

THE EVOLUTION OF THE *STEP WORK GROUP GUIDE*

(January 2003 to October 2014)

by "Old" Bill S.

In 1988, one of my sponsees, Leonard F., was transferred to Dallas, Texas where he continued to work diligently on his sobriety in local A.A. meetings. Len was just 11 months sober when he left and we stayed in touch over the years, talking on the phone occasionally and meeting on those rare occasions when we found ourselves in the same state at the same time.

Around that same time, a local A.A. woman, Jennifer W., moved to Texas where she spent several years before returning to Connecticut and, on her return, asked my wife, the Lady Sara, to be her sponsor.

Both Jen and Len occasionally talked about these small groups that got together in Texas for a limited time and with the express purpose of actually DOING the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous together.

Sometime in late 2002, I decided that I wanted to try organizing a Step Work Group here in Connecticut and I asked Len to send me a copy of the format used by the groups he knew about and Sara asked Jen if one of her friends in Texas would forward us the outline of how their meeting were organized and the format that they followed each week.

Soon, we had two of these Texas outlines for Step Work Groups, one of which was six pages long and the other eight.

My background includes the frequent creation of agendas for business meetings and so, with that experience, I set out to blend the two Texas outlines into one document which necessitated, among other things, editing out a number of specific 'Jesus references' that dominated one of them.

I prepared a format for the first couple of meetings and convinced eight of my A.A. friends (King D., Stuart W., Charles D., JD S., Bobby K., Tom W., Chris S. and Tom F.) to join me in giving this new concept a try. We held the first meeting at my house in January of 2003 and were quite frankly amazed at how interesting and productive these meetings were from the very start.

I had taken some creative liberties while blending the Texas documents, but had preserved the long list of "talking points" that were suggested for discussion at each meeting and, each week, I would hand out the sheets for the next week's meeting. The first major 'working' change to the format happened when my sponsor, King D., came to the third meeting having dutifully done the required readings and then actually written out his answers for each of the suggested "talking points" for that meeting.

This was clearly such an excellent way to prepare for the meeting, that when I made up the outline for the next meeting, I moved all the "talking points" from the meeting section into the homework section (which, up until then, had been exclusively devoted to readings). I did this for each subsequent meeting – right up until the Fifth Step meeting where the "talking points" disappeared from both of the Texas formats.

Our first group took 20 weeks to go through the Twelve Steps and by the end of those sessions, the *Step Work Group Guide* – with the help and suggestions of the participants – had grown to 36 pages. By then, it was also clear to me and to the other members of the group that this was one of the most beneficial exercises we had ever done during our time in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Immediately after the completion of that first group, my Lady Sara took the 36-page document and formed a women's group, taking 20 weeks to go through all of the Steps. They too made suggestions for changes, most of them coming from Sara, Mary Lynn F, Katie W. and Kathy O'S.. Simultaneously, Bobby K. had found the first group so helpful that he immediately put together another group and began going through the Steps with them – again, making suggestions as they went.

But the next big suggestion came a year or two later from Greg W. during the second Work Group held at my house. Greg lamented that there was no more written homework to do after the Fifth Step (as mentioned, there were no “talking points” beyond this in the Texas materials) and noted that he missed the discipline it brought to the weekly exercises. That was such a valid criticism, I immediately started to scour the Big Book for references and instructions regarding the other Steps, formulating homework questions to reflect what was in the book and what needed to be done.

But most important ongoing contribution to the changes that were made to the *Guide*, were the suggestions (perhaps “proddings” would be a better word) from Stuart W. who insisted that each question had to be easily understandable and must accurately reflect what was actually written in the Big Book. Stuart, who has participated in a number of Step Work Groups over the years, makes constant suggestions for changes and additions which we then argue over before any changes are (or aren’t) made. While I have been the “writer” of the *Step Work Group Guide*, Stuart is the “editor” and his fingerprints can be found on almost every page of the final document – which is currently 116 pages long.

Early on, there were complaints that 20 weeks was just too long, so I revised the *Guide* down to 15 weeks, but people reported that this didn’t allow them enough time to do real justice to each Step. Given that, I then created a 17-week *Guide*, but again there were complaints of not enough time. That led, finally, to the current 18-week format, which we have been using for the past six or seven years and which, based on the feedback we have received, people seem to feel is just right.

During the first decade, many of the 150+ men from our Monday night meeting in Stratford participated in one – and frequently more than one – Step Work Group, all the while making helpful suggestions for changes. The most common of these were along the lines of “this question confused us” (a mandatory rewrite) and “how come you didn’t have a homework question about this important passage in the Big Book?” (possible rewrite).

Then, as word of the *Step Work Group Guide* (and its availability on our website) began to spread, the *Guide* started to be used in other areas of the country and, I must admit, it is very gratifying to receive suggestions and critiques from people as far away as California for our *Guide* – all of which are given careful consideration and frequently implemented.

THANK YOU, ALL!