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Conference-approved literature

# A.A.'S LEGACY OF SERVICE

*BY BILL W.*

What is the basic A.A. service?

The Fellowship's responsibility

The pioneers' battle for the Big Book

News stories and sudden A.A. growth

Beginnings of group and world services

Origin of the Twelve Traditions

G.S.O. today

Birth of the General Service Conference

THIS IS A REPRINT FROM  
"THE A.A. SERVICE MANUAL"

The complete manual, an invaluable  
guide in Fellowship activity, is available  
from the General Service Office.

*Recovery, Unity, Service—these are the Three Legacies given to the whole membership of A.A. by its founders and their fellow oldtimers. When this heritage was announced, at the St. Louis Convention in 1955, celebrating A.A.'s 20th birthday, Doctor Bob was already gone. But Bill W. spoke for him and the other pioneers, as well as for himself, in turning over to all of us the responsibility for A.A.'s continuation and growth.*

*“The A.A. Service Manual,” current version of the handbook first known as “The Third Legacy Manual,” may seem to be simply a guide to organization and procedure, and its approach is indeed practical. At the same time, it is based firmly upon spiritual principles, as Bill explains in his introduction to the manual, reprinted here to recall the development of our Third Legacy.*

# A.A.'s Legacy of Service

**by BILL W.**

Our Twelfth Step—carrying the message—is the basic service that the A.A. Fellowship gives; this is our principal aim and the main reason for our existence. Therefore, A.A. is more than a set of principles; it is a society of alcoholics in action. We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven't been given the truth may die.

*Hence, an A.A. service is anything whatever that helps us to reach a fellow sufferer—ranging all the way from the Twelfth Step itself to a ten-cent phone call and a cup of coffee, and to A.A.'s General Service Office for national and international action. The sum total of all these services is our Third Legacy of Service.*

Services include meeting places, hospital cooperation, and intergroup offices; they mean pamphlets, books, and good publicity of almost every description. They call for committees, delegates, trustees, and conferences. And, not to be forgotten, they need voluntary money contributions from within the Fellowship.

## ***Vital to A.A.'s Growth***

These services, whether performed by individuals, groups, areas, or A.A. as a whole, are utterly vital to our existence and growth. Nor can we make A.A. more simple by abolishing such services. We would only be asking for complication and confusion.

Concerning any given service, we therefore pose but one question: "Is this service really needed?" If it is, then maintain it we must, or fail in our mission to those who need and seek A.A.

The most vital, yet least understood, group of services that A.A. has are those that enable us to function as a whole; namely, the General Service Office, A.A. World Services, Inc., the A.A. Grapevine, Inc., and our

Board of Trustees, known legally as the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our world-wide unity and much of our growth since early times are directly traceable to this cluster of life-giving activities.

Until 1950, these overall services were the sole function of a few old-time A.A.'s, several nonalcoholic friends, Doctor Bob, and me. For all the years of A.A.'s infancy, we oldtimers had been the self-appointed trustees for Alcoholics Anonymous.

### ***Fellowship Ready for Responsibility***

At this time, we realized that A.A. had grown up, that our Fellowship was ready and able to take these responsibilities from us. There was also another urgent reason for change. Since we oldtimers couldn't live on forever, newer trustees would be virtually unknown to the A.A. groups, now spread over the whole earth. Without direct linkage to A.A., future trustees couldn't possibly function alone.

This meant that we had to form a conference representing our membership which could meet yearly with our Board of Trustees in New York, and thus assume direct responsibility for the guardianship of A.A. tradition and the direction of our principal service affairs. Otherwise, a virtually unknown board of trustees and our too little understood service headquarters operations would someday be bound to face collapse.

Suppose that future trustees, acting quite on their own, were to make a serious blunder. Suppose that with no linkage to A.A., they tried to act for us in time of great trouble or crisis. With no direct guidance from A.A. as a whole, how could they do this? Collapse of our top services would then be inevitable. And if, under such conditions, our world services did fall apart, how could they ever be reconstructed?

These, briefly, were the conclusions that led to the formation of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. Later, I will outline in more detail the events that have now become A.A. history.

