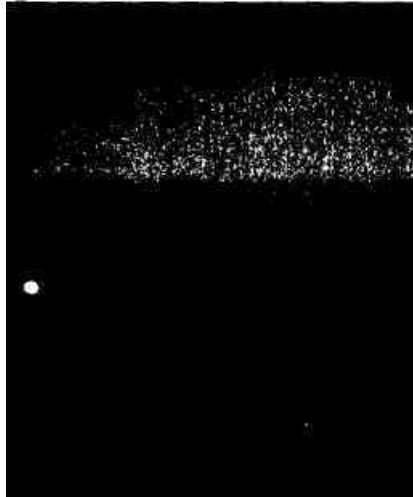


May 1995

SPECIAL FEATURE

Coming of Age



What would happen to the Fellowship when Bill and Dr. Bob were no longer around to guide us?

AA's answer: The General Service Conference

The co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill W., had a flair for envisioning the future. He was what might be called a constructive worrier: he could easily imagine worst-case scenarios, but he could also imagine workable solutions to problems. By the mid-nineteen-forties, Bill looked around at the Fellowship, and this worrisome question came to him: What will happen to AA when the old-timers are gone? It was a question that most AAs didn't want to think about.

The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous began as an organization of loosely associated entities — the AA groups — bound only by suggestions, "principles," and "traditions," not rules or regulations. The natural autonomy of the groups was balanced only by the need to have a centralized source for information, guidance, literature, and public relations. In the Fellowship's early years, this source was Headquarters: the New

York office and the Alcoholic Foundation (a rather grand term for what was essentially a board of trustees, consisting originally of five members — three nonalcoholics and two AAs). For a long time, the office was mostly Bill, his nonalcoholic secretary Ruth Hock, and an assorted staff of volunteers. The Alcoholic Foundation, which was set up in 1938, monitored the legal, business, and financial end of AA.

This arrangement was fine as long as AA was in its infancy. But as the AA population grew, thrived, and stabilized, it became apparent that this program for recovery was no mere experiment — it was going to endure — and Bill saw two problems for the future: first, there was no link between the AA members and Headquarters. Second, AA's policy was being set by the trustees, who were not *directly* responsible to those they served.

Bill's worst-case scenario about the future went like this:

"When death and disability finally took us few old-timers out of the picture, where would that leave the Trustees and the Headquarters? A single blunder on their part might cause a failure of confidence that could not be repaired. Lacking the moral and financial support of the groups, the whole Headquarters effort might collapse completely. Our services might never be reinstated because nobody could be authorized to do the job."

Bill knew that the Fellowship was used to relying on him and Dr. Bob and other old-timers, but he felt that eventually, AA members would want to run their own affairs. And whether they wanted to or not, they were going to have to

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face a growing-up process; after all, the Old-timers were — as Bill put it — "perishable." Bill believed it was critical that the authority of AA should derive from AA itself— that is to say, from the broad spectrum of the membership. This authority, he came to believe, should be funnelled through a practical body — an elected conference or an advisory council — which would be primarily representational and democratic. The AA membership, Bill wrote in a letter, should "assume some responsibility for its all too isolated Headquarters Services and, at the same time, afford our Trustees a real cross-section of AA opinion for their better guidance."

RENOUNCING AUTHORITY

In late 1945, Bill wrote a long memo to the board of trustees in which he introduced the possibility of holding a small yearly conference of "older members from all parts of the country for the purpose of meeting with the trustees, the Grapevine editor, and the national secretary." He went on to say that he and Dr. Bob had found "that the more we renounce our own claims to authority and power the more does group confidence in us rise" — perhaps tactfully laying the groundwork for the trustees to do the same. He was trying to bring the grass-roots Fellowship into the decision-making arena.

The reaction of the trustees to what Bill was calling a "general service conference" was negative. They didn't share Bill's urgent sense that AA's future was in jeopardy, and they believed they could continue to handle AA's affairs with competence and fairness. A lot of AA old-timers around the country also felt that the status quo was just fine. But after Bill and Lois undertook a cross-country trip in 1948, Bill concluded that most AAs were behind the idea of a conference.



