

Unity, Safety and Wellbeing: Guidance for Meetings

The 'Unity, Safety and Wellbeing' reading, which was put together by C.A. London Area to help its meetings, says:

"In C.A., we care about the safety and wellbeing of our fellows. Everybody has the right to feel safe and secure in and around our meetings. It is imperative that each member can find recovery in a safe environment and that the unity of the group is not harmed. Bullying, harassment or unwanted sexual advances do not have to be tolerated. If anyone feels unsafe, or feels another member may be unsafe, please speak to a member of the committee or the District Service Committee. Please be assured that you will receive support."

Unity, safety and wellbeing¹ are the responsibility of all members, individually and collectively. Our first tradition states that "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon C.A. unity." The best way to promote healthy, functional meetings is to have strong committees that are fully informed about the 12 Traditions, hold regular group consciences and conduct group inventory, and stand together when facing difficult situations.

There are times, however, when our unity is challenged. While we aim to be loving, compassionate and tolerant to all, members can fall out; or individual members can behave in ways that affect the general wellbeing of the group or its primary purpose (Tradition Five: "Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the addict who still suffers").

Promoting unity, safety and wellbeing

The answer to nearly all challenges faced by groups lies in the 12 Traditions. After all, they came about because of difficulties experienced by the original 12-Step groups.

So, what can groups do if members fall out; or an individual member repeatedly disrupts a meeting or bullies, harasses or makes unwanted sexual advances to another member, or behaves in a manner which compromises a meeting's primary purpose?

It is not for London Area to tell groups how to manage their meetings and specific guidance may not cover all situations. We can, however, offer some suggestions to guide members and committees.

We urge members to be loving, understanding and compassionate to others in the fellowship who may be struggling with behavioural issues or challenging defects of character. All of us may have struggled to fit in at times and our behaviours may not have been acceptable to others. Our unity is best served by finding the good and potential to grow in others, rather than trying to control their behaviour.

Disrupting meetings

If a member is under the influence and disrupting a meeting or unable to follow meeting etiquette, the best solution is often for a senior member to take them outside and talk to them and try to carry a message of recovery person-to-person.

¹ In this context, safety refers to the safety of members from harm by other members. However, please note that English and Welsh law requires that any person with an official role in a charity has specific responsibilities for health and safety, preventing bullying and harassment, and the safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults at meetings and events that they represent. All GSRs and Area Service Committee members are considered to be members of CA London (the registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation), and so are legally responsible for safety and security at their meetings and events. The London Area Charity Trustees Committee has overall responsibility for safety and security, and provides general guidance on all of the issues listed here.

If the member refuses to cooperate and continues to disrupt the meeting or is upsetting other members, it is the responsibility of the committee to keep the meeting safe. The Secretary, GSR or any member of the committee can pause the meeting and ask members to behave respectfully or to ask for the 'Unity, Safety and Wellbeing' reading to be read out again.

If the problem persists, the member who is disrupting the meeting can be asked to leave. This may seem harsh and unfair, particularly if the member seems unwell or is otherwise struggling. What about Tradition Three ("The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using cocaine and all other mind-altering substances")?

Any request to leave is based on the group's common welfare (Tradition One) and primary purpose (Tradition Five). The request should be reasonable and can only apply to that meeting on that particular day – we cannot bar a member from a meeting on an ongoing basis or from C.A. as a whole.

If the member who is asked to leave is known to the committee, a kind phone call or text in the following days can often start to heal any anger or resentment that may have arisen. This, however, is a matter for individual members and they must be guided by their conscience, Higher Power and need to feel safe.

Should you be unable to resolve such a situation and it reoccurs regularly, seek guidance from your District Service Committee. The District Chair, Unity Chair and/or DSR(s) can often resolve such issues by helping members to understand the 12 Traditions.

