

Maine Area Legacy Wording Thought Force Report

December 2020 completed by Task Force

February 2021 presented to AWSC

A Note to Maine Area Al-Anon Members:

The Legacy Wording Thought Force wishes to thank you for your patience. We know some of you have been eager to review the presentation and findings we shared at the 2020 Fall Assembly. Because we had not engaged in a thorough review of our content to ensure accuracy and consistency with Al-Anon principles, we have taken the past two months to reassess our presentation, make a few edits where needed, and format all of our content into this report (as opposed to sharing our findings as either a PowerPoint or a PDF version of our slide deck.)

The data presented are consistent with what we presented at Fall Assembly. However, we have revised some wording, clarified parts of the presentation that confused some members, and revised some of our answers for Knowledge-Based Decision-Making (KBDM) Questions. We also omitted the appendices containing Legacies from other 12-Step programs that served as examples for how the wording for the Steps and Traditions could be changed, as including them is not in alignment with Al-Anon principles or the process at this time. Other information that was originally in the Appendices of the presentation has been incorporated into the body of this report.

Our hope is that this report will meet the expectations of a Thought Force as specified on page 71 of the 2018-2021 Service Manual: “A Thought force is a temporary unit of people established to brainstorm ideas and to develop strategies on a single defined task of activity.....A thought force presents its information to the originating body to move forward. Thought Forces are “thinkers” not “doers.”

*Thank you for this opportunity to be of service to you, our fellow Al-Anon members.
In Gratitude – The Legacy Wording Thought Force*

Introduction

The Legacy Wording Thought Force was created at Spring Assembly, March 2019. The charge of the five-member Thought Force was

“to determine whether/to what degree the current wording of the Legacies is a problem for Maine members, specifically the male pronouns and the word God.”

The methodology used by the Thought Force was to conduct a survey, research information from other Areas that had conducted Knowledge-Based Decision-Making (KBDM) on this issue, and to compile the survey results and research to answer KBDM questions 1-5 in order to generate a response to the Thought Force charge.

This report presents

1. Maine Area Legacy Wording Thought Force Report Summary
2. Legacies that use male pronouns and/or the word “God”
3. The survey methodology and limitations
4. The survey questions and findings
5. KBDM questions and answers used to analyze the survey responses and generate a response to the Thought Force charge

1. Maine Area Legacy Wording Thought Force Report Summary

The Legacy Wording Thought Force was created at Spring Assembly, March 2019,

“to determine whether/to what degree the current wording of the Legacies is a problem for Maine members, specifically the male pronouns and the word God.”

Using a survey, research, and Knowledge-Based Decision Making (KBDM), the Legacy Wording Thought Force, found that the majority of 192 Maine Area member-respondents are bothered by the use of the male pronouns in the Legacies, but not by the use of the word “God”. The subject of gender-neutral language and use of the word “God” in the Legacies has been a concern for Areas in the US since at least 1989.

The Legacies (Steps, Traditions, Concepts) that include male pronouns and/or the word God are:

Step 3;

Step 6;

Step 7;

Step 11;

Tradition 2.

The methodology used by the Thought Force was an online survey through Survey Monkey from June 2019 through January 2020. 192 AI-Anon members completed the survey, possibly about 15% of the Maine AI-Anon membership.

Summary

The findings include the following points of data that are described in more detail in the report.

101 (53%) of respondents were bothered a lot or a little by the male pronouns.

91 (47%) were not bothered at all

69 (36%) of respondents were bothered by use of the word “God.”

122 (64%) were not bothered by the use of the word “God.”

89 (46%) took one or more action related to discomfort with the wording.

103 (54%) of respondents took no actions related to discomfort with the wording.

119 (62%) of respondents said they would make changes regarding male pronouns or God.

72 (38%) said they would keep the Legacies the same.

In addition to the data, the report contains the comments from the respondents that may be helpful in considering the next step regarding the Legacy Wording.

The Thought Force suggests that AI-Anon groups use spiritual principles of legacies as they consider the summary of this report in preparation for further discussion on the Area level. This would give broader and deeper information into the impact of the wording of the legacies for our members.