EASY DOES IT—BUT DO IT

When Bill was convinced that an idea was good for the Fellowship, he became tenacious. The conference became a near obsession for him, and his strong-arm tactics alienated many AAs and even many of his friends on the board. Dr. Bob was also unenthusiastic about the idea of a conference; he advised Bill in a letter to let the idea rest for a while: " 'Easy Does It' is the best course to follow "

"Easy does it" might have been good advice, but it wasn't always Bill's style. He continued to try to talk Dr. Bob into the idea of a conference, and he finally succeeded in the summer of 1950. Several weeks after the 1950 International Convention in Cleveland — where Dr. Bob had given his last, brief talk — Bill went to Akron and got Dr. Bob's go-ahead. (Dr. Bob died on November 16, 1950.) Meanwhile, Bernard Smith, the nonalcoholic chairman of the Board of Trustees, persuaded the board that the conference was a good idea.

So the General Service Conference was born, with a certain amount of dissension and personality clashes, for the course of AA's history did not always run smooth in those early years. Bill called the Conference "a coming of age," and indeed, growing-up isn't always easy. He wrote to an AA friend in December 1950: "___the organization and functioning of the Conference is no world-shaking matter," adding hopefully, "Sunday school teachers and bartenders alike seem to bring off such events without undue harm. Maybe we can, too." The idea of the Conference was adopted on an experimental or provisional basis for five years, from 1951 to 1955.

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'THE HOUR IS COME'

As he often did on important matters, Bill turned to the pages of the Grapevine to communicate with the Fellowship about the conference. In the November 1950 issue, he wrote:

"So the hour is come when you must take these things into your own keeping. We ask that you guard them well, for the future of Alcoholics Anonymous may much depend on how you maintain and support these life-giving Arms of Service. Anticipating that you will happily accept this new responsibility, the Trustees, Dr. Bob and I propose The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous; a body of State and Provincial representatives who will sit yearly with our Foundation Trustees as their traditional guide. We have long considered and will soon present a detailed plan designed to bring this great change about."

The first General Service Conference convened in New York for four days in April 1951. Attendees included members of the Alcoholic Foundation (renamed the General Service Board), staffers from the Headquarters Office and the Grapevine, and, most importantly, delegates from the Fellowship. Delegates from half the areas attended; these were called the First Panel; the Second Panel joined the first one the following year. Thus every Conference has two overlapping panels of delegates — one set of "veterans" and one of "newcomers."

In the June 1951 Grapevine, the delegate from California summed up the importance of the Conference. The delegate wrote:

"I know how frightening it is to all of us to think of Bill ever leaving; I know also he can never be replaced. But Bill believes, and I gather Dr. Bob also believed, that he and Bill can be replaced by a principle, that being the collective conscience of AA speaking through the delegates of the General Service Conference."

The collective conscience of AA made several important decisions during that first Conference:

- The temporary Conference charter should be approved for the following three years.
- All AA "textbooks" should have Conference approval.
- All AA groups should be informed as to the 1951 Headquarters budget [which was \$107,000].
- It should be suggested that AA groups wishing to contribute to AA

general services give a minimum of two dollars per member for the year.

- Nonalcoholic trustees should continue to serve on the board of trustees.

COLLECTIVE AND EVOLVING PRINCIPLES

The GSO staffer who serves on the Conference assignment in 1995, Valerie O'N., points out what a radical idea the Conference was when it was first conceived. In most human institutions, a leader who's stepping down arranges to hand over his power to one or two people he's personally selected. But, as Valerie says, "Bill didn't, groom a successor to be 'Bill Jr.' — he chose a concept over people." The Conference replaced the guiding forces of the old-timers (personalities) with the collective and evolving principles of AA. It was based on rotation of power, and it elevated principles over personalities.

In this system, every member has a voice. Any AA member or group may participate directly in the Conference by writing GSO or by giving their input to their GSR, DCM, or area representative. Valerie explains, "Not every request or idea will reach the Conference floor, but every one is treated with dignity, honor, and respect."

