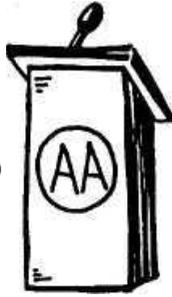


August 1995

AROUND



'Safe From Any Storm the Future Might Bring'

Celebrating the theme of "Pass It On — Our Three Legacies," the Forty-fifth General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous convened on Sunday, April 30 at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza in New York City. The Conference meets once a year to address matters of concern to the Fellowship at large, its purpose being — as Bill W. put it — to ensure "the permanence and well-being of AA itself." Because of the Conference, Bill said, Alcoholics Anonymous would be "safe from any storm the future might bring."

The Conference represents the collective wisdom of AA in the U.S. and Canada; its 134 voting members are the delegates from the 91 service areas (who constitute two-thirds of the body), members of the General Service Board of Trustees, the AA World Services and Grapevine Corporate Boards, and the AA

staff of the General Service Office and the Grapevine.

The Conference begins each year with a dinner on Sunday night followed by an open AA meeting. Throughout the early part of the week, presentations and workshops are given, delegates give reports on area activities, and there is a chance to have questions answered at regular sharing sessions. An AA meeting is held at the hotel every morning at 7:30 A.M.

The main work of the Conference is done through eleven committees. During Monday and Tuesday mornings, the committees meet to deliberate on a variety of items; beginning on Wednesday night and running through Friday afternoon, committee chairpersons give their reports to the Conference as a whole. If committees have recommendations, these are presented for discussion and voting; recommendations that receive a two-thirds vote

become Advisory Actions, which are considered binding. Since the Fourth Tradition mandates the autonomy of AA groups, Advisory Actions most often have to do with business practices or publishing procedures of the General Service Office, AA World Services, the Grapevine or the Conference itself. (For more information about how the Conference operates, see the May 1995 Grapevine.)

Grapevine readers will be interested in learning what impact the 1995 Conference had on the magazine. The biggest news is that the Grapevine Committee recommended the development of Spanish-language Grapevine and in response the Conference voted 'yes' unanimously. The result was an Advisory Action recommending that:

Based on an expressed need, a Spanish edition of the Grapevine be produced, contingent on the following: that the Grapevine Corporate Board proceed to gather information and develop a business plan for a bi-monthly Spanish edition of the Grapevine, for presentation to the trustees' Finance Committee, and that funding for up to five (5) years be obtained from the General Service Board Reserve Fund, with start-up costs estimated at \$84,000 for the first year. It was further recommended that if a Spanish

edition is established, the monthly Spanish articles he removed from the English-language Grapevine, and that if, after five (5) years, the Spanish edition of the magazine is determined to be no longer feasible, publication be discontinued.

During the discussion period, delegates from all over spoke in favor of the recommendation. One delegate said that a Spanish Grapevine might encourage more participation in AA from "our nongeographical Spanish members," referring to those AAs who are geographically dispersed and not part of a Spanish-speaking community. Sandy C., chairperson of the Grapevine Committee, said that with the new edition, "We are fulfill-

ing a spiritual need, long expressed." A Spanish-speaking delegate said, "Spiritually, this magazine will be a great part of our carrying the message." He added, "You can't imagine how I feel. I think our souls are speaking out today."

Some delegates had questions about the business side of the new magazine. One delegate said that the three Spanish-speaking districts in his area wanted a time limit on the venture "to be sure that the Grapevine itself is not hurt by this reaching out." Another delegate was concerned that there was no provision for an annual review, but John King,



Class A trustee and member of the Grapevine Corporate Board, explained that "it's inherent in the idea of the business plan that there will be an annual review." A delegate said, "I'm very comfortable with the checks and balances provided here. My area asked me to express strong support."

One delegate wanted to know what the initial print run was likely to be; Sandy C. said, "We studied the possibilities of 5,000, 10,000, 15,000, and 20,000, and decided on 10,000." Another delegate queried whether articles would be original ones in Spanish or ones translated from previously published English articles; Sandy explained that probably there would be a mix of both.

