

Participation and Decision Making at the World Service Conference

For more than ten years, Narcotics Anonymous members have debated the question of who should participate in the decision-making processes of our World Service Conference. Some believe all conference decisions should be made directly by the NA groups, and only by the groups. Others believe all conference members should fully participate in all phases of its decision-making processes, from discussion to voting.

As a fellowship, we have recognized no hard and fast participation rule to be applied throughout Narcotics Anonymous. In 1989, our World Service Conference overwhelmingly approved a motion which replaced restrictive language on local voting in the *Temporary Working Guide to our Service Structure* with words that allow for variation in local practice:

"GSRs are the only voting members at ASC meetings; ASRs are the only voting members at an RSC meeting..." was replaced with, "Although individual area and regional guidelines differ regarding which participants may vote..."

Regarding participation in the voting of the WSC, however, it's been a different story. From 1982 through 1987, various motions accompanied by heated debate were presented to limit WSC voting to RSRs. A 1982 motion, tabled until 1983, was opposed by fully two-thirds of the voting participants. Each of four motions related to conference voting made in 1984 were defeated by an average of 80% of all voting participants. The following year, when yet another voting rights motion was made, fully two-thirds of conference participants objected to even considering it. With that, many members believed the matter to have been settled. They were mistaken.

In 1987, another motion was made to restrict conference voting rights to RSRs. Tabled to the next year, the motion appeared in the 1988 Conference Agenda Report. A package of papers for and against the motion was widely distributed by the WSC Policy Committee, and the World Service Board of Trustees prepared its own statement on the matter. Following fellowshipwide discussion of the issue, the conference defeated the motion, 27 participants (36%) voting in favor, 40 against (53%), and 9 abstaining (12%). A breakdown of the voting revealed tremendous disparity of opinion between RSRs and the other conference voting participants.

RSRs were split fairly evenly on the motion, with 27 voting yes, 24 no, and 7 abstaining. However, the trustees, conference administrative officers, and committee chairpersons were in virtually unanimous opposition to the motion, 16 voting no and 2 abstaining. RSRs cast all the votes in favor of the motion; 40% of the no votes were cast by non-RSRs. Clearly, the issue had not by any means been definitively settled.

Three years later, the motion to restrict WSC voting rights to RSRs was revived. The conference participants had not been given the opportunity to discuss this issue for any significant length of time prior to voting on the motion. The motion was introduced at the very end of the last of seven long conference days. Voting on the 1991 motion showed an overall 12% increase in support of restricting conference voting rights over the 1988 vote, with 35 yes ballots (48%), 28 no (38%), and 10 abstentions (14%). RSRs voted 31 yes and 21 no with 5 abstentions, an increase of 10% in support of voting rights restrictions. Most significant, perhaps, was the marked shift in votes cast by conference administrative officers, committee chairs, and trustees. A quarter of these trusted servants voted in favor of the 1991 motion, while none had approved the 1988 proposal; less than half voted con, and almost a third abstained. Lack of adequate discussion might account for some of the shift in favor of voting restrictions, but certainly not all of it. The movement to limit conference voting rights to RSRs, decidedly *not* laid to rest with the 1988 WSC meeting, appeared to be gaining strength.

Clearly, the question of who should vote at the World Service Conference is still an open one, requiring further discussion. It is our hope that your NA community will discuss this issue thoroughly. Our board believes that the voting rights issue is by no means a simple one, but that there are many subjects which need to be considered in relation to it. This issue will be a topic at one of the WSB panel presentations at WSC'92. To the best of our ability, we have presented below some of the arguments we feel need to be addressed in considering the issue of voting rights, along with brief summaries of the opposing points of view on each subject. While these are not the only arguments, they demonstrate the polarity of opinions held by members within our fellowship. We hope you find these summaries useful in your community's discussions of voting rights as you prepare for the World Service Conference meeting this April in Dallas.

Group conscience

RSR-only: "Our Second Tradition says that God speaks to our service structure only through the conscience developed in our groups. The decisions registered at the World Service Conference should reflect only the gathered conscience of the groups as expressed by the votes of RSRs."

All WSC participants: "The World Service Conference develops a group conscience when its members gather to consult their consciences, seek God's guidance, and make decisions. That group conscience is developed from discussion among all members of the conference, and is expressed by the combined vote of all conference participants."

Authority of members, groups

RSR-only: "Unlike some organizations, our members and our groups bear the final authority in NA. Only those representing members and groups should vote at the conference. If trusted servants other than RSRs vote at the WSC, they dilute the authority of the NA groups."