In 1955, at the end of the provisional period, the Conference met in St. Louis just before the International Convention was held there. At

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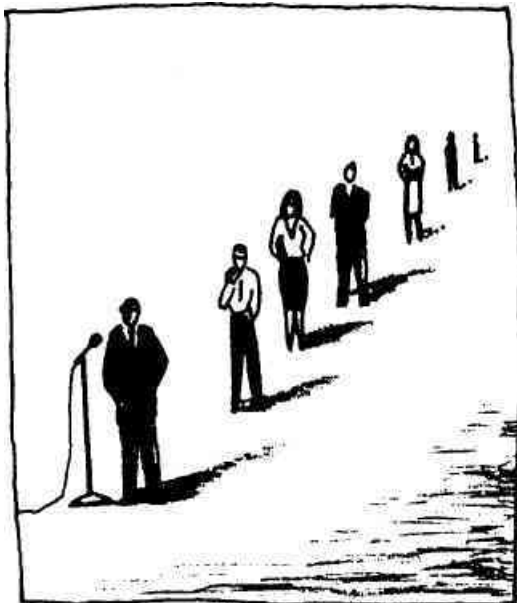


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the Convention, the Fellowship as a whole ratified the idea of the Conference and thus made it a permanent arm of AA. Bill offered a resolution, adopted by the Convention, which said in part that the Conference "should now become the permanent successor to the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, inheriting from them all their former duties and special responsibilities, thus avoiding in future time all possible strivings for individual prestige or personal power, and also providing our Society with the means of functioning on a permanent basis."

HOW IT WORKS

The present-day Conference meets for a week every April. The voting members of the Conference are the delegates, the General Service Board of trustees, the AAWS Board, the Corporate Board of the Grapevine, and the AA staff members at the General Service Office and the Grapevine. The work of the Conference truly begins when the committees meet. There are conference committees for agenda, finance, treatment facilities, correctional facilities, literature, trustees, cooperation with the professional community, public information, policy and admissions, report and charter, and the Grapevine. Committees examine issues received from a variety of sources — groups, individuals, delegates, DCMs, GSRs, GvRs, area assemblies, and the trustees' committees. After two days of discussion, the committee decides whether to table an idea, make a suggestion, or make a recommendation. Later in the week, the entire body convenes to hear the committee reports and to vote on recommendations.



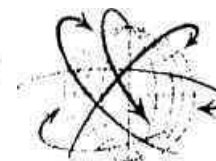
After each committee makes its report, those who want to speak on the issue go to the nearest of six microphones. Sometimes the lines at the microphones can get pretty long, and those who are chairing the meeting try to keep things rolling by calling on people in order of their arrival. To make speakers stay focused, there's a two-minute limit on speaking; after two minutes, a light goes off and the speaker must retire.

For the vote, hands are raised and counted by volunteer delegates or staff. Recommendations that are passed by two-thirds of the Conference become Advisory Actions. For those recommendations that pass, the minority opinion is allowed to be heard: that is, after the vote, those who are in opposition may speak once again to the issue. An interesting possibility then proposes itself: if someone *who voted with the majority* has now changed her or his mind, possibly as a result of hearing the minority opinion, they may call for a re-vote. Charles M., delegate from Tennessee, explains that he heard a minority opinion and changed his vote: "I got up at one of the microphones and I said, 'I apologize. I didn't do my job as a delegate. I was a sheep, just going along with somebody else's opinion.'"

Conference voting can become a marathon event, going from Wednesday night, all day Thursday, through Friday morning, with brief times out for meals. Out in the hall where the big coffee urns are always on, the debate may continue one on one.