In response to the passing of this Advisory Action, the Managing Editor of the magazine prepared a pilot edition of the Spanish Grapevine, based on translations from the regular edition, which was distributed at the International Convention in San Diego, along with new subscription order forms. It is hoped that when this pilot issue reaches Spanish-speaking AAs, they will be enthusiastic in their support of the new magazine. Of course, an AA member won't have to be Spanish-speaking to take advantage of the new Grapevine as a Twelfth Step tool for beginners or in work with such committees as Hospitals and Institutions, Correctional Facilities, Treatment Facilities, and Cooperation with the Professional Community.

The Grapevine Committee also presented the following considerations which

didn't result in recommendations: the committee discussed editorial content of the Grapevine and urged that the editorial policy of the Grapevine continue to follow our Statement of Purpose; it suggested that the AA Grapevine not produce a "generic" Grapevine at this time, but rather continue to focus on our Statement of Purpose and increasing subscriptions of the Grapevine; and it suggested that no action be taken on any related items proposed for production in 1997, and suggested that a proposal be presented to the 1996 Conference Grapevine Committee for possible production in 1998.

The Conference finished its business on Friday night, concluding with the Serenity Prayer said in three languages: English, French, and Spanish. The following morning, at a farewell breakfast meeting, trustees who were rotating out of their assignments gave presentations. Ann B., who was Southwest U.S. regional trustee for four years, spoke on the importance of unity: "I sobered up in Houston, Texas, and I never wondered where the money went, or who made the coffee and cleaned the tables and washed the cups. But then I found out who did most of it — because if you were new, *you* did it! Within a year, I had painted all the restrooms in that building — twice.

"Then I moved to Dallas and I didn't like AA there — which had nothing to do with AA: it was just me. I didn't like the way they opened their meeting or closed their meeting or passed the baskets. I didn't like what was going on and it was only because I didn't like what was going

on inside me." When Ann had to move again, this time to Ft. Smith, Arkansas, she decided that she couldn't go to Ft. Smith with the same attitude she had brought to Dallas, so she asked for help and ended up going to her first area assembly. "I sat in the back and judged everyone," she said. "But it only took three assemblies for me to want to go. It's a lot like the 'Twelve and Twelve' — where it talks about how first you go to meetings because you have to and then you go because you want to. That happened to me in service. I began to see and be taught what was holding these groups together."

Ann described the tolerance and love she had felt from her fellow Conference members — "the men and women who have silently stood by each other, who have agonized over decisions, who have loved this Fellowship so very much. I never for a second wondered if somebody went home and said, 'I can't believe Ann wants to do it that way.' And I'm not going to say we always agreed! But I know that whatever the final decision was, I had their support and they had mine."

Ann concluded by saying, "There was never any 'She's better' or 'He's not as smart.' It had only to do with the good of the Fellowship, what we can do to carry the message."

John King, Class A trustee, who was rotating out of service after nine years, joked that "there were times when I left here and considered becoming one of you! My Higher Power has worked overtime." John continued, "This year I put all my resent-

ments in an envelope and I barbecued 'em. It was a very fine hamburger! I figured out the only thing I had to offer you, after nine years, was thanks — thanks for all the time you've spent on me. My region adopted me — and I recommend that so much to the regions who are bringing on new Class A trustees."

Jim Estelle, nonalcoholic Chairman of the Board, introduced George D., the general manager of GSO, by saying, "George has brought to his assignment more applicable skills that anyone has in recent years." George began by getting a laugh when he said, "I don't hesitate to steal good thoughts, so if you're thinking, 'Gee, I said that' — you undoubtedly did!" George continued: "I really feel that this Conference produced patience, love, and tolerance. We didn't let personalities get in the way as we did the work of the Conference." George said that he believed that "the most important mission of the service structure in the U.S. and Canada is the example we set for the rest of the Fellowship. This Conference set a very fine example. Milton Maxwell taught me that *how* we do things is much more important in the end than what we do." George pointed out that the Conference provides continuity in the context of rotation: "We form part of a continuum of those who have been here before and those who will come in the future."

