



## Whatever Happened to the Circle and Triangle?

Have you noticed that the circle and triangle symbol no longer appears at the top of the Grapevine's Table of Contents? The decision to remove it has its roots in recent events: actions of the 1993 General Service Conference, and subsequent actions by the Board of Trustees and the directors of AA World Services.

Adopted at the 20th Anniversary International Convention in St. Louis, the circle and triangle symbol was registered as an official AA mark in 1955, and has been widely used by various AA entities. By the mid-1980s, however, it had also begun to be used by outside organizations, such as novelty manufacturers, publishers, and occasionally treatment facilities. There was growing concern in the membership of AA about this situation. Some AA members were saying "we don't want our circle and triangle aligned with non-AA purposes." In keeping with the Sixth Tradition, that AA "... ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise . . .", the AA World Services board began in 1986 to contact outside entities that were using the circle and triangle in an unauthorized manner, and to take action to prevent such use of the symbol. AAWS implemented this policy with restraint, and did not resort to legal remedies until all attempts at persuasion and conciliation had been unsuccessful. Of about 170 unauthorized users contacted, two suits were filed, and both were settled in the very early stages.

Denying the use of the symbol to outside entities raised other problems, however. By early 1990, it was clear that some AA members very much wanted to be able to obtain medallions with "our" circle and triangle. Both the AAWS and Grapevine Corporate boards began receiving

requests to produce sobriety chips and medallions, and the matter was discussed at a joint meeting of the two boards in October 1990. Their consensus was that production of tokens and medallions was unrelated to our primary purpose of carrying the AA message, and they suggested that the matter be given a thorough airing at the General Service Conference in order to seek a group conscience from the Fellowship.

At the 1992 Conference, there were presentations on why we should or should not produce medallions, and on the responsibility of AAWS to protect our trademarks and copyrights. The result was a Conference Advisory Action asking the General Service Board of trustees to undertake a feasibility study on the possible methods by which sobriety chips and medallions might be made available to the Fellowship, and to report its findings to an ad hoc committee of delegates.

The ad hoc committee met prior to the 1993 Conference, for several full days of discussion and deliberation, and in turn presented its report and recommendations on the Conference floor. After discussion, the Conference approved two of five recommendations: 1) that the use of sobriety chips/medallions is a matter of local autonomy and not one on which the Conference should record a definite position; and 2) that it is not appropriate for AA World Services or the Grapevine to produce or license the production of sobriety chips/medallions.

In substance, the ad hoc committee report said:

"We began to see that the issue is 'What is best for AA as a whole' and not 'Does the Fellowship want AA sobriety chips/medallions?' or 'Can AA produce sobriety chips/medallions?' The committee did not focus on the use of sobriety chips/medallions - groups and individuals

are free to use them if they wish. The question is whether it is best for AA as a whole to have a sobriety chip/medallion with the AA name on it authorized and/or issued by an AA entity.

"Some of the comments made during the Traditions part of the discussion included:

*"The First Tradition* - At the heart of the matter is unity . . .

*"The Second Tradition* - Therein lies our solution. Where is our ultimate authority and where is our center? Is it internal or external - principles arising from a power greater than people, or values of the world? We must keep in mind that this is also the place where Bill W. points out that '... the good is sometimes the enemy of the best.'

*"The Third Tradition* - We were reminded that we are a self-correcting Fellowship ... We felt that it is time for the whole Fellowship to get back to the simplicity and basis of our message.

*"The Fourth Tradition* makes it clear that we must separate the spiritual from the material. Keeping in mind that any action we take could affect AA as a whole ...

*"The Fifth Tradition* - The Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, *AA Comes of Age*, and 'The Twelve Concepts for World Service' - are the basic message, the core message of AA. Everything else is commentary on the basic message: all literature published, comments and sharing at meetings, even the Grapevine, is a sort of national commentary. Could chips/medallions be another form of commentary, another form of a pamphlet?

*"The Sixth Tradition* calls on us to 'divide the spiritual from the material.' Money is not a valid consideration in the question of whether or not litigation should be brought against misusers of our logo since AA is not in the business of making money. Similarly, the fear that others would be making money off our logo does not hurt the Fellowship on a fundamental level. How do we let go of this tiger we have by the tail? ... We are at the tip of the iceberg of litigation right now ... We went many, many years without lawsuits. To continue on this path threatens to keep our focus on money and property instead of allowing our view to widen spiritually.

*"The Seventh Tradition* reminds us 'Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely

destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money and authority.'

*"The Eleventh Tradition* - explicitly warns against the sensationalism that follows litigation. It is essentially negative attention and puts the Fellowship at risk.

*"The Twelfth Tradition* - Humility is the key, working from the internal to the external, from the smaller to the larger, from 'I' to 'We,' in a spirit of humility and trust. What course of action will keep us on the path of spirituality?...

