I AM ONE of the thousands of AAs who could have been—but were not—present at the Convention in St. Louis in July 1955. I wasn’t interested.

I had been told that at this Twentieth Anniversary Convention our co-founder would, on behalf of himself and the original old-timers, formally propose that all of our worldwide general services should be permanently turned over to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. I still was not interested. I couldn’t see what this had to do with me.

At that time, sober a little over a year, it was difficult for me to connect general services with my own sobriety. Anything that began with the words “General Service” was, if you lived on the West Coast as I did, referred to simply (and very often disparagingly) as “New York.” I knew we had to have “New York,” and that we were supposed to send money there to support the operations of General Service Headquarters [now the General Service Office—GSO], but the whole thing bored me. I listened with impatience on the rare occasions when a committee member or a general service representative was granted a few minutes at a regular AA meeting to make his pitch. My AA horizon embraced the group and, to a limited degree, our local intergroup central office. The rest was out of sight and out of mind.

Then I became a general service representative of my group, and later a committee member. I glanced through "The Third Legacy Manual," listened to our delegate’s annual report on the General Service Conference, and attended committee meetings in a perfunctory manner because it was the thing to do. My group sent in its $2.00 per member [now $3.65, as the 1973 Conference suggested] to "New York." As far as I could see, this was the extent of my responsibility.

But afterward, I began to think calmly about some of the things they had said. And I took an inventory of my own personal relationship with "New York." How much did general services have to do with my own sobriety? What exactly was the extent of my individual responsibility for the survival of our general services? For the survival of Alcoholics Anonymous?

My own personal experiences in AA provided me with the answers. It began on the morning when, sick and beaten, I picked up the phone and called the number I found in the telephone directory, under "Alcoholics Anonymous," and said, "I’d like to talk to someone about my drinking," and an hour later a man who lived in my own neighborhood was sharing his experience, strength, and hope with me.

So I incurred the first installment of my personal debt to general services. Because, you see, at the other end of the telephone line was a man, and an office, and money to pay the man and to keep the office open; and behind all that was a system, an organization of AA groups supporting that office, and sending representatives from the groups to watch over that office and see to its operations; and behind that was General Service Headquarters—"New York," if you will — men and women, armed with the carefully documented experience of thousands of groups and dozens of central offices, who poured out ideas and advice and suggestions to the Los Angeles AAs who started that office, and who continue to do so when asked. Our central office has a sponsor — "New York."

Later, I went to my first meeting, sober now for a few days, and there I found the answer that has made it
"How much did general services have to do with my own sobriety?"

"Wouldn't it be great if we had an open meeting down here, with guest speakers from Los Angeles?" and somebody else said, "Let's start one."

In a way, this was funny, because the oldest on the program among the four of us had been sober just four and a half months. We were ignorant; we were confused; but we did have an idea. So we talked to some of the local old-timers about our idea, and they gave us a dozen good reasons why it wouldn't work; and deep discouragement set in.

What to do?

Well, we wrote a letter — to General Service Headquarters. And you should have seen the reply that whistled back by airmail. A friendly, encouraging, wonderful letter, pages of it, directed to our idea, and they gave us a dozen reasons why it wouldn't work; and deep discouragement set in.

What to do?

I arrived at the island several hours ahead of schedule, I had passed through a lot of old drinking territory on the way, and old memories were seeping into my mind, and I sure felt like talking a little AA subject to guard his anonymity with care.

I introduced myself and said, "Ann M. in New York gave me your name and address," and this man just stood there and beamed.

Then he grabbed my arm and shoved me into his office, and he called his wife at home and said, "Doris, there is a man here that got my name from New York," and he hung up and said, "She'll be right down."

So I went out to their home and spent the day with them. I met their two kids, Patrick and Prudence,
and the dog, and several cats, and I looked at the pictures in the family album, and I heard Clay's story.

Five years before, Clay had drunk himself out of his trade in England, and the only employment he could get was out of the country. His wife made the hard decision: to send him off alone, because she couldn't risk the trip, with one small child and another on the way, and Clay's drinking, and so forth. And then, a week before the sailing date, Clay saw an ad for an AA meeting in a London newspaper. He went to the meeting, and Doris went with him, and when they got home that night she asked, "Well, what do you think?"

He said, "I think I've found it."

On that slim hope, Doris shipped out with Clay.

That is the only AA meeting Clay has ever attended. He has never taken another drink. He told me,"I get all the bulletins and things from New York, and of course I have the Big Book. And I receive a personal letter once a month from one of the girls in the New York office." Then he grinned. "Also, my kids have got uncles."

I said: "What do you mean, uncles?"

"Well, the people in New York give my name and address to AA merchant seamen whose ships dock here, and these chaps always head straight for my place. The kids call them their uncles." Then he said, "They come here instead of hanging around the pubs in town, and it keeps them out of trouble. And they help me stay sober."

I never spent a better day than the day I spent with Clay and his family. I never saw more heartfelt gratitude for AA — and for "New York."

So I have changed my mind about "New York." And I wish now that I had gone to the big Convention in St. Louis. I wish I had been there to hear Bill challenge 5,000 sober alcoholics: "We are ready to deliver the world services of Alcoholics Anonymous into your hands. Do you accept this gift?" And I would like to have heard the roar that thundered back at him: "Yes!" from 5,000 throats.

I wasn't there that day, but the gift was accepted in my behalf. Not only the gift, but the responsibility for the gift. The lifeline of my own sobriety was delivered into my hands, together with the responsibility to guard it, support it, and extend it. And to be alert, and vigilant, and informed about it.

There is a big debt to repay — to "New York"!

Jim K.