Dealing with complaints

In the reading at the start of this guidance, it says: *"If anyone feels unsafe, or feels another member may be unsafe, please speak to a member of the committee or the District Service Committee. Please be assured that you will receive support."*

If a Group Service Committee (or District Service Committee) member receives such a complaint, we urge you to remain open-minded and not make assumptions or rush to judgement. It is better if two committee members or more are present when hearing a complaint to provide a safe environment.

In the first instance, try to ensure that the person making the complaint is listened to and feels heard. This does not mean taking sides or promising outcomes. Ask if there are witnesses who can corroborate their version of events. However, the absence of a witness does not mean that the complaint should be ignored. Ask if the person making the complaint wishes to remain anonymous. Either way, treat their complaint with discretion and don't talk about it to other members (other than the committee) or people outside the fellowship. Ask what the person making the complaint would like to happen next and what their ideal outcome would be.

Most such complaints can be dealt with by the Group Service Committee, through tact, discretion and considered action. We urge you to act with love, tolerance and compassion, but also to ensure that members feel safe at your meeting by challenging inappropriate behaviour. If a committee feels unable to resolve a complaint, get permission from the person who has complained to seek guidance from your district or London Area, but again be discreet and if requested respect the anonymity of the person making the complaint.

If, however, the complaint is more serious and you believe a crime may have been committed, encourage the person who has allegedly been harmed to report the matter to the police (see below).

If a crime is committed

If a disruptive member is less inclined to be reasonable and commits a crime, such as assault, sexual abuse, theft or vandalism, it is OK to call the police or subsequently report the alleged criminal behaviour. Again, this may not sit well with individual members, but the safety and wellbeing of all members is important. Similarly, while anonymity is a cornerstone of our traditions, it doesn't allow members to commit crimes without accountability. This includes threats of violence.

In simple terms, if a C.A. member believes a crime may have been committed, they should consider taking the following action(s), as appropriate:

- Preserve any evidence, including the names and phone numbers of any witnesses
- Report their concerns to the Secretary, GSR or another committee member
- Call the police by dialling 999 in an emergency or 101 to report a crime or criminal offence that is not an emergency, or subsequently report a crime in person by visiting a police station.

If the suspected crime relates to a Vulnerable Adult, the police or the Local Authority Adult Social Care team are the appropriate people to be notified.²

'When Trust is Lost'

In specific situations, the disruption may come from a committee member, which can create additional challenges as they have been elected by the group as a trusted servant. For example, it may be suspected that a group treasurer may be misusing the funds. Such problems have arisen before and the fellowship has clear guidelines about financial issues and handling money at all levels (see the 'Financial Guidelines for Groups, Districts and Areas', which can be found on ca.org). In the first instance, it is the responsibility of the meeting as a whole to ensure that it takes seriously its financial affairs and ensures the guidelines are followed.

There may be situations, however, where a trusted servant allegedly breaches the trust placed in them. Our World Trustees have suggested a process for dealing with such situations, which is outlined in the article 'When Trust is Lost' that first appeared in *The NewsGram*, the CA newsletter. It is a thorough document that sets out a clear process for handling such situations. This article has been approved by London Area: it is available from the Area Chair and will be included in the forthcoming Area Service Manual.

We hope you never have need for any of this guidance, but it is better that members, particularly those who do service in meetings, feel informed and empowered to keep their meetings safe and promote unity in C.A. The important point is that you are not alone and can ask for help.

If you need more support or guidance, there are plenty of people in the fellowship with experience of resolving disputes or difficult situations in meetings or other service environments. In the first instance, we suggest asking your District Service Committee for help, through either the Chair, Unity Chair or DSR(s). Beyond this, the Chair, Vice-Chair, Unity Chair or Delegates at London Area can offer guidance, suggestions or moral support to your meeting's committee.

² Please note that 'Vulnerable Adult' is a legal term and does not generally apply to all newcomers or addicts who are struggling ('A person who is 18 years of age or over, and who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness and who is or may be unable to take care of him/herself, or unable to protect him/herself against significant harm or serious exploitation').