2. Legacies that use male pronouns and/ or the word “God

The Legacies (Steps, Traditions, Concepts) that include male pronouns and/or the word God are:
Step 3;
Step 6;
Step 7;
Step 11;
Tradition 2.

3. Survey Methodology and Limitations

The survey was developed and administered online through Survey Monkey from June 2019 through January 2020. No paper version of the survey was made available. Fliers with an explanation of and a link to the survey were distributed to through District Representatives by email and at AWSC meetings, and to Group Representatives and members at Fall Assembly 2019. Not every meeting has a Group Representative and not all Group Representatives attend assemblies so there are likely groups and members who did not know of the survey.

192 Al-Anon members from all but two counties -- Piscataquis and Aroostook--participated in the survey.

Representativeness of the survey cannot be accurately determined, as there is no known count of Al-Anon membership in Maine. To get an idea of what percentage 192 is of the entire Maine fellowship, the Thought Force made an estimate. There are 95 groups in Maine. Assuming the average number of members per group is 13 (this is based on averaging a membership range of 5, 10, and 25 members), there could be approximately 1235 Al-Anon members in Maine. Based on this number, the survey response rate could be estimated as 15.5% (of the total membership). But again, this is strictly an estimate, or better yet, a “guestimate”.

4. Survey Questions and Findings

The responses to the survey questions are presented as data followed by comments as they were presented. We did not edit, analyze or group answers, and similar responses may appear under more than one question.

Please Note: If percentages add up to 99 not 100, it is because they are expressed here as whole numbers rounded up or down rather than their actual values, which are whole numbers plus fractions. The percentage calculations are based on the 192 responders to the survey.

Respondents’ length of time in Al-Anon

Question: How long have you been coming to Al-Anon?

192 (100%) of respondents answered this question

Findings

167 (87%) of respondents have been coming to Al-Anon for more than one year

13 (7%) of respondents have been coming to Al-Anon for 6 months to one year

12 (6%) of respondents have been coming to Al-Anon for less than six months

Respondents by Al-Anon Districts

Question: What county do you live in?

184 (96%) of respondents answered this question

8 (4%) of respondents to the survey did not give county designation but lived in Maine.

Findings

Those that indicated county of residence are grouped into Districts, understanding that there are a few variations between districts and counties throughout the state.

81 (42%) of survey respondents were from Districts S1 and S2 (York; Cumberland)

57 (30%) were from Districts C1 and C2 (Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Kennebec, Somerset)

7 (4%) were from Districts W1 and W2 (Androscoggin, Franklin, Oxford)

39 (20%) were from Districts E1 and E3 (Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock Washington)

0 (0%) were from Districts N1 and N3 (Aroostook)

Regarding the wording of the Legacies

Question: How much are you bothered by the use of male pronouns?

192 (100%) of survey respondents answered this question

Findings

64 (34%) were bothered a lot

37 (19%) were bothered a little

91 (47%) were not bothered at all

Question: How much are you bothered by the use of the word “God?”

191 (over 99%) of survey respondents answered this question

1 (less than 1%) respondents to the survey did not respond to this question.

Findings

31 (16%) were bothered a lot

38 (20%) were bothered a little

122 (64%) were not bothered at all

Question: Have you ever done any of the following because of discomfort with the wording?
 192 (100%) of respondents answered this question, with the possibility of multiple answers per person.

Findings

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None of the above	54%	103
Changed the wording when reading a step or tradition	33%	64
Shared my feelings about the wording at a meeting	22%	42
Other (please specify)	14%	27
Skipped reading the steps or traditions when it was my turn	10%	19
Avoided or delayed working the steps or traditions	8%	15
Thought about leaving Al-Anon	5%	10
Began attending other 12-step programs with different steps and traditions	3%	6
Stopped encouraging others to try Al-Anon	2%	4
Total Respondents: 192		

Of the 192 respondents who answered this question
 103 (54%) took none of the actions listed because of discomfort with the wording
 89 (46%) took one or more of the actions listed and/or another action because of discomfort with the wording

The 27 (14% of) respondents who said they did something “Other” than the options listed above, specified what they meant by “Other” and/or commented:

- Attend Calix meetings (<https://www.calixsociety.org/>). 12-steps for Catholics.
- I can disassociate from the steps while reading them and not get the meaning behind them.
- I haven't done any of those things, but members have, especially the men. Some have changed the word God to “my higher power.”
- I was from black belt. Focus is on my interpretation. Stop changing something outside of me and focus on me and my recovery.
- I’ve thought about speaking up, and it’s often made me question whether I should recommend Al-Anon to someone if they might be offended by that.
- Many years ago I was bothered by the word God. I learned in Al-anon that I get to define my own God.
- Shared individually after the meeting or with a sponsor. I also have re-written the Steps and Traditions eliminating the masculine references but keeping God and God of my understanding. I intend(ed) to submit this to Forum or other requests for writings but have not done so to date.