The deliberative body known as the Conference is made up of elected area delegates from the United States and Canada—now numbering about ninety—together with the trustees, the directors of A.A.W.S., Inc., and the A.A. Grapevine, Inc., and G.S.O. and Grapevine staff members numbering forty or more. The Conference held its first annual meeting in 1951.

Since then it has met annually in April in New York.\* It has proved itself an immense success—establishing a record of advisory actions that have served the Fellowship well during the intervening years of growth and development.

### ***Highlights of A.A. Service History***

To go back to the beginning: One day in 1937, at Doctor Bob's Akron home, he and I added up the score of over two years' work. For the first time we saw that wholesale recovery for alcoholics was possible. We then had two small but solid groups at Akron and New York, plus a sprinkling of members elsewhere. How could these few recovered ones tell millions of alcoholics throughout the world the great news? That was the question.

Forthwith, Doctor Bob and I met with 18 of the Akron Group at the home of T. Henry Williams, a steadfast nonalcoholic friend. Some of the Akron Group still thought we ought to stick to the word-of-mouth process; but the majority felt that we now needed our own hospitals with paid workers and, above all, a book for other alcoholics that could explain to them our methods and results. This would require considerable money—millions perhaps. (We didn't know that millions would have ruined us even more than no money at all.) So the Akron meeting commissioned me to get to New York and raise funds. Arrived home, I found the New York group in full agreement with this idea. Several of us went to work at once.

### ***A.A.'s Early Money Problems***

Through my brother-in-law, Dr. L. V. Strong, Jr., my only remaining friend and the confidant of the worst of my drinking time, we made a contact with Willard S. Richardson, a friend and longtime associate of the Rockefeller family. Mr. Richardson promptly took fire and interested a group of his own friends. In the winter of 1937, a meeting was called at the offices of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Present were Mr. Richardson and his group, Dr. William D. Silkworth, alcoholics from Akron and New York, Doctor Bob and I. After a long discussion, we convinced our new friends that we urgently needed money—a lot of it, too.

\*Except for 1955 Conference held in St. Louis, Missouri.

One of them, Frank Amos, soon made a trip to Akron early in 1938 to investigate the group there. He returned with a very optimistic report, a digest of which Mr. Richardson quickly laid before John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Though much impressed, Mr. Rockefeller declined to give any large sum for fear of professionalizing A.A. He did, however, donate \$5,000. This was used to keep Doctor Bob and me going during 1938. We were still a long way from hospitals, missionaries, books, and big money. This looked mighty tough at the time, but it was probably one of the best breaks that A.A. ever had.

In spite of Mr. Rockefeller's views, we renewed our efforts to persuade his friends of our crying need for money. At length, they agreed that we did need more money, certainly enough to prepare a textbook on our methods and experience.

In the late spring of 1938, I had drafted what are now the first two chapters of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous." Mimeographed copies of these were used as part of the prospectus for our futile fund-raising operation. At board meetings, then held nearly every month, our nonalcoholic friends commiserated on our lack of success. About half of the \$5,000 Mr. Rockefeller advanced had been used to pay the mortgage on Doctor Bob's home. The rest of it, divided between us, would, of course, soon be exhausted. The outlook was certainly bleak.

### ***A.A. Its Own Publisher***

Then Frank Amos remembered his old-time friend Eugene Exman, religious editor at Harper's, the book publishers. He sent me to Harper's, and I showed Mr. Exman two chapters of our proposed book. To my delight, Mr. Exman was impressed. He suggested that Harper's might advance me \$1,500 in royalties to finish the job. Broke as we then were, that \$1,500 looked like a pile of money.

Nevertheless, our enthusiasm for this proposal quickly waned. With the book finished, we would be \$1,500 in debt to Harper's. And if, as we hoped, A.A. then got a lot of publicity, how could we possibly hire the help to answer the inquiries—maybe thousands—that would flood in?

There was another problem, too, a serious one. If our A.A. book became the basic text for Alcoholics Anonymous, its ownership would then be in other hands. It was evident that our Society ought to own and

publish its own literature. No publisher, however good, ought to own our best asset.

So two of us bought a pad of blank stock certificates and wrote on them "Works Publishing, par value \$25." My friend Hank P. and I then offered shares in the new book company to alcoholics and their friends in New York. They just laughed at us. Who would buy stock, they said, in a book not yet written!