"The committee spent a great length of time in the discussion of the Warranties. Warranty Five states:

"Practically all societies and governments feel it necessary to inflict personal punishment upon individual members for violations of their beliefs, principles or laws. Because of its special situation, Alcoholics Anonymous finds this practice unnecessary. When we of AA fail to follow sound spiritual principles, alcohol cuts us down. Therefore, no humanly administered system of penalties is needed. This unique condition is an enormous advantage to us all, one on which we can fully rely and one which we should never abandon by a resort to the methods of personal attack and punishment. . . .

"In case the AA name should be misapplied . . . it would of course be the duty of our General Service Conference to press for the discontinuance of such a practice - always short, however of public quarreling about the matter. . . . It was recognized that a public lawsuit is a public controversy, something in which our Tradition says we may not engage.'

"The chips/medallions and trademark questions were dealt with as separately as possible. The committee felt that a distinction could be drawn between the two in terms of their respective significance to AA. The trademark (logo) is the embodiment of the AA name. The significance of its shape is described in *AA Comes of Age*, page 139: 'The circle stands for the whole world of AA, and the triangle stands for AA's Three Legacies of Recovery, Unity, and Service . . . The priests and seers of antiquity regarded the circle enclosing the triangle as a means of warding off spirits of evil, and AA's circle and triangle of Recovery, Unity, and Service has certainly meant all of that to us and much more.'

"Medallions, on the other hand, are not universally considered an embodiment of the Fellowship as such. Many stories are told about the role that the coins play in an individual's continuing sobriety: the coins act as symbolic recognition of the length of sobriety. They are not the sobriety itself and any attempt to make medallions more than a symbol may lead perilously towards ego-inflation, self-glorification, rather than ego-deflation (see Tradition Twelve).

"The committee felt that the desire to protect the unique meaning of AA's symbol is at the foundation of litigation, as well as the fear of the trivialization of the mark. But despite the vehemence with which we feel 'ownership' of the symbol, we suspect that the belief that we (or anyone) can 'possess' the symbol is a fallacy.

"It actually works against the foundation of the Steps that lead us to sobriety. Ownership necessarily involves control and to argue over that control through litigation takes the focus away from the fact that we are ultimately powerless. We can own the meaning of the symbol, and if someone uses the graphic, our meaning will not be diminished, as long as we keep the principles it represents in sight.

"The committee finally questioned the goals of litigation, what would actually be gained from a lawsuit. We suspect that the harm done internally as a result of litigation would be far worse than the harm others could do to our 'property' from the outside. At the base of this approach is the trust that is the foundation of AA. It is our trust that AA principles will work to protect our name, just as our trust in God is the foundation of our program and of our lives. Warranty Five says that we can '. . . confidently trust AA opinion, public opinion, and God Himself to take care of Alcoholics Anonymous. . . .'

"Concept Seven states '[The Conference] Charter itself is not a legal document. . . it relies instead upon the force of tradition . . . for its final effectiveness.'

"To us, the fear that the incorporation of the symbol by others outside the Fellowship would somehow detract from the significance of the symbol is really unfounded. No one outside the Fellowship can detract from AA's strength if we stick to the Steps, Traditions and Concepts, which unite us.

"The registered trademarks, service marks and logos are symbols of our spiritual Fellowship, Alcoholics Anonymous, and should be treated as such.

"The General Service Conference is a living entity. From the group conscience will eventually emerge an expression of the will of a loving Power greater than ourselves proven to be firmly linked to the Traditions and Warranties, keeping us safe for as long as we are needed."

The ad hoc committee report was debated on Tuesday and Thursday of Conference week, and the subject of chips and medallions came up again during a final sharing session on Friday. The chairperson of the AAWS Board made the following statement at that time: "The AAWS Board will immediately begin a thorough review of its policies regarding our marks, will do everything possible to avoid initiating litigation, and will prepare a revised policy statement to be ready for next year's Conference."

Immediately after the Conference, the General Service Board accepted AAWS's recommendation to discontinue protecting the circle and triangle symbol as one of AA's registered marks. And by early June, the trustees reached substantial unanimity in support of AAWS's statement that, to avoid the suggestion of association or affiliation with outside goods and services, AA World Services, Inc. would phase out the "official" or "legal" use of the circle and triangle.

If you're wondering how to identify Conference-approved literature in the future, it will carry the words "This is AA General Service Conference-approved literature." As pieces of literature are due for reprinting, the symbol will be deleted; and new materials will carry only the Conference-approved wording.

Like the Serenity Prayer and the slogans, which have never had official recognition, the circle and triangle will most likely continue to be used widely for many AA purposes. The difference from earlier practice is that its official use to denote Alcoholics Anonymous materials will be phased out.

*(This material is adapted from the August-September issue of the GSO newsletter Box 4-5-9; portions of the ad hoc committee report are taken from the Final Report of the 1993 General Service Conference.)*