

## A Learning Experience

### memories and reflections of a past delegate

His quarterly meeting of the Oklahoma area committee started just like all the others I've attended since the fall of 1978. I crossed the room with stops for smiles, handshakes, howdys, hugs, and similar greetings on the way to my customary front row seat. Two past delegates stopped to embrace me and one took the vacant chair beside me. The area chairperson and his stunning blonde wife, whose sponsor I have the honor to be, came up to involve me in a three-way hug.

Across the room a woman I didn't recall having seen before was leaning forward, watching. At the luncheon break she came straight to me, hand outstretched.

"I'm Marian, a new committee member from the southeast district. I figured if so many people know you, I should too. Do you hold an office?"

"I'm a past delegate," I told her,

"which makes me an ex officio member of the area committee, with an obligation to be here if I possibly can. People know me because I'm always here, not because I'm anything special."

"Having been delegate sounds pretty special to me."

"It's a tremendous learning experience," I said, "an opportunity to share knowledge and ideas with others who have a great dedication to AA. Plus it's the chance to serve AA in ways not available to most AA members."

"Six months ago I'd never heard of a delegate," Marian admitted. "Even now I have only a vague idea of why we have them or what they do. Can you tell me?"

"Let's walk over to the dining room and I'll try." A kaleidoscope of memories whirled through my mind.

"We have delegates," I said "to keep the authority in AA where it be-

longs, with the groups. To make sure no power bloc can ever set itself up to rule the groups rather than serve them. A delegate is elected by general service representatives for a two-year term.

"As to what he or she does, the most important thing is attending the General Service Conference in New York for a week in April."

"What kinds of things does the Conference act on?" Marian asked.

"Anything to do with carrying the message, communicating inside AA, and conducting AA business. To name a few, the Conference must approve any new literature, radio or TV announcements, or changes in the method of nominating and electing trustees. With our tremendous growth, AA has become a huge operation, running to millions of dollars a year." Suddenly my mind flashed back to 1977, and I relived the moment when I first felt myself truly a part of the Conference.

*It was the second morning of my first Conference. I was on the aisle at the third row of tables facing the podium. The nearest microphone, I noticed idly, was practically at my elbow. When the next speaker began his presentation I snapped into instant, total involvement. He was proposing that one special kind of AA group be barred from listing in the AA regional directories.*

*It is my profound and passionate conviction that no alcoholic who wishes to stop drinking should be denied the right to full participation in our program of recovery, for any*

*reason whatsoever. And the minute discussion was called for I was going to step to that handy microphone and say so. As the delegate from Oklahoma I had not only the right to resist what I saw as a threat to one of AA's most basic principles, I had a moral obligation to do so. I hoped to discourage intolerance by stating the case for AA love and acceptance.*

*As it turned out, I simply expressed the feeling of most Conference members. The proposal got almost no support and was quickly dropped.*

"Going to the Conference must be thrilling," Marian said.

"It was," I agreed, "and it was also the hardest week's work I ever put in. We started at nine o'clock every morning and kept at it until at least ten at night. Lunch and dinner are part of the Conference. No outsiders are there and at tables for ten we could get acquainted with fellow Conference members and share problems and solutions.

"We had talks, workshops, discussions on the Conference floor and in committees. Every delegate is a member of a Conference committee. There are eleven committees, each with eight or nine members chosen by lot, assisted by one of the office staff members as nonvoting secretary. Each deals with a single major AA concern, like literature, public information, Grapevine, or finance. The committees hold intensive discussion of subjects under consideration for recommendation to the whole Conference. While a commit-

tee recommendation carries a lot of weight, the Conference sometimes rejects one, or refers it to next year's Conference for further study. But everything you do, the entire crammed week, is a process of learning about AA and serving AA."

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*It was the third evening of my second Conference. The Conference was divided into units of fourteen people in small meeting rooms, seated around a table, holding workshops on "the home group." We were a mixed bag of delegates, trustees, and staffmembers. Waiting for the meeting to start we held a lively discussion on what constituted the ideal group. Just as I was wondering why some of them felt so strongly, it dawned on me that each one was describing his or her own home group.*

*Our workshop chairperson started the meeting with a question directed at all of us: "What is the most important thing you can do for your group?" He got his answer instantly, in a two-word chorus from more than half of us: "Be there!"*

"When did all this get started?" Marian asked.

"The first General Service Conference was held in 1951," I said. "The book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* has a detailed explanation of why and how. Essentially the Conference was a means of keeping our rapidly growing Fellowship united and in control of its own affairs."

"What happens when you stop being delegate?"

"It depends on area customs, but usually the past delegate's knowledge and experience are considered as a valuable resource. In our area we become ex officio committee members, eligible to debate, but not vote. Also we are on an advisory committee that is consulted on planning the state convention, and sometimes by the area chairpeople. Some areas may elect the immediate past delegate as area chairperson or appoint him or her to head service committees.

"In general I think of the past delegates as guardians of the AA Traditions. We know how vital the Traditions are — so any time you propose breaking one, and a current or past delegate is within earshot, prepare for a protest that is very prompt, very sincere, and probably very loud."

*Elizabeth E., Tulsa, Okla.*