Somehow, these timid buyers had to be persuaded, so we went to the *Reader's Digest* and told the managing editor the story of our budding Society and its proposed book. He liked the notion very much and promised that in the spring of 1939 when we thought the book would be ready, the *Reader's Digest* would print a piece about A.A.—mentioning the new book, of course.

This was the sales argument we needed. With a plug like that, the proposed volume would sell by carloads. How could we miss? The New York alcoholics and their friends promptly changed their minds about Works Publishing stock. They began to buy it, mostly on installments.

Ruth Hock, our nonalcoholic secretary, typed away as I slowly dictated the chapters of the text for the new book. Fierce argument over these drafts and what ought to go into them was a main feature of the New York and Akron Groups' meetings for months on end. I became much more of an umpire than I ever was an author. Meanwhile, the alcoholics at Akron and New York and a couple in Cleveland began writing their stories—28 in all.

When the book project neared completion, we visited the managing editor of the *Reader's Digest* and asked for the promised article. He gave us a blank look, scarcely remembering who we were. Then the blow fell. He told how months before he had put our proposition to his editorial board and how it had been turned down flat. With profuse apologies, he admitted he'd plumb forgot to let us know anything about it. This was a crusher.

Meanwhile, we had optimistically ordered 5,000 copies of the new book, largely on a shoestring. The printer, too, had relied on the *Reader's Digest*. Soon there would be 5,000 books in his warehouse, and no customers for them.

The book finally appeared in April, 1939. We got the *New York Times* to do a review and Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick supplied us with another really good one, but nothing happened. The book simply didn't sell. We were in debt up to our ears. The sheriff appeared at the

Newark office where we had been working, and the landlord sold the Brooklyn house, where Lois and I lived. She and I were dumped into the street and then onto the charity of A.A. friends.

How we got through the summer of 1939, I'll never quite know. Hank P. had to get a job. The faithful Ruth accepted shares in the defunct book company as pay. One A.A. friend supplied us with his summer camp; another with a car.

### ***A.A. Makes News***

The first break came in September, 1939. *Liberty Magazine*, then headed by our great friend-to-be, Fulton Oursler, carried an article, "Alcoholics and God," written by Morris Markey. There was an instant response. About eight hundred letters from alcoholics and their families poured in. Ruth answered every one of them, enclosing a leaflet about the new book, "Alcoholics Anonymous." Slowly, the book began to sell. Then the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran a series of pieces about Alcoholics Anonymous. At once, the Cleveland groups mushroomed from a score into many hundreds of members. More books sold. Thus we inched and squeezed our way through that perilous year.

We hadn't heard a thing from Mr. Rockefeller since early in 1938. But in 1940, he put in a dramatic reappearance. His friend Mr. Richardson came to a trustees' meeting, smiling broadly. Mr. Rockefeller, he said, wanted to give Alcoholics Anonymous a dinner. The invitation list showed an imposing collection of notables. We figured them to be collectively worth at least a billion dollars.

The dinner came off early in February at New York's Union League Club. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke in praise of us, and so did Dr. Foster Kennedy, the eminent neurologist. Then Doctor Bob and I briefed the audience on A.A. Some of the Akron and New York alcoholics scattered among the notables at the tables responded to questions. The gathering showed a rising warmth and interest. This was it, we thought; our money problems were solved!

Nelson Rockefeller then rose to his feet to speak for his father, who was ill. His father was very glad, he said, that those at the dinner had seen the promising beginning of the new Society of Alcoholics Anonymous. Seldom, Nelson continued, had his father shown more interest in anything. But obviously, since A.A. was a work of pure goodwill, one man carrying the good



news to the next, little or no money would be required. At this sally, our spirits fell. When Mr. Rockefeller had finished, the whole billion dollars' worth of capitalists got up and walked out, leaving not a nickel behind them.

Next day, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., wrote to all those who had attended the dinner and even to those who had not. Again he reiterated his complete confidence and high interest. Then, at the very end of his letter, he casually remarked that he was giving Alcoholics Anonymous \$1,000!

