

## About the Annual General Service Conference



### VOICE OF AA OR RUBBER STAMP?

J. M. is an ex-delegate to the General Service Conference from Calif., and is at present a Class B Trustee of the AA General Service Board. This article is a revision of a talk he gave at the 1965 Conference, and we print it in this issue, which is mailed about the time of the 1966 Conference (April 18 through 23 in New York), for its frank presentation of questions which more than one delegate has found himself asking before his term was over — *The Editors*.

**I**N THE Spring of this year, for the sixteenth time, 86 delegates representing, through their area conferences, all the AA groups of the United States and Canada, gather to review AA's General Service operations in New York City, and make known the needs and thoughts of their areas.

AA's New York offices — AA World Services, and the AA Grapevine—are directly under the guardianship of the AA Board of Trust-

ees, but the Conference was set up expressly to put the Trustees and the service workers in New York into direct, responsive touch with all groups through the delegates.

On page 31 of the *Third Legacy Manual*, the purpose of the AA Conference is set out: "The Conference is a practical means by which AA's group conscience can speak and put its desires for world service into operation. It is the voice of AA."

Is it? Do past delegates to the Conference feel that the Conference has been a real influence on the operation of AA's World Services and the Grapevine in New York? Do the delegates — first-year men and women, and second-year ones — feel that they carry any weight? Let me speak for myself. I was once a delegate. I did find myself questioning the real impact of the Annual Conference, and I have asked myself if the expense of it was worthwhile. As my term went on, and drew finally to a close, I had a feeling of not having done all that I should, of not having been sufficiently forward about stating my own thoughts on questions before the Conference, and about airing what I believed to be the feeling on them abroad, in the area I represented.

I am not, of course, suggesting that delegates try to get a permanent stranglehold on the floor mikes. That's not what I am trying to say! Let me go about this indirectly, and first review some of the criticisms I know have been made, by delegates, of the conduct of Conferences.

Critics say that delegates tend to be awed not only by their first but even by their second visit to New York, and by meeting AA Staff and Trustees; out of this awe, comes an inclination to conform. Or perhaps the trouble is, say the critics, with the pace; there is hardly time enough, or opportunity, to set forth views on the fast-rushing agenda subjects,

brought quickly to the floor and quickly disposed of. Or perhaps the trouble is with the agenda itself, made up well in advance of the Conference. Some have said there was inadequate briefing by GSO on the knottier difficulties up for discussion. And, certainly, too many delegates come unprepared, not having kept adequately in touch with problems in their area, and not having read the advance material sent out from New York, with the result, that, finally, in New York, they feel lost, dazed by the events of the Conference, and are inclined to criticize the whole thing as too complex, or too cut and dried.

In other words, does the Conference end up being nothing but a rubber stamp for the Trustees and Staff, blandly okaying their decisions about expenditure, and publications, and the service commitments which AA has undertaken around the world?

Perhaps the current Conference might look at all the negative statements I have made in the foregoing — in a positive sort of way! It is *up to the Conference delegates themselves* to see that criticisms of the Conference do not have validity, and are, indeed, unfair. Strictly as a personal view, I do not feel that past Conferences have been as influential as they might have been, and as the combined ability and experience of the delegates would have led one to expect. Many times, talent, experience, know-how, have gone astray.

And as a result, we all, AA itself, suffer a great loss. But the answer to this waste lies in the Conference itself, that it undertake to make itself increasingly a clear "voice" and a weighty one. I know now, from my later experience as a Trustee, that the Trustees, World Services Staff and the Grapevine *need* help and guidance from the Conference in solving the problems of the Fellowship, and are literally "at its mercy" in all matters of policy. How, you say, can this be?

The Conference delegates exercise enormous *influence* on AA's world affairs, whether they are aware of it or not. What they say and propose and vote upon are only half the story, what they do not say, do not propose and do not vote upon are the other half.

To the extent that delegates have voiced and spoken their honest and true feelings, thoughts and experiences, then to that extent have they influenced the Board of Trustees, World Services and the Grapevine, and conversely, to the extent that they have said what they thought they "should" say, or felt the inclination to "go along," so to speak, then indeed have they been influential—but in reverse.

The Conference is basically an "influential body." Let us acknowl-

edge that. But I speak, I know, the feelings of Trustees and Staff when I say that these people of the Board, GSO and the Grapevine *want* to be influenced. They want to hear what the delegates have to say, honestly, not what the delegates think the Board and Staff want them to say.

If the Board of Trustees, Staff and the Grapevine are deprived of the privilege of hearing delegates' real thoughts and opinions, they are deprived of any opportunity to *use* Conference delegates' thoughts and experience when it comes time to make Staff decisions and set policy on those issues involved in overall operations of our AA Fellowship on a world-wide basis.

Conference delegates have a unique prerogative: the right to exercise real influence on AA's day-to-day plan for "carrying the message" world-wide. An individual delegate can avoid disappointment, and steer clear of the trap of being a disgruntled ex-delegate, by coming prepared, speaking his true mind, and stating the views of his area to the best of his ability. If the Conference is to be the "voice of AA," it can only be so if the delegates who make it up resolve, within the sense of our Third Legacy, to speak out.

*J. M., Carmichael, Calif.*