- Been distracted and delayed in working the steps.
- Almost didn't come back after the first meeting, because of this.
- Always struggle to say the words god and him but say them anyway.
- Brought wording up at business meeting for my group.
- Felt very uncomfortable with all God speak in the beginning.
- God clearly helped Bill start this program. For 50 years it has worked. If it ain't broke don't fix it, as they say. Most people's higher power is God or ends up being God as they grow in the program. Can't mess with truth. Let's not start calling a tree a ball. Be seekers of truth. Read the Bible, then study all the GREAT theologians of all history, during and right after the Apostles and Jesus. There are phone numbers to call to get the truth that's already been studied for over 2,000 yrs. God has both male and female attributes just like all humans. I've never met a reputable Theologian in program. They are the only ones you can find out answers with. Ya don't go to a plumber to teach you about the space program.
- Higher Power is used and that wording is more general for members and is used in literature. I'd like to see that more.
- I am very upset that those who are even more uncomfortable/feel excluded with/by these pronouns and the use of "God" are not coming to, or returning to the program. I am especially concerned about teens and the future of Al-Anon.
- I came with my own steps that I use at home.
- I refer to the power that is greater than me as my Higher Power, and use the pronouns of He or She simply to not create discussion. This also has been my means of trying to make people comfortable, who may be in the process of discovering their Higher Power.
- In addition to my concern about the inequity created by using he/him over she/her, and God over Spirit, I am REALLY bothered that all the literature and meeting guidelines only refer to the alcoholic and alcoholism and not the addict and addiction. Alcoholism IS only one face of addiction: Addiction covers ALL forms of this disease.
- Just wasn't sure if the program was a fit for me.
- Language is so important and I feel strongly that Al-Anon—if we want to stay relevant—needs to adapt our wording to be more inclusive.
- Literally crossed out pronouns in the books. Have done this since 1981.
- Male members change the word male to female.
- Shared my feelings about the wording outside of a meeting, with Al-anon friends.
- Since I do not believe in the Supernatural, I am uncomfortable with the word God. I am a Western Taoist, and it makes me feel like a liar if I recite it. And it makes me feel like an outsider if I don't. Usually, I substitute the word Tao for God. Higher Power is also okay with me. Occasionally, someone will suggest we say The Lord's Prayer. I remain silent and respectful but alienated.
- Substitute HP for God sometimes when reading a piece of CAL.
- Thought Al-Anon was out of step with 21st Century mores and norms.
- Took a group conscience on the issue and sent it to the Area level.

Question: What changes would you make to the steps, if any?

191 (over 99%) of respondents answered this question.

1 (less than 1%) respondents to the survey did not respond to this question.

Findings

119 (62%) said they would make changes, such as:

28 (15%) said they would change the male pronoun to something neutral

23 (12%) said they would use the word “Higher Power instead of “God”

60 (31%) said they would change the male pronoun to something neutral *and* use the word “Higher Power instead of “God”

8 (4%) said they would make a change “Other” than the three options listed above

72 (38%) said they would keep the Legacies the same

Five respondents who said they would change the male pronoun to something neutral commented on what they would do to change the word “God”

- I actually change the male pronoun to “God.”
- Prefer something like "Universe" or “Universal Energy.”
- (Use) spiritual self instead of god.
- While I'm not bothered by the word “God”, I would support changing it to “Higher Power” in support of other members who are troubled.
- (Use) Creator or Spirit.