Only much later did we realize what Mr. Rockefeller had really done for us. At risk of personal ridicule, he had stood up before the whole world to put in a plug for a tiny society of struggling alcoholics. For these unknowns, he'd gone way out on a limb. Wisely sparing of his money, he had given freely of himself. Then and there John D. Rockefeller, Jr., saved us from the perils of property management and professionalism. He couldn't have done more.

### ***A.A. Grows to Two Thousand Members***

As a result, A.A.'s 1940 membership jumped sharply to about two thousand at the year's end. Doctor Bob and I each began to receive \$30 a week out of the dinner contributions. This eased us greatly. Lois and I went to live in a tiny room at A.A.'s number one clubhouse, on West 24th Street in Manhattan.

Best of all, increased book sales had made a national headquarters possible. We moved from Newark, N.J., where the A.A. book had been written, to Vesey Street, just north of the Wall Street district of New York. We took a modest two-room office right opposite the downtown Church Street Annex Post Office. There the famous Box 658 was ready and waiting to receive the thousands of frantic inquiries that would presently come into it. At this point, Ruth (though nonalcoholic) became A.A.'s first national secretary, and I turned into a sort of headquarters handyman.

Through the whole of 1940, book sales were the sole support of the struggling office. Every cent of these earnings went to pay for A.A. work done there. All requests for help were answered with warm personal letters. When alcoholics or their families showed continued interest, we kept on writing. Aided by such letters and the book "Alcoholics Anonymous," new A.A. groups had begun to take form.

## ***Beginning of Group Services***

More importantly, we had lists of prospects in many cities and towns of the United States and Canada. We turned these lists over to A.A. traveling businessmen, members of already established groups. With these couriers, we corresponded constantly, and they started still more groups. For the further benefit of our travelers, we put out a group directory.

Then came an unexpected activity. Because the newborn groups saw only a little of their traveling sponsors, they turned to the New York office for help with their innumerable troubles. By mail we relayed the experience of the older centers on to them. A little later, as we shall see, this became a major service.

Meanwhile, some of the stockholders in the book company, Works Publishing, began to get restive. All the book profits, they complained, were going for A.A. work in the office. When, if ever, were they going to get their money back? We also saw that the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" should now become the property of A.A. as a whole. At the moment, it was owned one-third by the 49 subscribers, one-third by my friend Hank P., and the remainder by me.

As a first step, we had the book company, Works Publishing, audited and legally incorporated. Hank P. and I donated our shares in it to the Alcoholic Foundation (as our Board of Trustees was then called). This was the stock that we had taken for services rendered. But the 49 other subscribers had put in real money. They would have to be paid cash. Where on earth could we get it?

The help we needed turned up in the person of A. LeRoy Chipman. Also a friend and associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., he had recently been made a trustee of the Foundation. He persuaded Mr. Rockefeller, two of his sons, and some of the dinner guests to lend the Foundation \$8,000. This promptly paid off a \$2,500 indebtedness to Charles B. Towns,\* settled some incidental debts, and permitted the reacquisition of the outstanding stock. Two years later, the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" had done so well that we were able to pay off this whole Rockefeller loan.

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\*Owner of Towns Hospital; his loans helped to make the book project possible.

## ***Jack Alexander Looks at A.A.***

The spring of 1941 brought us a ten-strike. The *Saturday Evening Post* decided to do a piece about Alcoholics Anonymous. It assigned one of its star writers, Jack Alexander, to the job. Having just done an article on the New Jersey rackets, Jack approached us somewhat tongue-in-check. But he soon became an A.A. "convert," even though he wasn't an alcoholic. Working early and late, he spent a whole month with us. Doctor Bob and I and elders of the early groups at Akron, New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Chicago spent uncounted hours with him. When he could feel A.A. in the very marrow of his bones, he proceeded to write the piece that rocked drunks and their families all over the nation. It was the lead story in the *Saturday Evening Post* of March 1, 1941.

Came then the deluge. Frantic appeals from alcoholics and their families—six thousand of them—hit the New York office. At first, we pawed at random through the mass of letters, laughing and crying by turns. How could this heartbreaking mail be answered? It was a cinch that Ruth and I could never do it alone. Form letters wouldn't be enough. Every single one must have an understanding personal reply.

Maybe the A.A. groups themselves would help. Though we'd never asked anything of them before, this was surely their business, if it was anybody's. An enormous Twelfth Step job had to be done and done quickly.