"I'm an ex-Navy man," George said, "and I like a reference I heard to the jobs we have on a ship. Just because we rotate doesn't mean we jump ship! We just take another job, whether it's cook

or deckhand."

George, who co-chaired the Conference reports and discussions, said, "Now I'm going to go sit in the park and talk to the squirrels and the pigeons — and rule 'em out of order!"

Also speaking at the farewell breakfast was Trevor H., an Australian General Service Trustee, who'd been invited to attend the Conference as an observer. Trevor explained that AA in Australia is still growing: "The whole of Australian AA would fit into one of your areas." There are 2,000 groups and 10,000 to 12,000 AA members; just under 30 percent of the groups

participate in the service structure. Their GSO, Trevor explained, is small — only five people. He said, "We don't have the funds to increase the office. We need to provide more services to the groups so they'll get more involved so they'll support the service structure so we can support more services to the group." Trevor praised the calibre of the 1995 Conference members: "You're all articulate and well-informed, and I'd guess this is a result of rising up through the service structure. My impression is that you don't get to be here unless you've done your apprenticeship in the trenches."



Digest of Advisory Actions

Some significant Advisory Actions appear below in condensed form

Agenda—that the theme of the 1996 General Service Conference be "Preserving Our Fellowship—Our Challenge."

Finance—that the draft of the pamphlet, "Self-Support—Where Money and Spirituality Mix," be accepted with changes placing emphasis on the informed group conscience; that a heading in this pamphlet, titled "Suggested Plans for Group Contributions Toward All AA Services," give five suggested contribution plans.

Literature—that changes in "The AA Group" pamphlet be implemented; that minor changes in the text of Tradition Three in the "Twelve Traditions Illustrated" pamphlet be implemented; that the first 164 pages of the pages of the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Preface, the Forewards, "The Doctor's Opinion," "Dr. Bob's Nightmare," and the Appendices remain as is; that a pocket edition of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* be published.

Policy/Admissions—that since the

Washington Area has met the conditions for admission, a second delegate be admitted from the Washington Area.

Trustees—after a thorough examination of the issue and information available and acknowledging that there may have been problems with communication at

many service levels in the past, it was the sense of the committee that there has been improvement and, therefore, in the interest of maintaining AA unity and finding there was no sufficient cause, the committee unanimously recommended that the proposal to censure the General Service Board be dismissed.



Substantial Unanimity in the Conference Process

a presentation made to the 45th Conference
by the Western Canada regional trustee

My very first reaction when I received this loving invitation to address the question of substantial unanimity was "Poor me, why do I always have to get the tough ones?" My second thought (following very closely on the first) was to get our happy archivist to do the research for me, which I would then summarize and present as a detailed, foolproof set of procedures and guidelines to apply directly to all circumstances. (Those of you with an alcoholic mind will of course immediately recognize the big Ego and the attempt to go for the easier, softer way.) And then the third thought (which came only long after) was that I was stuck with this and I would have to stumble through in my own clumsy way.

So, how do we define substantial una-

nimity? We all know the basics. We know it takes three-quarters of all the registered groups to change the things that we have written in stone — like the Traditions and the Warranties of Article XII of the Conference Charter.

At all levels where decisions are made (I'm thinking particularly of actions taken here at the Conference), a vote of over two-thirds is accepted as substantial unanimity and is considered binding on the management and staff at the General Service Office, as well as on the three boards. A vote of less than one-half means "Don't." A majority vote between one-half and two-thirds represents a suggestion to the staff/management/boards that, under normal circumstances, efforts should be made to follow this action — but it is not nearly as

binding as a two-thirds vote.

This was summed up beautifully by my sponsor long before I was even aware of the existence of a Conference; namely, that there are always three options for any decision in AA: a "yes"; a "no"; and a "maybe, but not now."

