

May 23, 2021 “Only” Meetings Town Hall Meeting Summary

This was the first in a series of town halls to launch a Fellowship-wide discussion; 133 members attended and 32 shared. The goal of holding these town halls and asking for a Fellowship-wide discussion is to provide guidance to the WSO Board of Trustees for developing a Traditions-based policy for meetings listed on (or removed from) the Adultchildren.org website. Groups, Intergroups, and Regions are also being asked to discuss this important issue.

Statement of Purpose for Town Hall Meeting #1:

Concerns about “only” meetings and their implications, how “only” meetings relate to safety, versus issues of exclusion.

Should these meetings be listed on the WSO directory?

Session 1: What do we know about our members’ (and newcomers’) needs, wants and preferences that relate to “only” meetings being listed on the WSO registered meeting list?

- How important is it?
- Is it what our current members want?
- How will it affect newcomers?
- What purpose would this serve?
- Is it necessary?
- Is it helpful?

General Summary

The majority believe that focus-specific meetings are critical and necessary to create safe space where people can both explore the traumas they experienced as members of an oppressed group, and to do it in a space where they are not at risk of being exposed to further trauma from people who do not identify in the same way. A further benefit is that creating these spaces draws a larger fellowship by creating a space that speaks directly to more people and tells them that ACA values them. Additionally, it evolves us away from a white, male-centric doctrine that was created in a time where difference and inclusion were neither prevalent nor valued.

Generally, most stated that, while focus-specific meetings are valuable, they should not turn away an ACA person in distress, whether a newcomer or not, unless an alternative, more appropriate meeting could be found for the person. Likewise, it seemed generally that people were not in favor of gatekeeping (either asking overtly, or using video, to confirm an identity); rather, most were in favor of self-identification. Rather than gatekeeping, two comments stated that it is the moderator's/group

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conscience responsibility to practice meeting safety practices and remove anyone behaving inappropriately.

It was stated as a terminology issue four times, but while not everyone overtly stated it that way, the language that many used was not the word "only," but something less exclusionary, like "focused", "affinity", the title without the word only, e.g., LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, women, men, etc.

Specific Comments

- I live in an area with only one meeting, typically hetero binary, and I have been excluded when I share about my being non-binary. It seems useful and necessary because membership has grown quickly. Non-binary needs this safe space.
- There is a Queer "only" meeting whose membership has skyrocketed in just 2 months. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have this space and I hope its protected going forward.
- I believe that healing from this disease requires safety, a feeling of safety, a feeling of belonging. And without that, I think we're limited in in what how we can heal. It is important to me as a member of an "only" meeting. I think that if newcomers are presented with a set of options that provide the safety they need for their particular situation, that will be a benefit for them. Regardless of what a person's external situation is, this will provide a a safety option for them where they can find belonging. Our meetings are autonomous, and meetings can mold themselves to fit the needs. It would seem removing this space this might fracture our unity. But I also think that unity can be seen as offering what is necessary to everyone that comes for help.
- I attend a women-only meeting that voted for it to be an open and affirming meeting. The statement that we created was "LGBTQ folks who identify as women are welcome in this meeting, regardless of gender expression." We did that because we wanted non binary, and transgender folks who identify on the feminine end of the spectrum to have a safe place to come. And we have had such members in our group. It is not only for LGBTQ people, but it is only for women, and it creates a safe space. I do think it's very important for me personally, to also attend meetings where men attend, because I need to see men and their journey of recovery. I happen to be a heterosexual cisgender woman and so my romantic relationships have been with men. And it's been very important to me to watch what they go through. I think it's important for men to have meetings too, so that they can talk about the constraints of the masculine image that they're supposed to live up to. I think it's vitally important to have such meetings because it provides a sense of safety and I think it's really important for newcomers, especially people who have been victimized in the past and want a space that is free from people who trigger their memories of victimization.
- I'm one of the cofounders of the We Agnostics meetings. And I cannot begin to, to say how many people have shown up at our meetings going, I am so grateful that I found you because the religion aspect has kept me from recovery for years, sometimes decades. I think it's critically important that we have the ability to list meetings that speak to a population that might not find representation elsewhere in the program. If you want

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to call them only meetings, that's fine. I was very clear to adhere to the traditions in saying that everyone is welcome in We Agnostics, because everyone is welcome in ACA. in the listings of our meetings on the ACA website. In ACA, we have adopted a practice of maintaining safety within the group and we go to great lengths to do that. However, my recovery did not blossom in a vacuum. My recovery blossomed in a diverse environment where I had to learn how, quite frankly, to get over my anger at the overly religious nature of the literature and the talk in 12 step rooms. I needed a place where I could go and talk about that. And I couldn't do that in almost any other room that I had been in. I don't want us to close the doors on people who are seeking recovery.

