

November 1971

Bill W.'s Twelve Concepts for World Service

Adopted by the 12th Annual General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous on April 26, 1962, the Twelve Concepts are an interpretation of AA's world service structure. The Grapevine is presenting this series on the Twelve Concepts because it believes a thorough understanding of AA's service structure is important. The Concepts provide guidelines for carrying the message to thousands of suffering alcoholics yet to come.

THE AA GROUPS today hold ultimate responsibility and final authority for our world services — those special elements of over-all service activity which make it possible for our Society to function as a whole. The groups assumed that responsibility at the St. Louis International Convention of 1955. There, on behalf of Doctor Bob, the Trustees, and AA's old-time leaders, I made the transfer of world-service responsibility to our entire Fellowship.

Why, and by what authority, was this done? There were reasons of stark necessity for it, and there were further reasons which have to do with AA's fundamental structure and tradition.

By the year 1948, our necessities had become clear enough. Ten years earlier — in 1938 — helped by dedicated friends, Doctor Bob and I had commenced work upon a world-service structure. Our first step was the creation of a trusteeship for AA as a whole. We called this body the Alcoholic Foundation; and in 1954 it was renamed the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

This trusteeship was designed to inaugurate and maintain all of those

The First Concept

The final responsibility and the ultimate authority for AA world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.

special services for AA as a whole that could not well be performed by single groups or areas. We envisioned the writing of a uniform AA literature, the development of a sound public-relations policy and a means of handling the large numbers of pleas for help that might follow in the wake of national and international publicity. We thought in terms of aiding new groups to form and of furnishing them with counsel based upon the experience of the older and already successful groups. We thought there would be a need for a monthly magazine and also for translations of our literature into other languages.

By 1950, nearly all of these dreams for world service had come true. In the dozen years following the creation of the Foundation, AA membership had jumped from fifty to 100,000. The AA Traditions had been written and adopted. A confi-

dent unity had pretty much replaced fear and doubt and strife. Our services had unquestionably played a large and critical role in this unfolding. World service, therefore, had taken on crucial meaning for AA's future. If these vital agencies were to collapse or bog down, our unity within and the carrying of our message to innumerable alcoholics without would suffer serious and perhaps irreparable damage. Under all conditions and at any sacrifice, we would have to sustain those services and the flow of lifeblood that they were pumping into the world arteries of our Fellowship. Among the AA groups, it had been proven that we could survive great strain and stress. But could we stand heart failure at our world center?

And so we asked ourselves: What further precautions could we take that would definitely guard us against an impairment or a collapse?

Nevertheless, the period from 1945 to 1950 was one of such exuberant success that many AAs thought our future was completely guaranteed. Nothing, they believed, could possibly happen to our Society as a whole, because God was protecting AA. This attitude was in strange contrast to the extreme vigilance with which our members and groups had been looking after themselves. They had quite prudently declined to charge Providence with the entire responsibility for their own effectiveness, happiness, and sobriety.

When, at AA's Service Headquarters, some of us began to apply this tested principle of "Stop, look, and listen" to AA's world affairs, it was widely thought that we must be foolish worriers who lacked faith. Many said, "Why change? Things are going fine!" "Why call in delegates from all over the country? That means expense and politics, and we don't want either." And the clincher was always "Let's keep it simple."

Such reactions were natural enough. The average member, pre-occupied with his group life and his own twelfth-stepping, knew almost nothing of AA's world services. Not one member in a thousand could tell who our Trustees were. Not one in a hundred had the least idea what had been done for AA's general welfare. Tens of thousands already owed their chance at sobriety to the little-noticed activity of our Trustees and general services. But few realized that this was true.

Among the Trustees themselves, a sharp division of opinion was developing. For a long time, most of them had strongly opposed calling together a representative conference of AA delegates, to whom they would become accountable. They thought that the risks were immense and that politics, confusion, expense, and fruitless strife surely would result. It was true that the woes of much lesser undertakings, such as local AA services and clubs, had

sometimes been great. Hence the conviction was widespread that calamity would be in the making if ever a conference representing all of AA were assembled. These arguments were not without merit; they were difficult to contest.

