

# Our Great Responsibility

## The Guidance of AA's World Affairs

*An endorsement of the Trustees' Program for the  
reshaping of the General Service Board, AA's  
chief agency for World Services*

by **Bill W.**

Dear Members:

Speaking on behalf of AA's Board of Trustees, our devoted friend and Chairman, Dr. Jack Norris, has called upon us to face a far-reaching responsibility. Future AA historians will no doubt record this occasion as a major turning point in the unfolding of our well-loved Fellowship.

This is because we are now to reconsider, and perhaps to recast, the whole nature and composition of AA's future world leadership. As we meditate upon this long unresolved problem, it would be well to recall that in the affairs of new societies and of nations, the determination of their ultimate leadership has ever

been a matter of crucial importance. This is the teaching of all human history.

Dr. Jack has specifically requested us of Alcoholics Anonymous — at the level of our Board of Trustees — to assume the primary role in the conduct of AA's world affairs. He has presented a detailed program for achieving this, a plan almost unanimously recommended by his fellow Trustees. Should we adopt this new concept in 1966, the chief responsibility for the guidance of our world affairs would then be shifted from the nonalcoholics of our present Board to the alcoholic Trustees of the new Board.

Our recast Board would then be composed of 14 AA Trustees and 7 nonalcoholic Trustees. Seven of the AA members would be chosen from suitable areas of the U.S. and Canada on the basis of their AA leadership qualifications. The remaining 7 AAs would be selected on the basis of their several high standards of business, professional and administrative skills. This would add up to a balanced board of 21 members, in which the AAs would function in a majority of 2 to 1. That would compare with our present Board of 10 nonalcoholics and 9 AAs. The chief posts of the new Board would be open to its AA members at any time such a change might be desirable. For practical reasons alone, the improved balance between the three classes of Trustees should commend itself to us all.

However, the Trustees' Plan, as outlined by Dr. Jack, has far greater implications than mere practicality: it carries deep spiritual values, it is a call to the highest of AA's responsibilities. In effect, it is also a declaration that AA has now evolved to such a point of stability and competence that it should no longer need to function under what has been, since 1938, the symbol of protective custody by nonalcoholic friends. As you know, the present structure was created long ago — in a time when AA had but three Groups and only 40 members.

It is worth pausing here to recall why our General Service Board was originally so constituted. For us of AA, the year 1938 was one of anguished uncertainty. There was no proof that alcoholics could stay sober indefinitely. Nor was there convincing evidence that we had the emotional stability to look after ourselves, even though sober. Besides, we had no public standing; people did not even know that we existed. Then, too, how many distant AA Groups would think of sending their money contributions to a board of trustees composed wholly of New York alcoholics? This was the climate of fear and indecision that darkly overcast us in that early time.

Nevertheless, it had already become clear that our infant society would have to head up somewhere. At the top of our growing pyramid



of membership, there would need to be erected a beacon light whose illumination might carry AA's message to those who still suffered from alcoholism. Lest one day its radiance be snuffed out by drinking relapses and irresponsibility, we felt sure that we dare not tend this lighthouse all by ourselves.

Some kind of certain protection we must have — but what protection? The answer that we proposed in 1938 is now history. We requested carefully chosen nonalcoholic friends to become a majority of our projected Trusteeship, and we agreed to make this status legal. We further stipulated that, traditionally, there should always be a nonalcoholic Chairman and likewise a nonalcoholic Treasurer. Frankly admitting that AA would absolutely have to have such a protectorate, we som-

berly estimated that, should all the AA Trustees get drunk, our Board could nevertheless continue to function by reason of its nonalcoholic guardianship!

Happily, we can now smile at all these excessive fears and elaborate precautions. During the past 27 years, only two AA Trustees have been waylaid by alcohol. Meanwhile, our message has been carried worldwide, and most effectively indeed. It is probably no exaggeration to estimate that one-half of our present membership, and much of our remarkable unity has been due, in large measure, to the efforts of AA world servants, both on the Board of Trustees, and in the General Service Office.

Of course we have sometimes wit-



nessed emotional storms, but none more serious than those which afflict most other societies. In every single instance these disturbances have been successfully overcome by the immense spirit of dedication that has always characterized every level of our worldwide effort. The record speaks for itself. Today we know that we need not fear alcoholism, nor excessive emotional instability.