- I am a founding member of Hella Gay ACA, a five day a week LGBTQ AI+ meeting that began on March 22 of this year. We were listed on Adult children.org on a Sunday and by Monday, we had nine people at our meeting. Three weeks later, we had over 30. Today we regularly have about 25 people attend at each of our meetings and more people than I can count call us their home group. Several people tell us that we were their first ACA meeting and they come back regularly. They see themselves reflected in us. Basically transgender people, non binary people, asexual people, intersex people, and they are given a space to process childhood trauma that will not re-traumatize them. The sad fact is that many of us go to mainstream ACA meetings and are re-traumatized by racism, transphobia, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry we experienced in our childhood and continue to experience in our adult lives. Please be sure to ask yourself, "who is not here?" How many people came into the rooms and left because they did not feel safe? We don't want the unity of those who feel safe in mainstream meetings. You have no idea of the people that are out here.
- When I first joined ACA, I was in a meeting with people who did not seem like me and I got freaked out. After that started seeking out meetings that were women's meetings, and queer meetings. And that really helps me in terms of having a foundation of safety within the program. I think, so much of what we talk about here is scary. And it's really, really hard. I think the more that we're all allowed to have that additional layer of safety we may individually need, the better. For me, these meetings are crucial. They are necessary, they are helpful.
- This seems as to be a discussion between open and closed meetings. I know when I'm excluded from a meeting, I have concerns and it's interesting to feel those feelings and understand maybe there's room for a focus meeting where people could have a discussion about the complexity of those issues. I'd like meetings to be a place where we can learn more about the issues of the people in focus in these meetings, where others could show a willingness and interest in listening to what the issues are; where they could learn about the sensitivities people are having. I know what it feels like to have a sense of a need for safety. The more we have, the better off we are. I think it's silly that we're not listing all these meetings.
- We're all different, every one of us is different. And thank God, that technology allows us now to have zoom and the phone bridge and face to face meetings. There are lots and lots of options. I once accidentally attended a women's only meeting with my husband, and it was fine that he didn't join. It's fine. To me having a place where it's safe for me to go and have a good cry, speak about my anger speak about my feelings. It's a very

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sensitive thing. It's reflects a very vulnerable part of me. So I need to be I need to feel safe.

- This is a whole host of complex, nuanced and charged issues. And, at least for some people, this is a safety issue, which I think is important. But to me, one of the things that's complex about this is that it's a terminology issue. We're talking about “only” meetings, but to me only meetings aren't one monolith of things. There are different dimensions, such as sex, gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion; they're not all the same. I see three options. One, all only meetings are okay; two, no only meanings are not okay; or, three, some only meetings are okay. My feeling is that it is definitely not none. I feel like some may cross the line. I tend to land in the some, but then it gets complicated, because then it becomes, “where's the line and who gets to decide?” And that's where I feel like getting input from lots of lots of people from lots of lots of different perspectives is probably really important. I will say that in terms of de-listing meetings, my understanding is WSO's policy is to de-list meetings when they violate traditions.
- I feel strongly about is the allowing some of these only meetings to exist, or to be shared about on our WSO website while saying others can't. We're not here to be authority figures. So it shouldn't be that we say, “Okay, this meeting is for a safety reason, therefore, they're allowed to exist and advertise that they're a meeting that is within ACA,” whereas, “Oh, no, you you're not allowed to,” I certainly understand the issue that has come up which spurred this on with a group acting and appropriately, and that's certainly something to take care of on a case by case basis. But having a safe place to speak about things that you either can't speak of in a regular meeting, because it would violate boundaries, or for the camaraderie that exists with knowing that the audience is women only or men only, whatever only, that they understand our unique problem that we're going through at a different level. And this helps having only meetings contribute to recovery of the whole individual and each trauma they have. But having people decide what meetings are or aren't listed is exclusionary, and we're to be inclusive, giving an opportunity for all, not just those who are in a specific area who see about a specific only meeting, but to open that up so that everyone has the same opportunity to take advantage of whatever meetings they want to.
- With regards to the question you're asking, “how important is it?” It's irrelevant because the traditions cover all of that. It doesn't matter what color you are, your sexual orientation, anything. The only requirement is that you grew up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional home. And these 12 traditions are adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, and the experience that they had. The 12 traditions protected Alcoholics Anonymous, and it can protect ACA, too.
- What I've found is that, while I've attended meetings that are specific to lesbians and women, we've never excluded anyone. We take in the newcomer and ask them what they need and then we help the newcomer. My only concern with only meetings is that they are not exclusive. Excluding people, I believe it is necessary to have only meetings and it is absolutely helpful. It would serve to have a safe place for people to go. But exclusion is not the answer. And it breaks Tradition One.

