

AA's General Service Conference

*Bern Smith saw it as providing
"a permanent haven" for all the alcoholics
yet to come*

MY ATTENDANCE at the AA International Convention in Miami Beach last July gave me an unusual opportunity to see the living growth of AA and also to see a remarkable man. What a privilege it was to hear a major address on "Unity and Continuity," the night of July 4, by Bernard B. Smith. In August, he died of a heart attack and was buried exactly one month after his talk at the Convention. When I heard of our loss, I was moved to tears.

This nonalcoholic attorney was a staunch advocate of the AA General Service Conference and had been its chairman from 1951 to 1956. At the time of the 1970 Convention, he was first vice-chairman of the General Service Board.

The main thrust of his Convention talk went to the necessity of preserving and continuing the unity of AA. He reminded future AA leaders that AA has an unlimited time to carry on its program, and that they should therefore move

only with a near-unanimous vote, making every effort to placate sincerely, realistically dissident minorities. Smith maintained — and who can doubt his wisdom? — that, because of the volatile character of the members and the nature of the organization, delay, postponement, and compromise should be used until the group conscience can act and an "adequate" majority (very large) is obtained.

Talking about the Conference, which expresses the group conscience of the Fellowship as a whole, Smith repeated part of his own recommendation, in 1955, that the Conference be made permanent: "We may not need a General Service Conference to insure our own recovery. We do need it... to provide, in keeping with our Twelfth Step, a permanent haven for all alcoholics who, in the ages ahead, can find in AA that rebirth which brought us back to life. We need it because we, more than all others, are conscious of the devastating effect of the human urge for

power and prestige which we must insure can never invade AA.

"We need it to insure AA against government while insulating it against anarchy; we need it so that Alcoholics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous alone may be the ultimate depository of its Twelve Steps, its Twelve Traditions, and all of its services. We need it to insure that changes within AA come only as a response to the needs and wants of all of AA, and not of any few. We need it to insure that the doors of the halls of AA never have locks on them, so that for all time all people who have an alcoholic problem may enter these halls unasked, and feel welcome. We need it to insure that Alcoholics Anonymous never

ask of anyone who needs us what his or her race is, what his or her creed is, what his or her economic or social position is."

We in AA are fortunate to have had such a great friend as Bern Smith through our rough early years. As he stressed the need for and the importance of continuity and unity, I recalled what I had read about Doctor Bob and the more serene of our first leaders. In listening to Smith, I got the taste and flavor of the early times. Though Bill W.'s indisposition, at the onset of his final illness, limited him to one Convention appearance, I drew from Bern Smith's talk the feeling of a historical continuum for AA.

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