Six respondents who said they would change the male pronoun to something neutral *and* use the word “Higher Power instead of “God” also suggested other wording changes and/or they commented:

- Stop capitalizing higher power. Capitalizing it implies that it's a deity.
- Maybe for sake of clarification and flow, perhaps alternating between, “a power greater than ourselves,” (from Step 2) and “the God of our understanding,” which is also already in CAL.
- higher power, no capitals!
- Use "the world" "the greater we" "the one" "the divine" "collective consciousness"
- Use her or him
- In changing pronoun to gender neutrality do it in consultation with the book *Trans Allyship Workbook, Building Skills to Support Trans People In Our Lives*, by David Shlasko. Chapter Four, “Getting The Pronouns Right and What It Teaches Us About Gender.”

Eight respondents who said they would make a change “Other” than the options listed above, specified what they meant by “Other” and/or commented:

- Replace Him with God. For example: Humbly asked God to remove all our shortcomings.
- Use "higher power or god of our understanding.”
- Used GOD instead of HIM.
- I've heard people say “God” instead of “him”. That's very nice.
- Eliminate masculine references. Use "Higher Power" and "God of my (our) understanding" as appropriate.
- Depends on the phrase. The proposed change may be awkward and more distracting than the original.

- Use a secular word or phrase that does not speak to any kind of higher power or suggestion of religion or spirituality, but rather, inner peace, etc.
- I think that the steps and the big book are divinely inspired and there is a synchronicity in the wording that is best left alone. *

**Note: This response appears to be in favor of keeping the Legacies the same, however, we've left the entry as the respondent indicated -- listed as "Other (please specify)."*

Four respondents who said they would keep the Legacies the same commented:

- The literature that we currently are using references to the word "God" throughout our books and pamphlets. I believe that it would be cost prohibitive to change all the literature. "Take what you like and leave the rest."
- Keep the word God in there.
- Don't fix what isn't broken.
- This program has been working for 50 years. What part of *this is not a religious program, God of your understanding, and take what you like and leave the rest* do you not get. Don't fix what's not broken.

4. Knowledge-Based Decision-Management questions and answers used to analyze the survey responses and generate a response to the Thought Force charge

Knowledge-Based Decision-Making (KBDM) is a process used by Al-Anon to reach an informed Group Conscience. KBDM consists of five questions. The Thought Force used these questions to analyze the survey findings, motivate the gathering of additional research, and to generate a response to the Thought Force charge:

"to determine whether/to what degree the current wording of the Legacies is a problem for Maine members, specifically the male pronouns and the word God."

KBDM Question 1: What do we know about our members' needs, wants, and preferences regarding this topic?

Based on the survey conducted, we know that

- 101 (53% of respondents) were bothered by the use of male pronouns (34% were bothered a lot; 19% were bothered a little).
91 (47% of respondents) were not bothered at all by the use of male pronouns
- 69 (36% of respondents) were bothered by the use of the word "God" (16% were bothered a lot; 20% were bothered a little)
122 people (64%) were not bothered at all by the use of the word "God".
- 89 (46% of respondents) took one or more of the actions listed and/or another action in response to discomfort with the wording
103 people (54% of respondents) took none of the actions listed in response to discomfort with the wording
- 119 people (62% of respondents) said they would make changes to the Legacies
72 people (38% of respondents) said they would keep the Legacies the same

KBDM Question 2: What do we know about our ability to respond to this topic in terms of Al-Anon's primary purpose and its resources?

- Al-Anon's primary purpose is to help families and friends of alcoholics. It is stressed in the literature that this is not a religious program, but a spiritual one. Using “He” and “Him” and “God” to refer to a Higher Power can imply that Al-Anon is a religious fellowship. This may be perceived as inconsistent with our Al-Anon principles and may turn away newcomers, as well as alienate current members. As a principle, members are encouraged to “take what you like and leave the rest”.
- Within Al-Anon's literature are many stories of those who have struggled with discomfort with the wording and how they resolved the issue for themselves.
- The World Service Conference Charter Item 3-d (page 226-227, 2018-2021 Service Manual) states that word changes are not permitted without a cumbersome process, yet we know members often change male pronouns and the word God while reading the Legacies in meetings. This affects group unity throughout Al-Anon.
- Maine Area AFG can continue learning about the degree to which the current wording of the Legacies is a problem for our members. GRs could explore this topic further with their group members. If there is substantial unanimity among the groups that this topic impacts Al-Anon's primary purpose, GRs could propose additional action, such as forming a Task Force.