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- The problem that was raised at the REA committee was the problem of the meeting that was delisted was a meeting that specifically put being a heterosexual male first, not being an ACA person first. We don't endorse or lend the ACA name to outside enterprises, e.g., religion, heterosexuality, etc. (where ACA recovery isn't the first goal).
- There's a difference between on-line meetings and in-person meetings.
 - For instance, at two of the meetings I go do both of which are special interest, LGBT meetings. We ask that allies or people who identify as cisgender straight people leave the meeting space, but offer them alternative meetings that are meeting at the same time. However, we don't gate-keep identities. Unless a person outwardly says in a hostile way that they are cisgender, or heterosexual, they are welcome to stay at our meeting.
 - I also think that in-person meetings, if anyone comes in distress, it doesn't matter what gender or sexuality; they are welcome at any meeting.
 - And lastly, I just wanted to say that special interest meetings are not a place for allies to get informed and be woke. They are there for people who have that special interest to heal from their trauma.
- The experience of hearing about a straight guy's meeting, and then the denial that it was a straight guy's meeting, was very triggering for me. I experienced a lot of trauma from straight men when I was growing up. However, I'm just questioning why anyone would want them not to have a meeting of their own. My feeling is, if I'm not that, I don't care if that exists, I simply can choose not to attend. A second issue for me is that I have hungered for a Gay Men's meeting for years, and when I found one that I resonated with, frequently on Zoom meetings, there have been attendees who have their video turned off, but have women's names on the squares. I was also traumatized by my mother growing up. I would never dream of attending a women's meeting and I don't want women in my Gay Men's meeting. When I brought it up with the group, one member said, “Well, we don't want to have them not feel part of the club.” My response is this isn't a club. This is a healing medicine modality.
- We're exactly where other 12 step groups, in particular AA, were with the concept of “only” meetings, which is that exclusivity didn't work. The fact that we have men, women, agnostics, etc. groups is proof in and of itself of the inclusivity. Unity is not inclusivity, they're two different things. Unity really speaks to the first tradition, and that our primary purpose is keeping the focus on recovery and carrying our message to those who suffer. I feel that the traditions as they're written provide a wonderful framework for expansion, not contraction, and that we are growing into those traditions, because they are such a wonderful structure to grow into, and they don't need to be changed or modified. I certainly support everybody who has talked about focus-specific meetings. I think those are perfectly fine; they're not excluding people. That's what the tradition speak to, that we keep the focus on recovery and keep the Unity there, So I support the fact that these other groups can pare off and focus on separate issues. The the group unity and the carrying the message is what it's all about here.
- I would really like to see the only groups more strongly supported.
- Having specific meetings for specific topics or issues is not anything that we should be looking to de-list. For me, the problem is the word only. Because as soon as you put

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only after any of these kinds of meetings, it becomes exclusionary. It's important that if someone in distress or a newcomer comes to an only meeting and is turned away, could be really damaging. I just think that the word only is just not okay. I was a part of the group that was taking the actions that brought us here today, which was that the person who was giving out the access code to that meeting was interviewing people to see if they were gay or straight before he would give him the code. And to me, that just defeats the whole purpose and is anti-everything that we work on when we work the steps. It's against the Traditions.