So we told the groups the story, and they responded. The measuring stick for voluntary contribution was at that time set at \$1.00 per member per year. The trustees of the Foundation agreed to look after these funds, placing them in a special bank account, earmarking them for A.A. office work only.

We had started the year 1941 with two thousand members, but we finished with eight thousand. This was the measure of the great impact of the *Saturday Evening Post* piece. But this was only the beginning of uncounted thousands of pleas for help from individuals and from growing groups all over the world, which have continued to flow into the General Service Office to this day.

This phenomenal expansion brought another problem, a very important one. The national spotlight now being on us, we had to begin dealing with the public on a large scale. Public ill will could stunt our growth, even bring it to a standstill. But enthusiastic public confidence could swell our ranks to numbers we had only dreamed of before. The *Post* piece had proved this.

Finding the right answers to all our public relations puzzlers has been a long process. After much trial and error, sometimes punctuated by painful mistakes, the attitudes and practices that would work best for us emerged. The important ones can today be seen in our A.A. Traditions. One hundred percent anonymity at the public level, no use of the A.A. name for the benefit of other causes, however worthy, no endorsements or alliances, one single purpose for Alcoholics Anonymous, no professionalism, public relations by the principle of attraction rather than promotion—these were some of the hard-earned lessons.

### ***Service to the Whole of A.A.***

Thus far in our Society story, we have seen the Foundation, the A.A. book, the development of pamphlet literature, the answered mass of pleas for help, the satisfied need of groups for counsel on their problems, the beginning of our wonderful relations with the public, all becoming part of a growing service to the whole world of A.A. At last our Society really began to function as a whole.

But the 1941-1945 period brought still more developments of significance. The Vesey Street office was moved to Lexington Avenue, New York City, just opposite Grand Central Terminal. The moment we located there, we were besieged with visitors who, for the first time, began to see Alcoholics Anonymous as a vision for the whole globe.

Since A.A. was growing so fast, G.S.O. had to grow, too. More alcoholic staff members were engaged. As they divided the work between them, departments began to be created. Today's office has a good many—group, foreign and public relations, A.A. Conference, office management, packing and mailing, accounting, stenographic, and special service to Loners, Internationalists, prisons, and hospitals.\*

It was chiefly from correspondence and from our mounting public relations activity that the basic ideas for our Traditions came. In late 1945, a good A.A. friend suggested that all this mass of experience might be codified into a set of general principles, simply stated principles that could offer tested solutions to all of A.A.'s problems of living and working together and of relating our Society to the world outside.

If we had become sure enough of where we stood on such matters as membership, group autonomy, single-

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\*Other services have been added since 1955.

ness of purpose, nonendorsement of other enterprises, professionalism, public controversy, and anonymity in its several aspects, then such a code of principles could be written. Such a traditional code could not, of course, ever become rule or law. But it could act as a sure guide for our trustees, for headquarters people and, most especially, for A.A. groups with bad growing pains.

Being at the center of things, we of the headquarters would have to do the job. Aided by my helpers there, I set to work. The Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous that resulted were first published in the so-called long form in the Grapevine of May, 1946. Then I wrote some more pieces explaining the Traditions in detail. These came out in later issues of the Grapevine.

### ***Traditions Took Persuasion***

The first reception of the Twelve Traditions was interesting and amusing. The reaction was mixed, to say the least. Only groups in dire trouble took them seriously. From some quarters there was a violent reaction, especially from groups that had long lists of "protective" rules and regulations. There was much indifference. Several of our "intellectual" members cried loudly that the Traditions reflected nothing more than the sum of my own hopes and fears for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Therefore I began to travel and talk a lot about the new Traditions. People were at first politely attentive, though it must be confessed that some did go to sleep during my early harangues. But after a while I got letters containing sentiments like this: "Bill, we'd love to have you come and speak. Do tell us where you used to hide your bottles and all about that big, hot-flash spiritual experience of yours. But for heaven's sake, please don't talk any more about those blasted Traditions!"

Time presently changed all that. Only five years later, several thousand A.A. members, meeting at the 1950 Cleveland Convention, declared that A.A.'s Twelve Traditions constituted the platform upon which our Fellowship could best function and hold together in unity for all time to come.