But what about those "Additional Considerations That Did Not Result in Recommendations?" I place these in the category of "park bench musings." As far as the Conference is concerned, they may be items that are not at a policy level and decisions on them more properly belong elsewhere; or they may be items on which the Conference Committee is split; or the committee may agree that more input and discussion are required on an item before a recommendation is formulated; or any one of another half dozen reasons for not recommending a specific action right now.

All of this mechanical stuff we know, and to varying degrees, accept. So why is substantial unanimity the topic of discussion here today? Why do we want to spend our precious time here this week on this topic? I think the basic answer is trust — or more precisely, the lack of trust. We could spend the next four days hammering out the fine guidelines and regulations and rules for who decides what, and who is responsible to whom. But I'm positive that with our keen alcoholic intellects we would find objections and exceptions to each detail before the ink is dry on the paper. No. The more obvious answer has to lie in trust and faith: faith that we have been guided at

each step to select the right people to serve us (GSR, DCM, delegate, staff, management, director, trustee); trust that the servants selected are willing and responsible to carry out the services assigned.

I think that the greatest hurdle this Fellowship will face in the next ten years will not concern copyrights, nor whether litigation is public controversy, nor the proliferation of self-help psychobabble. I feel that the greatest hurdle we face today and in the foreseeable future is the spillover into our Fellowship of the cynicism and distrust that are exhibited in our North American society at large in regard to its public servants. I have noticed with growing concern that letters from members of the Fellowship are more and more suspicious of the motives of the leaders we have chosen to serve us. There was a time in my short eighteen-year experience in this Fellowship when arguments abounded about principles and what the best course of action might be. But there was always the underlying premise that both sides thought they knew what was the greatest good for the longest time. And when the vote was taken, and upwards of two-thirds voted for fuchsia-colored name tags, the proponents of the brown tags might have their minority say, but would accept the decision of a Higher Power "as He may express Himself in our group conscience." I sometimes wonder if we can still do that. More often I hear the minority either questioning the motives of an "influential" leader in swaying the

majority; or else insisting that the body wasn't well informed, and then, when the group does have the information, saying that the body is not responsible (not listening) and that it has become a law unto itself. The thing that's missing is acceptance by the minority of the group conscience decision. I know that for myself I have to keep two things in mind.

First, I alone do not always know what is best for AA in the long term. I often don't even know what is best for me. You're looking at the person who was convinced beyond a doubt that being alcoholic and coming to AA was the absolute worst fate that could possibly fall to a human being. Turned out to be the very best thing that ever happened to me — bar none! So if I don't even know what's good for me, I may occasionally not know what is best for AA.

Second, if a servant (or service body) somewhere in AA screws up, the trouble lies not with that servant, but with the members who selected that person. My home group some time ago chose to sit back and let a young, new member take on the job of group treasurer. After three months, we discovered that the money from the basket hadn't made it to the bank, and the rent wasn't paid. Whose fault? The older members of the group did the young girl a terrible injustice.

She should never have been placed in such an impossible situation. I often pray for her, and am grateful to her for teaching me a very valuable lesson.

So, after all this, what is substantial unanimity? It's the same as it has always been — to be of one mind (spirit) on the basic principles of fundamental issues. Translated into personal terms, it simply means that I don't always know what's best, and I need to have faith in group conscience decisions. Simple as that.

Not one of us is given a torch big enough to lead the drunks of the world out of the darkness and into the light. Instead, each of us has been given a candle that burns for a short while with a flickering flame. If we stand together, the light will outshine the greatest torch. If we argue and bicker and blow at each other's candle so that each of us starts shielding our own little flame, then the alcoholics of the world will continue to suffer in darkness — and so will we.

The answer does not lie in more rules or guidelines. The solution lies in trust and faith. I pray that this Conference will be a witness to the Fellowship of the trust and faith by each member here, in the guidance of a Higher Power.

I thank you for your patience with me. I love you all.

Gerry F., *Humboldt, Sask.*