- I feel very strongly that the issues people of color need to address in terms of relating to sort of migration and the family issues of dysfunction that come up, are quite specific for us. As a person that attend that only space, I find it very useful.
- We do we do ask people to have their camera on and identify as a person of color so it's a safe space for us to talk about issues that are about living in a white supremacist society. Also, those only meetings can be a stepping stone into the wider, wider ACA. They complement other ACA meetings. It's just that in those only spaces there are certain issues that I can address with other people and learn from other people that have experienced those same issues in their own recovery.
- The word only to me does not matter. It's about what meetings do. My opinion on whether there should be all, some or none of these focused groups is that there should be absolutely be some. But the reason that there should not be all only meetings is it can affect the fellowship as a whole. For me, when we get to the point that people say that white only meetings are acceptable, for this fellowship that is simply not acceptable under any circumstances. White people do not qualify as a “like people.” Screening is a harsh word, but the monitoring of meeting descriptions should be acceptable since the ACA meetings website is not a free for all posting. It's something that you have to submit to and there is something of a review process. Where things affect the fellowship as a whole, that's where a line needs to be drawn. I will say that I attended the hetero only meeting after it came to light and I found simply, it was not necessary to say you can only attend if you're a straight man.
- I was in the men's meeting for a while. And I'm just going to give the background there was one member there, who is a very problematic member who had interactions with many people that were negative. And he was a gay man. And he would share graphic details. The meeting tried to appropriately take action by the guidelines of ACA, and really, the issue came up repeatedly. But no one was no one was crossing the guidelines, people were really respecting the ACA guidelines and really trying to be as a group give this person proper feedback and warning. And it just wasn't happening and some people would just come and support this person. I was not part of the formation of the resulting hetero only group, and in my opinion it was very clumsy how they did it. They were being reactors versus actors. And that hetero only meeting was a reaction in my in my estimation, and whenever we react, it leads to things like these complications. And the genesis of a new meeting was because the original meeting wasn't strong enough to corral this one person who kept derailing the meeting. So this other meeting was formed in response. I just wanted to give that background. I don't think the original one was strong, and it was reactive.

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- I won't speak for a group that I'm not a member of. And I mean that in terms of, I don't want to speak to the straight white experience. I don't want to speak to a woman's experience. And I don't want to speak to anyone to experience that I don't actually have. That being said, I identify as queer. And the queer meetings have been like coming home for me, I love all the meetings I go to, they're all really different. And I do love the ideology of take what you like and leave the rest. I try and put myself in the shoes of a newcomer coming to the ACA website for the first time. And wondering about how these meetings work and go in and then seeing all these different kinds of meetings. And I'm imagining, if I were that person, I would be looking at where I feel like I would be invited in. And I wouldn't want to go where I didn't feel comfortable. Especially as a newcomer, I know how I was when I first started coming to the meetings. I was very cautious. I was sitting in the meetings, I was listening to the group and I was thinking, is this a safe place? Are they going to run a trap on me? Do they have an agenda? Are people going to try to, you know, talk me into something or you know, I was very cautious from the religious and institutional abuses I had been through, and my alcoholic family. So I just wanted to say I don't feel comfortable rejecting anyone from having their safe space. And I love having my LGBT queer questioning spaces. It's been a godsend.
- Hearing the word only is uncomfortable to me. The way I look at it, there's a difference between ACA as a whole being welcoming to everyone and each individual meeting being welcoming to everyone. If you find one that says women only men only and think that because of that one meeting being there, that ACA is not open to everyone, I think that's wrong. As long as there are lots and lots of meetings that are open to everyone then it's not unwelcoming for there to be meetings that have limitations like men only women only.
- The basis for my share is only as a form of exclusivity. Uniquely common as an adult child. Recognizing that I'm an ACA member is a form of acceptance of myself and others as well as trust, unity and anonymity being the spiritual foundation of that even though the idea of ACA stands as a group of men and women, it's creating itself a form of exclusivity based on gender. Some of the only meetings also form a basis of only exclusivity. And is based on attraction of exclusivity versus inclusivity, and thus the opposite of neutrality or responsibility in some ways. But as an individual member, recognizing my own my own uniqueness is an acceptance of others' uniqueness, personalities, and thus, a form of receptiveness, humility that there's other people in the world and that others have a right to acknowledge and a purpose.
- I would like to speak as an ACA, I'm someone who's fairly new to the to the program, I came in September, as someone who has Latin x, black, queer and non-binary. For me, this program is about a program about identity. It's about identifying as an ACA, I want to be with people who are also ACA, or children of dysfunctional families. And, so much of my life is about her, it's been about having my reality denied. And that's the trauma that my family has passed on through to me about their reality being denied by their parents. And for me, I go to, "only" meetings because it gives us an opportunity to talk about how our reality is not only denied sometimes in our own families, but how institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, cisgender binary, how all that plays into crippling us. And so for me, I don't believe they're outside issues, I believe this is an opportunity for me to feel

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included. I also find that when I go to 12 step programs that are not, “only” meetings that sometimes people will say racist, sexist, and homophobic things to me, which are very traumatizing. For me, this is about survival. It's not about trying to exclude people; it's about trying to give me a place to feel safe. I don't identify as trans. So for instance, I don't go to specific trans only meetings, because I feel like they have a right to feel safe. I want to be in meetings where I can feel safe. And I would love to be a part of a worldwide organization where I'm not unique. I'm not the only black person. It's about giving people opportunity.

