

HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON: HISTORY OF THE AL-ANON DECLARATION

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This article is one in a series about how Al-Anon works. Its purpose is to provide personal observations and a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. This article is educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research in mutual-help groups.

The title of this article is simply one I use in the document filing system for my articles that I post. There are no implications contained herein that this article has received—or that the author has applied for—Al-Anon Conference Approval. I make no claim that the contents, opinions, or statements expressed herein are free of error. In fact, my opinions may be wrong. I welcome any corrections, deletions, or edits in terms of any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

As a preface to understanding Al-Anon, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with Twelve Step recovery programs, it may be useful to review how Al-Anon works. The “Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps” provides this brief description that is read at the opening of almost all meetings:

“The Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. We believe alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery.

Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution; does not engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any cause. There are no dues for membership. Al-Anon is self-supporting through its own voluntary contributions.

Al-Anon has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps, by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics, and by giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic.”

(Al-Anon Family Groups, 2026, p. 11) ¹

Al-Anon Declaration

Let it Begin with Me

“When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there, and – *Let It Begin with Me.*”

(Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2026, p. 3)

A Brief History

The phrase “Let It Begin With Me” originated as the theme of Al-Anon’s 1974 World Service Conference (WSC) in New York City. Following its success at the conference, Al-Anon’s Policy Committee reported to the WSC that the phrase “Let It Begin With Me” should be developed into a declaration. It was structured to parallel Alcoholics Anonymous’ (A.A.) famous “I Am Responsible” statement.² Al-Anon’s final declaration, which included both the outreach mission and the personal responsibility phrase, was introduced at the 1974 WSC and subsequently approved in 1975.

The Al-Anon Declaration was largely derived from A.A.'s 1965 Declaration of Responsibility.³ When A.A. celebrated its 30th Anniversary Year at its convention in Toronto, Ontario, on July 4, 1965, the first pronouncement of the AA Declaration of responsibility was documented as follows:

The largest assemblage in history of recovered, once-thought-hopeless drunks, more than 10,000 A.A. members, their families and friends representing 30 countries . . . at that instant solemnly clasped hands and led by Bill W. and Lois, clearly and loudly pronounced this promise of hope in one tremendous, strong voice.

I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.

(I am responsible, 1965, p. 1, para 2)

The Al-Anon Declaration states: "When anyone anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there, and let it begin with me" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, (2026, p. 3) ⁴

Let it Begin with Me
When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there, and - *Let It Begin with Me.*

The 1973 Al-Anon Policy Committee Report by Chairman Mary S. and Co-Chairman Lois W.⁵ contained a January 8, 1974 item (postponed from December 18, 1973), which contained the following statement:, "The slogan 'Let It Begin With Me' is to be worked into a declaration, similar to AA's 'I Am Responsible,' and it is to be printed in a small leaflet to be introduced at the 1974 World Service Conference" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1974, p. 6, col. 1, para. 5).

According to the official 1974 Al-Anon Conference Summary, the conference officially began in the evening of Tuesday, April 23, 1974 in the Regency Room of the George Washington Hotel in New York City. At the opening dinner, the 1974 WSC, Conference Chairperson Penny B. stated, "You also have a small card at your place. This is the Declaration built on the theme of our Conference. Let us repeat it together: "When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen be there, and LET IT BEGIN WITH ME" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1974, p. 1, para. 1; Executive Director, 2008, para. 6).

In 1975, Al-Anon's WSC was asked to approve the decisions of the Policy Committee. These decisions did not appear as a Conference motion. The 1975 Conference Summary lists the Policy decisions, as revised by the Conference, and states that they were approved as amended. Among them was the following from the

March 19, 1974 Policy Committee meeting:
“The following was adopted as Al-Anon’s declaration: ‘LET IT BEGIN WITH ME—
When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there and LET IT BEGIN WITH ME’” (Executive Director, 2008, para. 7).

Astute readers will notice that there is the addition of a single word in the Declaration in the 1975 Conference Summary in contrast to the original 1974 version that 1974 Conference Chairperson Penny B. had placed on the small cards at the opening dinner of the 1974 WSC. The addition of the word *always* is significant for several reasons. Adding the word “always” to the Declaration shifts it from being a conditional or occasional statement to being an absolute, universal truth. This single word emphasizes *frequency* (all the time), *intensity* (amplifying the emotional weight, urgency, and certainty of the declaration), *duration* (occurring without interruption), and *emphasis* (transforming a flexible guideline into a non-negotiable mandate).

Al-Anon’s Declaration “Let It Begin With Me” is a reminder to members that change and recovery start with the individual—rather than attempting to control or fix the alcoholic. The first half of the declaration ensures that no matter when or where an affected friend or family member seeks assistance, the fellowship and resources of Al-Anon will be accessible and available.

Notes

1. Although the widely-accepted term *alcoholism* is found throughout AA and Al-Anon literature, it is actually a poor choice of terms for a medical disease. Alcoholism is not a philosophy or religion, like Buddhism, Catholicism, or Confucianism. A better term for a medical condition would have been *alcoholitis*—using the taxonomic style of other medical disorders such as *arthritis* (inflammation of a joint), *gastritis* (inflammation of the stomach lining), or *pancreatitis* (inflammation of the pancreas).