However, in 1948 there occurred an event that shook us all. It became known that Doctor Bob was suffering from a fatal illness. As nothing else could, this news drove home the hard fact that he and I were almost the sole links between our virtually unknown Trustees and the movement they served. The Trustees always had relied heavily upon Doctor Bob and me for advice. They had taken a firm grip on money expenditures, but they necessarily turned to us every time that AA policy questions arose. Then, too, the groups of that time did not really rely much on the Trustees for the management of their service affairs; they were still looking to Doctor Bob and me. So

here was a society whose total functioning was still largely dependent upon the credit and the confidence which, for the time being, its founders happened to enjoy.

The fact had to be faced that AA's founders were perishable. When Doctor Bob and I had gone, who would then advise the Trustees? Who could link our little-known Board to our thousands of groups? For the first time, it was seen that only a representative conference could take the place of Doctor Bob and me. This gap simply had to be filled without delay. Such a dangerous open end in our affairs could not be tolerated. Regardless of trouble or expense, we had to call an AA General Service Conference and deliver our world services into its permanent keeping. It took little imagination to see that future collapse would be the certain penalty if we did not act boldly and decisively. Thus propelled by events, we did take the necessary action. Now that

the Conference is in its second decade*, we find that our former fears of the troubles a conference might involve were largely groundless. The results of the Conference have exceeded our highest expectations. It now stands proven that the AA groups can and will take the final responsibility for their world services.

There were other reasons for this basic shift of ultimate responsibility and authority to AA as a whole. These reasons center around Tradition Two, which declares, "For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern."

Tradition Two, like all the AA Traditions, is the voice of experience, based upon the trials of thousands of groups in our pioneering time. The main principles of Tradition Two are crystal clear: The AA groups are to be the final authority; their leaders are to be entrusted with delegated responsibilities only.

Tradition Two had been written in 1945, and our Trustees had then authorized its publication. But it was not until 1951 that the first experimental General Service Conference was called to see whether Tradition Two could be successfully applied to AA as a whole, including its Trustees and founders. It had to

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be found out whether the AA groups, by virtue of this Conference, could and would assume the ultimate responsibility for their world-service operation. It took five years more for all of us to be convinced that Tradition Two was for everybody. But at St. Louis in 1955, we knew that our General Service Conference — truly representing the conscience of AA worldwide — was going to work and work permanently.

Perhaps many of us are still vague about the "group conscience" of Alcoholics Anonymous, about what it really is.

Throughout the entire world today, we are witnessing the breakdown of "group conscience." It has always been the hope of democratic nations that their citizens would always be enlightened enough, moral enough, and responsible enough to manage their own affairs through chosen representatives. But in many self-governing countries, we are now seeing the inroads of ignorance, apathy, and power-seeking upon democratic systems. Their spiritual resources of right purpose and collective intelligence are waning. Consequently, many a land has become so helpless that the only answer is dictatorship.

Happily for us, there seems little prospect of such a calamity in AA. The life of each individual and of

each group is built around our Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. We very well know that the penalty for extensive disobedience to these principles is death for the individual and dissolution for the group. An even greater force for AA's unity is the compelling love that we have for our fellow members and for the principles upon which our lives today are founded.

Therefore, we believe that we see in our Fellowship a spiritualized society characterized by enough enlightenment, enough responsibility,

and enough love of man and of God to insure that our democracy of world service will work under all conditions. We are confident that we can rely upon Tradition Two, our group conscience and its trusted servants. Hence it is with a sense of great security that we old-timers have now fully vested in AA's General Service Conference the authority for giving shape — through the labors of its chosen Delegates, Trustees, and service workers — to the destiny that we trust God in His wisdom is holding in store for all of us.

* *Third decade now; the April 1971 Conference was the 21st.*