- I'm the founder of the new LGBTQIA+. You might say it's an “only lite” meeting because it is new and our policy just started off being just focusing on their community. I don't know where it's going to go. But I will defer to the group conscious when we decide on what our policy is to be long term. My instinct is that we will focus on that group and include others as well. As it applies to AA's failing with all the only groups and all that different kind of thing. There's also a notion of AA of allowing people to have their experience and maybe ACA should be allowed to have our experiences as well with this. We should just be allowed to have our own experience with this process as well.
- It's very important to have a women's only group because I feel safe there. And I definitely have some trust/safe issues with males. So for me, if my women's only group were not available, I'm not saying that I would not get anything out of an everybody can attend ACA group. But I don't think I would get as much out because I know there are some things I wouldn't feel comfortable and safe speaking about. So for me, this is very important. And we've never turned anybody away in the time that I've been in this group.
- I'm the co-moderator of an online ACA message board that's open to all ACA's. And personally, I have no problem with specialty meetings, as long as you're not prohibited by some kind of law. There are plenty of online meetings that are open to all ACA's. So as long as it's not done in a mean-spirited manner. I don't have a problem with it. The job of a moderator is to keep the meeting safe. And if John Doe is disruptive, the answer is not to start another meeting, but excluding John Doe's. That's a moderation problem.
- It's important that ACA as a program be open to all. I also think that it's important that each meeting is autonomous and can decide for themselves. What unites and makes an ACA meeting is the steps, the traditions, and the principles. And if the meeting is following the traditions and the principles, having an affinity group is acceptable. The ACA website should be a menu of options that people can choose from and choose meetings that they would like to go to. And then they can take what they like and leave the rest. I also think that the question of safety, just having an affinity group or homogenous identified group does not necessarily make the meeting safe but makes safety a little bit easier. But what really makes it safe is since the common purpose and the traditions. As an ACA, I choose to self-identify, which is one of our principles that we self-identify. So, I think with affinity groups, this should be more of a self-identification process versus what's has been called “having a gatekeeper.” And the last point is this that one of our principles is to have a deference to the newcomer as well as the deference to the minority voice. And we do that because the newcomer is not necessarily aware of that tradition, not necessarily aware of national level of the program principals and the minority, whatever that looks like, may not have enough an ally or

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support system to be able to speak up and claim space. So I think it is important to have a vision of where the possibilities have only meetings and affinity group meetings.

- I wanted to talk go back to history a little bit with AA when people of color were not allowed into the meeting rooms, for the most part, and had to meet separately. I heard a story recently from a woman whose husband, who is African American, was not allowed into a meeting room, this was in the 50s. For a year, he had to sit on a chair outside the room and try to listen to what was happening. I don't believe what's happening today is the same as what happened then I don't believe it's full circle. This is different because the people who are experiencing certain things, in their lives personally and in society, are choosing to have meetings like this. Long ago, it wasn't a choice, there was exclusion. Today, we're choosing to have specialty meetings. And I think that's a big difference. I think it's very important to listen to the people who are experiencing certain things. The people who experience homophobia, racism, whatever it is, are the experts on it. And it's very important to listen to what they need and what they want. It seems to me that there is a lot of support for specialty meetings, but there's maybe more disagreement about whether anybody could come, or if people would be screened, or excluded from the meetings. I support specialty groups and I participate in people of color and women's meetings and time and other regular meetings, and I benefit from them all.
- One of the underlying questions we're exploring in this meeting is whether a specialty meetings violate the traditions, but I'm wondering if the traditions were formulated by white heterosexuals. And if they were, I wonder if they'd be different if BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks had participated in developing them.
- I think so many people that have their group and feeling a safe space, can share more easily. On the other hand, it's not possible to know what's going on in the people's minds that form these only meetings. I think most people are thinking, “this is for a safe place for us;” a very small amount may be thinking, “I don't like these people, and I want to exclude them.” Since there's no magic that we can know what people are thinking, I don't think there's any specific rule that that can be written that captures that. I also don't believe that it's just a straightforward, “if you're in the majority, you can't have that meeting, if you're in the majority, if White, you can't necessarily have the meeting.” The question is when you're having that exclusionary type of thing, and you're testing people at the door, that becomes a problem. I think really, unfortunately, the way that this may end up having to go is that it becomes called a specialty meeting, rather than an only meeting. And that we hope that people respect this, and there just can't be a litmus test at the door. You know, if there was a white only meeting, I would not feel like I needed to go to that, because that is not part of a group that, that I feel like I need to identify with and have a split specially meeting for. But without the one size fit, without the magic, that's the best rule I can think of.