All WSC participants: "Members and groups are responsible for our common welfare, and group autonomy should not affect NA as a whole. With full participation, the interests and authority of members and groups at the conference is spoken for by RSRs; specialized experience of other trusted servants is blended into the WSC mix; the result is a balanced conference decision-making process which best serves our primary purpose."

Leadership

RSR-only: "Our 'leaders' are only trusted servants, taking their guidance from the conscience of the groups. In giving conference officers, committees, and trustees direction for the fulfillment of their responsibilities, only RSRs should vote because only they speak for the groups."

All WSC participants: "We carefully select our WSC leaders to serve us. When the conference makes decisions, we want full access to the insight and specialized experience of conference officers, committee chairs, and trustees. We allow them to participate fully in all phases of the WSC decision-making process."

Direct representation

RSR-only: "Because NA service authority arises from NA members and NA groups, conference decisions must be made on a representative-only basis. Other trusted servants should not vote on WSC decisions because they do not represent the conscience of any NA groups."

All WSC participants: "If the WSC was NA's government, passing laws and levying taxes, we would want representative decision making at the conference. We would also want a better-proportioned breakdown for representation; today, a region with 60 groups has the same WSC power as a region with 600 groups. However, the conference's concern is not to pass laws and levy taxes, but to serve. A mix of representation and specialized experience produces the most balanced conference decisions for NA."

Accountability

RSR-only: "When committee chairs, trustees, and WSC officers vote in service decisions, they set their own terms for how accountable they are to be held. This is inappropriate. Officers, trustees, and committees should take their direction from decisions voted on by those representing the groups--the RSRs--establishing the degree to which those trusted servants will be held accountable for their duties."

All WSC participants: "Unless conference officers, committee chairs, and trustees take part in voting on WSC decisions, they cannot be held accountable for the consequences of those decisions because they are not co-responsible for them."

Inclusiveness, equality, anonymity

RSR-only: "All NA members take anonymous, equal part in the conference's decision-making processes by voting in their home groups. When RSRs vote at the conference, they express the collective group conscience of all NA communities equally. To allow other trusted servants a special vote violates the spiritual principle of anonymity, setting a few members up with rights not given most members."

All WSC participants: "Officers, committee chairs, and trustees should have the same rights as representative members of the WSC. To exclude them from full participation in the conference makes them less than equal members of the WSC, specially set apart from other members. This is inconsistent with the spirit of anonymity."

Balanced decisions, primary purpose

RSR-only: "Our primary purpose is served best by balanced decisions. Balanced service decisions can only be made by those who do not have a personal stake in the outcome. Conference decisions made by NA group representatives--RSRs--are balanced because they are objective."

All WSC participants: "Representatives, trustees, committees, and officers all have stakes in the decisions of the conference. All of them, however, serve first in the best interests of NA as a whole. The insight and experience of both RSRs and other trusted servants are necessary parts of balanced service discussions and balanced service decisions."

Nature of the WSC

RSR-only: "The World Service Conference exists to carry out the directions of the groups. RSRs bring NA group votes together at the conference. Discussion is necessary only to provide new information."

All WSC participants: "The conference exists to draw together the best information available on issues at hand. For good decisions to be made, everyone must have the ability to cast a vote based on the information presented in conference discussions, not solely on prior instructions."

Partial participation

RSR-only: "Trustees, WSC committee chairpersons, and conference officers should offer insight and information in the discussions that shape a group conscience, but only RSRs should vote in expressing a group conscience."

All WSC participants: "If it is important to include trustees, committee chairs, and WSC officers in discussions, then it is equally important to include them in the decisions arising from those discussions. Otherwise, WSC votes do not represent the full circle of the conference's group conscience, but only a piece of it."

"...Ought never be organized..."

RSR-only: "Responsibility, not authority, is delegated by the groups to the World Service Conference. Decision-making authority resides only with the groups. By restricting conference voting rights to RSRs only, we keep our groups directly involved in all our fellowship's decisions."

All WSC participants: "When groups do not delegate decision-making authority to the conference, they must become highly organized in order to assess WSC issues and make decisions. This distracts the groups from their primary purpose."

We hope the preceding examples of some of the differing viewpoints throughout our fellowship have assisted local communities in their discussion of this topic. Since there is representation on both sides of this issue within the World Service Board of Trustees, the WSB could develop a comprehensive paper after the WSC'92 discussion, presenting both pro and con viewpoints, if the conference believes such a paper would be helpful.