al-Anon Works* (B-22), page 109. Con: Either way may include some members and yet exclude others.

Question 5:

What do we wish we knew, but don't?

- Is there another “prayer” or saying that could be used in place of the “Prayer for Today”?
- Could we have someone write a non-sectarian prayer that would truly espouse Al-Anon principles that would be widely approved and used by the membership?

- I'd like to know how many members (old and new) would like to see religious terminology changed.
- If we change the prayer, will the fellowship in a few years want to change it back? Is there another version that may be more acceptable to others?
- The Serenity Prayer we use is an excerpt of a longer prayer. Would an excerpt of this prayer be open enough to be useful to persons of all faiths or none, perhaps starting with "Make me an instrument...." and ending with "... joy"? Then we wouldn't technically be altering or changing an established prayer. Would such an excerpt be meaningful to those who are attached to the current wording?
- Have there been enough requests from members of the fellowship to remove this prayer or change it? Can we change some of the wording?
- Why does there need to be a prayer of any kind on the *Just for Today* Bookmark?
- Even though it would still be a part of a "religious" prayer, would the excerpt reference shared earlier by a Committee member of using only the first paragraph be inclusive enough for all? Or would this still be considered "religious" rather than spiritual, due to its origin? Would another prayer that already appears in *As We Understood...* (B-11) be appropriate, such as on pages 214-215, which encompasses the Twelve Steps in the prayer?
- I participated in a meeting using the Bookmark at an A.A. conference this weekend. Would the Serenity Prayer be a more fitting prayer given the theme of living in the present?
- See *How Al-Anon Works for Families & Friends of Alcoholics* (B-22), Chapter 14, page 101 (page 103 in editions printed prior to 2008), for the following quotation, followed by the prayer from the *Just for Today* Bookmark.

"And nowhere is the spirit of Al-Anon service more clearly articulated than in the prayer on the back of the *Just for Today* bookmark."

If the prayer is removed from the Bookmark, does this mean the prayer and this reference will also have to be removed from *How Al-Anon Works* (B-22)? Is it referenced in any other Conference Approved Literature?
- Does our fellowship consider the phrase "it is in dying that we are born to eternal life" to be a specific religious belief?