The word “qualifier” does not appear in Al-Anon’s Service Manual nor in any of Al-Anon’s Conference Approved Literature. I do not like the term because it seems depersonalized and demeaning. I prefer terms such as friend, family member, or loved one.

2. Throughout this article, the abbreviation “A.A.” is used to denote that it appears in early documents cited. The more contemporary abbreviation “AA” is used in other instances to denote when it is used in earlier documents quoted in this article.

3. An article titled, ‘*How I am Responsible became a part of AA*’, from the GSO newsletter, Box 4-5-9, identifies former AA trustee, Al S. as the author of the Responsibility Statement. Al S. also served as a *Grapevine* editor (Dec. 1948–Dec. 1951).

The AA Responsibility Statement remains a core principle of AA service today: “I am Responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.” In the souvenir book for the 1965 Convention, Dr. Jack Norris writes:

“We must remember that AA will continue strong only so long as each of us freely and happily gives it away to another person, only as each of us takes our fair share of responsibility for sponsorship of those who still suffer, for the growth and integrity of our Group, for our Intergroup activities, and for AA as a whole. It is in taking responsibility that real freedom and the enduring satisfactions of life are found. AA has given us the power to choose - to drink or not to drink - and in doing so has given us the freedom to be responsible for ourselves. As we become responsible for ourselves, we are free to be responsible for our share in AA, and unless we happily accept this responsibility we lose AA. Strange, isn’t it?”

Since the introduction of the Declaration of Responsibility in 1965, there have been two Advisory Actions from the AA General Service Conference regarding the Declaration of Responsibility. In 1971, AA’s General Service Conference recommended that the Literature Committee, following the general feeling of the Conference, reaffirm both the spirit and the wording of the “I am Responsible” Declaration from the International Convention held in Toronto in 1965. In 1977, the General Service Conference recommended that the Responsibility Declaration not be changed,

as it was made at the 1965 International Convention in Toronto. The current declaration is the same as it was in 1965.

4. This article relies heavily on a 2008 memorandum from the Executive Director of the Al-Anon Family Groups World Service Office (WSO). In 2008, the Executive Director of the Al-Anon Family Groups WSO was Ric B. (often written as “Ric B., Executive Director” in official WSO reports). In accordance with Al-Anon’s traditional policy of personal anonymity at the public level (specifically Tradition Eleven), staff and members who serve the organization are publicly identified using only their first name and last initial.

The November 9, 1973 minutes of the International Convention Committee for Al-Anon/Alateen activities in the 1975 A.A. International Convention with Al-Anon/Alateen participation stated the following:

“Henrietta told the Committee of a call she received from AA telling how impressed they are with our proposed choice of theme – ‘Let It Begin With Me.’ They might even want to adopt it as the overall Convention theme.”

(Executive Director, 2008, para. 4)

The WSO’s Executive Director’s 2008 Memorandum continues as follows:

The Convention Committee for Al-Anon/Alateen activities then recommended that this theme be used as a declaration. The recommendation was brought to the Policy Committee in January 1974. In April 1974, the Policy Committee reported to the World Service Conference that: “The slogan ‘Let It Begin With Me’ is

to be worked into a declaration, similar to AA’s ‘I Am Responsible,’ and it is to be printed in a small leaflet to be introduced at the 1974 World Service Conference.”

(Executive Director, 2008, para. 5)

The theme chosen for the 1974 World Service Conference was “LET IT BEGIN WITH ME.” At the opening dinner, Conference Chairperson Penny B. stated, “You also have a small card at your place. This is the Declaration built on the theme of our Conference. Let us repeat it together: ‘When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen be there, and LET IT BEGIN WITH ME.’”

In 1975, the Conference was asked to approve decisions of the Policy Committee. These did not appear as a Conference motion. The *1975 Conference Summary* lists the Policy decisions, as revised by the Conference, and states that they were approved as amended. Among them was the following from the March 19, 1974 Policy Committee meeting: “The following was adopted as Al-Anon’s declaration: ‘LET IT BEGIN WITH ME – When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there and LET IT BEGIN WITH ME.’ (Executive Director, 2008, para. 4-7).

5. Al-Anon’s 1974 publication contained the terms “chairman” and “co-chairman” rather than the modern term “chair.” Historically, the word “chair” was used as a metonym (substituting the object associated with a role for the role itself) to describe the person

presiding over a meeting or holding a professorship as early as the mid-1600s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tracks the earliest use of the term “chair” to refer to the presiding person back to 1658–1659, as found in the parliamentary diaries of the English politician and Member of Parliament Thomas Burton (d. 1661): “I move that your Speaker forbear the Chair.”

Here are some observations based on my own writing and publications since 1970: During the 1970s, and especially at the height of the U.S. feminist movement’s push to eliminate male-gendered morphemes (e.g., “man” to refer to all humans) from professional titles, the awkward-sounding term “chairperson” was coined as a deliberate, gender-neutral alternative to “chairman” or “chairwoman.” By the late 1970s and early 1980s, major publishing houses and academic style manuals (e.g., the American Psychological Association and the Modern Language Association) updated their style guidelines to mandate gender-neutral language. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, corporate boards and government agencies gradually altered their bylaws toward more gender-inclusive language. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the term “chair” emerged as the preferred academic title that became more popular than the earlier term “chairperson.”

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Dedication

This article dedicated to the inspiration of an anonymous Al-Anon member who was searching for some information related to the Al-Anon Declaration.

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