Next, let us inquire into what has been the value of our nonalcoholic Trustees over all these years. Without hesitation, I can tell you that their value has been quite beyond reckoning. Only God could add their score. Therefore I deeply hope that a sizable contingent of these friends will continue to remain with us, just as our new plan provides.

In the days when AA was un-

known, it was the nonalcoholic Trustees who held up our hands before the general public. They supplied us with ideas that are now a part of the working structures of our headquarters. They voluntarily spent hours on end, working side by side with us and among the grubbier details. They gave freely of their professional and financial wisdom. Now and then they helpfully mediated our difficulties.

In the early years especially, their very presence on our Board was quite able to command full confidence and the respect of many far-away Groups. Meanwhile, they assured the world around us of AA's worth. These are the unusual services which indeed they still render. Then, too, these are the men who stood fast during that exciting but perilous time between 1940 and

1950 when AA's unity and its collective responsibility were put to the acid test — a time our Twelve Traditions were being forged out of the lessons of that experience.

Having myself been a constant resident of AA's house of world service for over a quarter of a century, no one could better understand what these devoted friends have meant to us. To gratefully set my testimony of their magnificent contributions on the record in this article is something for the deepest and most enduring of satisfactions. Nor could any expression of our gratitude be complete unless I were to tell you of the indispensable contribution that was once made to AA's welfare by a nonalcoholic friend and Trustee. I write of a man that many of you know — our one-time Chairman, Mr. Bernard Smith. During the most serious crisis that this Fellowship has ever experienced, it was Bern who persuaded us to meet and to shoulder our clear and rightful obligations.

As individuals, it must be confessed that we AAs have never been over-anxious to meet heavy responsibilities. All of us were at first driven to AA under the lash of alcohol. Arriving in the midst of the new-found life, we were soon confronted with the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. More often than not, we proceeded to adopt these principles in a rather piecemeal fashion. However, as



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inevitably time went by, the quality of our conformity began to improve. We commenced to practice AA principles because we knew them to be right for us, even though many were still difficult. Nonetheless, it was a very long time before many of us could come to the point where we would accept our heavier obligations with that full and joyful willingness which finally grants to us a consistent spiritual effectiveness.

It is also observable that, like other people, we AAs are apt to resist any proposal for great change, especially when all seems to go well. Often enough, these reluctancies have been based upon our fears. But sometimes they have represented a genuine prudence. This latter quality of conservatism has occasionally prevented ill-considered or hasty decisions upon important matters.

What has been true of us as individuals has necessarily been true of AA as a whole. I can vividly remember the heavy opposition to the creation of our world trusteeship in 1938, to the publication of our text book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939 and I still tremble when I recall the truly fierce resistance that arose when, in 1946, the General Service Conference of Alcoholics

Anonymous was first projected. In those times it was seriously believed by a majority of AAs that the temptations and risks of such complex ventures as these would be far too much for us. However, we can now thank God that we finally did face and accept those vital and clear-cut responsibilities.

Nevertheless we found on each of these occasions that we had to be strongly persuaded of the absolute need for change. There had to be manifest a solid core of constructive and convincing personal leadership.

This is exactly what our remarkable friend, Bern Smith, gave to us when, in 1950, after years of great heat but little light, we had failed to arrive at a decision to form AA's General Service Conference. It was his personal leadership that saved the day.

Let me now background this statement. By 1946, certain facts of AA life were becoming visible. Our trusteeship — then called The Alcoholic Foundation — was becoming more and more isolated as our Groups fanned out over the globe. Indeed, the only linkage between our Board and all these thousands of members consisted of a few tireless AA gals at the General Service

Office, Dr. Bob and myself. The Trustees themselves were virtually unknown. Dr. Bob had fallen ill, perhaps fatally. Our linkage was perishable and far too thin. Hence some of us felt it imperative that our Board of Trustees should be directly related without delay to AA as a whole.

There was still another reason: a majority of our Groups had already declared that they would no longer live under the protection and management of their local founders and old-timers — no matter how well-loved these were. For better or worse, our Groups were taking the decision to look after themselves.