KBDM Question 3: What do we know about changes happening in the world around us, and changes happening within our fellowship that are relevant to this topic? What are the pros & cons?

Changes happening in the world around us

- While people may use the term “he” as a generic pronoun for both men and women, research has shown that the generic “he” produces a male bias (it evokes images of males) and reinforces sexist attitudes and behaviors.
- Using gender-neutral language has become standard practice in both journalistic and academic writing, as well as in pop culture.
- Using the gender-neutral pronoun “they” is commonplace among younger people.
- Some 12 Step Programs use gender neutral language in their Legacies with the permission of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Changes happening within our fellowship

Over the past 31+ years, using male pronouns in our Legacies has been discussed at the World Service Conference and at the Area level:

1989 Conference Summary

- Poll the fellowship regarding changing the sexist terminology in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Comments:
 - Not a real concern in my Area; everyone has learned to adapt, particularly the men.
 - This is frequently brought up, but when we explain the procedure to change the 12 and 12, the request is usually dropped:
 - My Area has experienced the gender language affecting some groups--they do not read the Steps that refer to "him."

- 18 Conference members were asked to vote by a show of hands, their willingness to request the WSO to poll the fellowship to change the Steps and Traditions. The overwhelming consensus was not to pursue the request.

1993 Conference Summary

- Motion #17 (76 Yes, 18 No, 2 Void) That the gender-specific language remain unchanged in the Handbook section of the AI-Anon/Alateen Service Manual.
- Motion was presented to poll the groups on changing the gender-specific language in the Steps changing “He” or “Him” to “God.” Following much discussion, the Conference membership voted not to approve this motion.

1995 Conference Summary

- The Ask It Basket: 4. How do we change the decision of the World Service Conference to allow the Policy Digest to be gender neutral as is the rest of the Service Manual? There was no World Service Conference decision about gender specific language in the Policy Digest. However, the 1993 WSC passed a motion: that the gender-specific language remain unchanged in the Handbook section of the AI-Anon/ Alateen Service Manual. This motion would have to be rescinded.

2001 Conference Summary

- Ask It Basket: 60. Members are concerned about the use of “ he” in our literature (even the new Service Manual) when the majority of our membership is “she.” See page 99, 2000-2002 AI-Anon/Alateen Service Manual, “To keep it simple, the pronoun “he” is used throughout.” The World Service Handbook section of the Service Manual. This was a decision made by the 1993 World Service Conference. Motions presented to a World Service Conference may result in changes in gender-specific wording for the Policy Digest and Concepts of Service sections. The World Service Office staff, as needed, makes changes to the AI-Anon and Alateen Groups at Work section. In literature our purpose in sharing is to keep the focus on us and not on the alcoholic. The Literature Committees review books and pamphlets when they are being revised and make suggestions for such changes.

2003 Conference Summary

- The Literature Committee discussed several suggestions from the fellowship including the possibility of a new daily reader for AI-Anon parents of alcoholics, the use of new media, alternate printing formats, a publication focused on members who enter AI-Anon after age 60, and the use of gender-specific language in our literature. The Committee agreed to take these suggestions under advisement without recommending further action at this time.
- Ask It Basket: 81. Can we make CAL references to HP gender neutral, especially in the Steps and Traditions? Gender-specific sharings from our members are left as-is, unless they quote a Step or Tradition. As stated on page 144 of the Service Manual, it is possible to make changes to any of AI-Anon’s three Legacies provided that three-quarters of the groups worldwide vote in writing to approve such a change.