The Conference coordinator makes a point about the responsibility of the General Service Conference: "We aren't the only general service structure in the world. But because we've been

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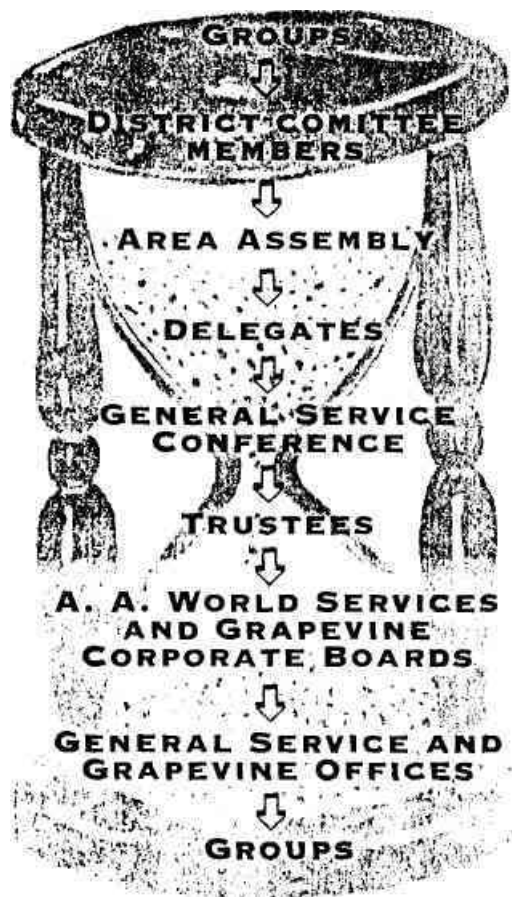
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around longer, our Conference does set an example. It provides a sober reference. We have an historical obligation not just to our U.S. and Canadian membership but to the Fellowship worldwide."

This responsibility is felt in a very personal way by the delegates — those who have been given "delegated responsibility" by the Fellowship. The Conference represents the intersection of business and spirituality, where the business practices and policies of AA are reviewed in light of the fundamental principles of the program. Robert P., a delegate from Quebec from 1991 to 1992, says for him the biggest fear was that in attending to business, "we would lose track of the simple AA spirit." However, the AA spirit always seems to prevail. Sandy C., a delegate from Southwest Texas, says she was impressed that the Conference was "structured but not rigid. It was flexible enough to work with real human beings. There was an openness there."

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

Robert says the best advice he could give a new delegate is to be prepared spiritually and to know the Concepts and the Traditions. What



does spiritual preparation provide? "It helped me realize I was powerless. Sometimes at the Conference, I was overwhelmed. I thought: I'm not prepared! I'm not good enough! On the first day of voting, I went into a corner and I meditated for a few minutes. I realized I wasn't a boss, I was just an instrument. I had to rely on the trust my area had put in me. I didn't have to be perfect. Understanding that, I saw that the Conference wasn't so overwhelming."

Sandy C. says, "It's scary because it's a responsibility. I feel inadequate sometimes." She added, laughing, "I think, I'm just a drunk! What am I doing here?" Did she feel any tension between what her area wanted and how her conscience directed her to vote? "No," she said. "My area is wonderful. They sent me up there with no agenda — just to do the best that I could. I was truly a trusted servant."

The purpose of the Conference is to reach an informed group conscience decision — a coming together of opinion, thought, feeling. The process by which it does this is a changing dance of talking and listening: sometimes lengthy and intricate, sometimes brief and to the point. Participants learn by listening — and since they sometimes change their minds, a discussion can go on for a long time, as issues are thrashed out and understood and language is revised. Delegates need willingness and patience. Susan C., a past delegate from Virginia, describes the way one group conscience was achieved: "Someone made a comment, and I could feel the whole room shift: 'Oh yeah — oops, we forgot about that!' And the vote changed."

Shaaron J., who has just rotated as delegate

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from Central Southeast Ohio, describes how she felt before her first Conference: "I came to the first Conference with preconceived ideas. Negative. Defensive. Looking for problems. But now I have a totally different viewpoint. I believe in the system itself. Mistakes are made, there are problems, but overall, the process works." What suggestions is she giving to the delegate who has become her successor? "Keep an open mind. You may go there with one idea. I was very against the pocket edition of the Big Book, but after I sat there and listened to delegates from other areas, I changed my mind. One delegate made it clear for me: What are we doing for the still-suffering alcoholic? That's the bottom line."