This was the AA revolution which led to the writing of Tradition Two, whose principles of AA function provide that the group conscience shall be the final authority for all active services and that trusted servants named by the Groups shall act in their behalf.

Certainly our long isolated Board members *were* trusted servants. But it was nonetheless true that these Trustees had no direct connection to the group conscience of our Society, nor were they directly accountable



to it. It was therefore becoming evident that we here at New York were still operating as a protectorate, something that had by then become obsolete and quiet inconsistent with the provisions and spirit of AA's second Tradition.

Consequently it was proposed to assemble a general service conference of delegates who could squarely meet these deficiencies. As news of this project got into circulation, resistance began to mount. The more the conference was urged, the more the opposition dug in. Many AAs were deeply frightened. They imagined themselves engulfed in a wave of prestige-seeking, shabby politics, financial troubles and all the rest of it. Under such conditions, many good members were quite unable to see the urgent need for radical change. Observing their protests, our Board naturally concluded that AAs most emphatically did not want a general service conference. I'm afraid, too, that the growing impasse was made still worse by my incessant bull-dozing of the conference issue.

Then Bern Smith came upon the scene. With matchless diplomacy and tact he began to point out that the actual risk of the conference venture was, in his belief, far less than the *risk of doing nothing at all* — a policy which he thought would, in the future, result in a collapse, or certainly a grievous impairment of AA

at its very heart of service. He deeply felt that we must not risk such a debacle at our headquarters, a calamity from which we might never recover.

He also continued to remind us that *self-direction was the very first responsibility* of every democratic society, such as ours had, in Tradition Two, said it was. As we know, these views of Bern's were finally accepted, and I shall never forget that wonderful day in his office when the Trustees' Committee on Structures recommended immediate creation of the General Service Conference of AA. To our friend Bern we therefore owe it that we have our Annual Conference.

Certainly his story has a deep and clear relevance to this all-important matter of AA's future leadership; the question that is again before us and one which has been ten years under debate.

It is ever so evident that Dr. Jack has been performing for us a similar service of unique importance. To him and to his fellow Trustees, we therefore owe a similar tribute. It is greatly due to Dr. Jack's wise and patient leadership in this time of change that we have the Trustees' Plan before us at this time — a plan, which, if adopted, would mark the last basic step in the evolution of AA's world service structure.

Most assuredly, I hardly need say that I *do* endorse the Trustees' Plan; its unfoldment in the 1965 Conference was one of the most inspiring

and heartwarming events of my entire AA life.

Finally, let us reflect together upon the high spiritual content of this all-important plan.

As we know, all AA progress can be reckoned in terms of just two words: humility and responsibility. Our whole spiritual development can be accurately measured by our degree of adherence to these magnificent standards. Ever deepening humility, accompanied by an ever greater willingness to accept and to act upon clear-cut obligations — these are truly our touchstones for all growth in the life of the spirit. They hold up to us the very essence of right being and right doing. It is by them that we are enabled to find and to do God's will.

Let us, therefore consider the spiritual gifts which our friends have today offered for AA's future welfare. They have offered to reduce their numbers by three. Being still a board majority, and still holding its chief posts, our nonalcoholics have all these years been cast in the role of guardianship, a responsibility that they have never been called upon to meet. Therefore this old-time symbol of protection has long since become meaningless. Recognizing this,

the new Trustees' Plan provides that our friends would, in the future, act in a minority, thus becoming our associates. In making this humble offer, they have called upon us to assume the highest of responsibilities — the guidance, under God, of our own life as a fellowship.

If this, then, is their demonstration of humility, what is going to be our demonstration of responsibility? As to a family just coming of age, they have in substance told us, "The world of the future stretches before you, and you are well prepared. Go out into it, fearing nothing. Our faith in you is confident and strong. As you move onward toward your destiny, may you always remember that God in His wisdom has granted you three precious Graces: freedom from a deadly affliction; a life experience that enables you to carry that priceless freedom to others, and a vision, ever widening, of God's reality and of His Love."

May we of Alcoholics Anonymous remain ever worthy of these three gifts of Grace and of the supreme responsibilities that are now ours, for so long as a bountiful God may wish AA to endure.