2014 Northern California

- Their Thought Force used KBDM and also conducted a survey of their members, asking: “Does changing the language of the Steps to gender neutral appeal to you?” (*See 2014 Northern California Thought Force Summary*
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/10LcM1ffoJy1X2S7ssW4dUViPt9sJJrdg/view>)

2018 Washington State

- Their Task Force used KBDM to explore the topic “What would the process look like to change the language of the Steps to gender neutral?” and came up with a motion that could be voted on by all of their groups. The motion failed to pass the 2/3rds threshold at their Area World Service Committee meeting. (See 2018 Washington State gender-Neutral Task Force Appendices https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fPP3goTXTxwZ-hVGB8HHDp8A_KR5u9v/view and Motion <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GwilLG319xmU4CPkC6LBpwK9bp7Evh/view>)

2018-2020 Maine activity

- In January of 2018, a member drafted a letter advocating for gender-neutral wording of the steps and presented it to the Delegate and the S2 District Meeting. Discussions took place in March, April and May at the District and group level. Many S2 groups participated in a straw poll which revealed some interest in changing the wording of the steps, but no formal votes were taken at the district level largely because there was not overwhelming support and because of the daunting process for changing the steps. In 2019, a member requested the Legacy Wording Thought Force be created at the Area level.

Comments

From those bothered by the wording

- Gender neutral language promotes equality and allows members to define their higher power as they understand it.
- Using Higher Power (HP) in place of God honors our principle of no religious affiliation and welcomes people of all faiths.
- Founders knew change would be needed. We trust HP to remove parts of the program that no longer serve us.
- Many people already change the words when they read, which hurts unity.
- 1950’s language is a barrier to recovery for younger generations.

From those not bothered by the wording

- If you are uncomfortable, look inward.
- Take what you like and leave the rest.
- Changing the Steps dilutes them and opens the door to more changes.
- This discussion diverts us from our primary spiritual aim of helping families and friends of alcoholics.
- It is impossible to change the wording of the Steps. Language barriers.
- “God” is not religious. “He” is already neutral.
- The steps are divine and cannot be improved upon.

KBDM Question 4: How can our discussion be consistent with Al-Anon's spiritual principles?

Spiritual principles can help guide our discussions.

- **Tradition 1** reminds us that everyone has an equal voice and to listen and learn. We also have a responsibility to share our views and opinions. Our common goal is to find solutions that are best for the greatest number.

- **Tradition 2** focuses on mutual respect and guides us to invite a Higher Power into our conversations. We are free to think and feel as we choose, but we remember that our Higher Power is with us and we put aside our fears, anxieties, and agendas and listen to each other with an open mind.
- **Tradition 5** invites us to ask how issues in the fellowship affect our focus on our primary purpose. Tradition 5 reminds us not to judge what is or isn't appropriate for anyone else, but rather to look at our fellow members with thoughtfulness and see that they also want what is best for our program.
- **Tradition 10**, reminds us that Al-Anon unity is reliant upon a focus of our primary purpose. Is the charge of the Thought Force an issue that distracts us from our primary purpose? Does the fact that the wording of the Legacies bothers a percentage of members (those surveyed), hinder us from carrying out our primary purpose?
- **Tradition 12** asks us to keep our focus on what unites us and to accept the group conscience even if we personally do not agree. It is vital we listen to the principles in others' messages instead of reacting to personalities.
- **Concept 4** reminds us that the principle of participation has been built into our whole service structure. Respectful, self-disciplined consideration of every other member and group of members will give everyone the right to participate and so assure harmony.
- **Concept 5** members with minority viewpoints are able to freely share their thoughts and feelings and have a duty to do so. When we are open to hearing minority voices and listen with full consideration, we all benefit because everyone is respected and included. The purpose of Concept Five is to ensure access to everybody's ideas so decisions are based on the best information available.

KBDM Question 5: What do we wish we knew? What additional information do we need before moving forward?

We don't know...

- If the current wording impacts newcomers walking through the door today or tomorrow. We can't survey those who don't return so we can't determine if the wording is having an impact on new and potential members.
- How many people have been deterred from trying Al-Anon because of the wording.
- How representative our survey is because the survey was self-selecting as opposed to random, and we can only estimate how many members are attending meetings in Maine.
- How many groups are represented, although we know that respondents represent all but two counties, including one District.
- If length of time in the program affected people's responses to the wording. We only asked respondents to tell us if they had one year or more in the program or less than one year. Would it be helpful to know if there is a direct correlation between how much a person is bothered/not bothered by the wording of the legacies and the amount of time they have been in the program?

We noted the use of spiritual principles to guide our discussion under Question 4 and suggest that groups use Legacies to consider this report in preparation for further discussion on the Area level. This would give broader and deeper information into the impact of the wording of the legacies for our members.