### ***Medicine Takes an Interest***

By this time, A.A. had found still more favor in the world of medicine. Two of the great medical associations of America did an unprecedented thing. In the year 1944, the Medical Society of the State of New York invited me to read a paper at its annual meeting.

Following the reading, three of the many physicians present stood up and gave A.A. their highest endorsement. These were Dr. Harry Tiebout, A.A.'s first friend in the psychiatric profession, Dr. Kirby Collier, also a psychiatrist friend and an early advocate of A.A., and Dr. Foster Kennedy, world-renowned neurologist. The Medical Society itself then went still further. They permitted us to print my paper and the recommendations of these three doctors in pamphlet form. In 1949 the American Psychiatric Association did exactly the same thing. I read a paper at its annual meeting in Montreal. The paper was carried in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, and we were permitted to reprint it.\*

During the 1940's, two hospitals met all these urgent needs and afforded shining examples of how medicine and A.A. could cooperate. At St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Doctor Bob, the wonderful Sister Ignatia, and the hospital's staff presided over an alcoholic ward that had ministered to five thousand alcoholics by the time Doctor Bob passed away in 1950. In New York, Knickerbocker Hospital provided a ward under the care of our first friend in medicine, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, where he was assisted by a redheaded A.A. nurse known as Teddy. It was in these two hospitals and by these pioneering people that the best techniques of combined medicine and A.A. were worked out.

Since proper hospitalization was, and still is, one of A.A.'s greatest problems, the General Service Office has retailed this early hospital experience, along with the many subsequent developments and ramifications, to groups all over the world—still another very vital service.

### ***A Rash of Anonymity Breaks***

About this time a serious threat to our longtime welfare made its appearance. Usually meaning well, members began breaking their anonymity all over the place. Sometimes they wanted to use the A.A. name to advertise and help other causes. Others just wanted their names and pictures in the papers. Being photographed with the governor would really help A.A., they thought. (I'd earlier been guilty of this, too.) But at last we saw the appalling risk to A.A. if all our power-drivers got loose at the public-media level. Already scores of them were doing it.

So our General Service Office got to work. We wrote remonstrances, kind ones, of course, to every breaker.

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\*Now in the pamphlet "Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W."

We even sent letters to nearly all press and radio outlets, explaining why A.A.'s shouldn't break their anonymity in the media. Nor, we added, did A.A. solicit money—we paid our own bills.

In a few years the public anonymity-breakers were squeezed down to a handful—thus another valuable G.S.O. service had gone into action.

### ***G.S.O. Services Expand***

To maintain all these ever-lengthening service lifelines, the office had to go on expanding. G.S.O. moved to 44th Street. [Later locations were 305 East 45th Street, 468 Park Avenue South and in 1992, 475 Riverside Drive. The staff is made up of A.A. members; nonalcoholics handle bookkeeping, stenography, filing, records, and shipping, and managers of these departments are also non-A.A.s.]

Our present array of services may look like big business to some. But when we think of the size and reach of A.A. today, that isn't true at all. In 1945, for example, we had one paid worker to every 98 groups; in 1955, one paid worker to every 230 groups. [In 2002, with services still further expanded, one paid G.S.O. worker serves approximately 667 groups.] It therefore seems sure that we shall never be burdened with a bureaucratic and expensive service setup.

No description of our world services would be complete without full acknowledgment of all that has been contributed by our nonalcoholic trustees. Over the years they have given an incredible amount of time and effort; theirs has been a true labor of love. Some of them, like Jack Alexander, Fulton Oursler, Leonard Harrison, and Bernard Smith, have given much in their fields of literature, social service, finance and law. Their example is being followed by more recent nonalcoholic trustees.

As I pointed out earlier, in the 1940's our headquarters was constantly overhung by one great threat to its future existence: Doctor Bob and I and our Board of Trustees had the entire responsibility for the conduct of A.A.'s services.

In the years leading up to 1950 and 1951, we began to debate the desirability of some sort of advisory board of A.A.'s. Or maybe we needed a conference of larger numbers, elected by A.A. itself, people who would inspect the headquarters yearly, a body to whom the trustees could become responsible, a guiding conscience of our whole world effort.