REACHING A CONSENSUS

Debate, disagreement, even downright controversy may be inevitable components of decision making at the Conference. Charles M. believes that controversy is necessary, and that in fact it's part of the learning process for the individual AA: "With my head stuck in a jug, I didn't have to face pain or discomfort; I never had to learn anything. But I think that's why we're here, that's our primary purpose in living — to learn our lessons. Through service — through the pains and trials and tribulations — I'm kind of catching up. I'm learning." But he adds: "It took me a long, long time to get to this point. Now I can sit quietly and listen to somebody rave and really listen and keep an open mind and see if there's anything to learn."

Susan C. says that the Conference "tested my patience and tolerance, but it also gave me a great deal of love and trust. It gave me the sense of being connected to something much greater."

Sometimes it isn't possible for the Conference to reach a consensus. In 1993 and 1994, for example, the Conference considered whether the Grapevine should continue to produce the wall calendar and pocket planner. After much intelligent debate, a vote was taken on the question, but in neither year was there a two-thirds majority, so no recommendation was made. (Instead, the 1994 Conference recommended that: All AA members be strongly urged to work toward the goal that the AA Grapevine magazine be self-supporting through the sale of magazine subscriptions.)

Not every Conference will deal with life and death issues: the Conference tends to respond rather than to initiate. It's in place to deal with the regular business matters of AA, and should a crisis ever arise, it will be there and ready to respond.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

The Conference week may be intense and challenging, but it's only one part of the delegate's job. When the Conference is over, delegates go back to their home areas and report on the Conference. Robert explains, "At the June assembly, I recounted my week in New York as I had lived it. I tried to give the spirit of the week — this is at least as important as the decisions that were made. I tried to be honest, I told when things were difficult." Last year, Susan C. spent twenty vacation and personal leave days from her job going to the districts in her area to tell them about the Conference.

How does the Conference affect those who participate in it? Susan describes, "There's a subtle change in delegates between their first and second Conference. They become *stiller*. They quiet down. They watch and listen more. They step out of their own way."

For Sandy C., the Conference was a "life-changing experience." Sandy comes from a town of 1,000 inhabitants — "a little bitty town where I can count the cars that go by on one hand. The people in my town can't figure out why I'm always putting suitcases in the car and leaving my husband for days at a time." Her very first plane ride was to a regional forum in St. Louis; she said, "And I'm a person who

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doesn't make left turns!" Like many other delegates, Sandy discovered that New York City doesn't live up to its unpleasant reputation. "I thought that everybody in New York was going to be mean and ugly and awful, but they were great. They were as nice as they are here in Little River." Charles M. agrees: "I fell in love with New York when I was up there. I loved the variety, the colorful characters, the street performers, even the scents and the sounds."

The first Saturday after Sandy returned from the Conference, she flew to South Padre Island (from the nearest airport in Austin, seventy miles away) to bring them the news of the Conference. Then she set out to visit all parts of her area, travelling 10,000 miles in four months; she was gone every weekend from May through November. "Before I stood for delegate," Sandy said, "I talked to my family about this. I said, you're important and I won't do this if you don't want me to." Sandy's kids are grown and she has a sympathetic husband. "But for six months my kids had to make an appointment if they wanted to see me!"

Like many other delegates, Sandy's Conference experience — as she put it — "reaffirmed my faith in the Fellowship." Forty-four Conferences have come and gone since the first panel was convened in 1951; there is a new generation of old-timers and newcomers. AA has survived and prospered for many reasons — including the success of the Conference structure.

Bill W. once wrote that the General Service Conference could never be "a policeman or a law-giver for AA." Rather, it is a source of guidance and a reflection of our common purpose. Valerie O'N. says, "Self-support doesn't always mean money — it also means personal responsibility"; the Conference is one of the ways we take responsibility for AA.

As Charles M. says: "I knew why I was at the Conference. I was there as a representative of AA — to perpetuate our existence and to find new and better ways to carry the message." Because of the Conference, we, like our founders, can help protect the Fellowship — its present policies and its future survival. 