But the objections to this were persistent and nothing happened for several years. Such a venture, it was said, would be expensive. Worse still, it might plunge A.A. into disruptive political activity when conference delegates were elected.

Then Doctor Bob fell ill, mortally ill. Finally, in 1950, spurred on by the relentless logic of the situation, the trustees authorized Doctor Bob and me to devise the plan with which this booklet deals. It was a plan for a General Service Conference of A.A., a plan by which our Society could assume full and permanent responsibility for the conduct of its most vital affairs.

### ***Birth of the Conference***

It was one thing to say that we ought to have a General Service Conference, but it was quite another to devise a plan which would bring it into successful existence. The cost of holding one was easily dismissed, but how on earth were we going to cut down destructive politics, with all its usual struggles for prestige and vainglory? How many delegates would be required and from where should they come? Arrived at New York, how could they be related to the Board of Trustees? What would be their actual powers and duties?

With these several weighty considerations in mind, and with some misgivings, I commenced work on a draft of a plan, much assisted by Helen B., an A.A. staff member.

Though the Conference might be later enlarged to include the whole world, we felt that the first delegates should come from the U.S. and Canada only. Each state and province might be allowed one delegate. Those containing heavy A.A. populations could have additional delegates. To give the Conference continuity, delegates could be divided into panels. An odd-numbered panel (Panel One), elected for two years, would be invited for 1951, the first year. An even-numbered panel (Panel Two), elected for two years, would be seated in 1952. Thereafter, one panel would be elected and one would be retired yearly. This would cause the Conference to rotate, while maintaining some continuity.

But how could we pull the inevitable election pressure down? To accomplish this, it was provided that a delegate must receive a two-thirds vote for election. If a delegate got a majority of this size, nobody could kick much. But if he or she didn't, and the election was close, what then? Well, perhaps the names of the two highest in the running, or the three officers of the com-



mittee, or even the whole committee could be put in a hat. One name would be drawn. The winner of this painless lottery would become the delegate.

But when these delegates met in conference, what would they do? We thought they would want to have real authority. So, in the charter drawn for the Conference itself, it was provided that the delegates could issue flat directions to the trustees on a two-thirds vote. And even a simple majority vote would constitute a mighty strong suggestion.

### ***Delegates Encouraged to Question***

The first Conference was set for April, 1951. In came the delegates. They looked over our offices, cellar to garret, got acquainted with the whole staff, shook hands with the trustees. That evening, we gave them a briefing session, under the name of "What's on your mind?" We answered scores of questions of all kinds. The delegates began to feel at home and reassured. They inspected our finances with a microscope. After they had listened to reports from the Board of Trustees and from all the services, there was warm but cordial debate on many a question of policy. Trustees submitted several of their own serious problems for the opinion of the Conference.

So went session after session, morning, afternoon, and evening. The delegates handled several tough puzzles about which we at G.S.O. were in doubt, sometimes giving advice contrary to our own conclusions. In nearly every instance, we saw that they were right. Then and there they proved, as never before, that A.A.'s Tradition Two was correct. The group conscience could safely act as the sole authority and sure guide for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Nobody present will ever forget that final session of the first Conference. We knew that the impossible had happened, that A.A. could never break down in the middle, that Alcoholics Anonymous was at last safe from any storm the future might bring. And, as delegates returned home, they carried this same conviction with them.

Realizing our need for funds and better literature circulation, some did place a little too much emphasis on this necessity; others were a little discouraged, wondering why fellow members in their areas did not take fire as they had. They forgot that they themselves had been eyewitnesses to the Conference and that their brother alcoholics had not. But, both here and at home, they made an impression much greater than they knew.

In the midst of this exciting turn of affairs, the Conference agreed that the Alcoholic Foundation ought to be renamed the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, and this was done. The word “Foundation” stood for charity, paternalism and maybe big money. A.A. would have none of these; from here out we could assume full responsibility and pay our expenses ourselves.

As I watched all this grow, I became entirely sure that Alcoholics Anonymous was at last safe—even from me.



**I am responsible. . .**

When anyone, anywhere,  
reaches out for help, I want  
the hand of A.A. always to be there.  
And for that: I am responsible.

**This is A.A. General Service  
Conference-approved literature**

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