



Fragments of AA History

AA's First General Service Conference: A Retrospective

“Quietly, effectively, with neither fuss nor fanfare — history was impressively written in New York City during the four days of the First General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous, April 19 through 22, 1951.

“Thirty-seven delegates from half the states and provinces of the United States and Canada joined in deliberations and worked out advisory plans of action, in harmonious collaboration with the trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation and with staff members of the General Service Office and the AA Grapevine. This was the First Panel of the Conference, strictly a geographical division, to be joined in 1952 by a similar gathering of the Second Panel of the Conference, comprising representatives of the remaining states and provinces....

“On behalf of AA members in their respective territories, these delegates met primarily to decide whether to accept the Third Legacy handed

down from AA's founders, Bill W. and the late Dr. Bob.”

—*Grapevine*, June 1951

The historic four days began the first evening with a reception and informal discussion of group problems. The next morning, delegates were up and out for a visit to the offices of GSO and the Grapevine; then lunch, followed by a welcome from Bernard B. Smith, nonalcoholic chairman of the Alcoholic Foundation, and an historical overview by Bill W. of the Foundation and the scope of services rendered.

The *Conference Report* for 1951 quotes Bill's description of the assembly as “a huge rotating committee, in whose hands has been placed responsibility for AA's worldwide services — assistance to the groups, public relations, preparation and distribution of literature, foreign propagation and other activities.” And the June Grapevine that year comment-

ed: “Since it was new in concept and since it represented no more than half the territory covered by AA, it is manifest that the First Panel of the Conference could not presume to express the opinions of AA as a whole. This was a beginning. It will take several years, perhaps, for the full Conference to take final form and assume the responsibilities it proposes to bear. The delegates did, however, give unanimous opinion on vital phases of the overall AA program.

“Detailed operation of the headquarters operations were explained to the delegates, who learned that the total 1950 income of The Foundation was \$114,200, with total expenses of \$134,200, showing a loss for the twelve-month period of \$20,000.”

Every Conference is different, yet in matters of AA business, those four days in 1951 were remarkably like a full week's Conference in the 1990s.

Delegates talked about money. They approved the financial report, and expressed “unanimous surprise” at the amount of service accomplished with so little money — five years earlier, GSO employed one paid worker for every 3,000 AA members, and in 1951 it was one paid worker for every 6,000 members. They agreed that quarterly financial reports on the Foundation should be presented. They also recommended approval of the 15% royalty on the AA Book to be paid to Bill W. or to Lois, for their lifetime.

All present agreed on the need for group contributions, suggesting a

minimum of \$2 per year per member. They felt strongly about the importance of providing accurate information to the groups, and recommended a visual presentation of general services rendered, with slides to be made available to every state committee.

Unanimously, the delegates voted that the nonalcoholic trustees remain in office (a question that “arose through the modest proposal of some of AA's nonalcoholic trustees that they now step aside”), and recommended the establishment of a fixed term of office for alcoholic trustees.

They talked about literature, and agreed unanimously “that in future years AA's textbook literature should have Conference approval.” The *Conference Report* clarifies that action with a comment: “adoption of the suggestion would not preclude the continued issuance of various printed documents by non-Foundation sources. No desire to review; edit or censor non-Foundation material is implied. The objective is to provide ... a means of *distinguishing* Foundation literature from that issued locally or by non-AA interests.”

All these as well as other Conference Actions would have a familiar ring for present-day delegates. The question of AA family groups was referred back to local groups for further discussion before the 1952 Conference. And it was suggested that the Grapevine could institute a form of “mild promotion,” and if finances did not improve, should raise the price.

Looking back from the vantage point of 1991, a Panel One delegate, George S. from Canada, recently shared his recollections: "There was something very special about that first Conference — the first big step in AA's overall growth and belonging to itself. I remember the intensity of our feelings; you could cut it with a knife." For many new delegates, the biggest thrill was meeting and talking with Bill W., and George recalls sitting with Bill in a hotel room, listening to him talk about AA's future, in the familiar pose with his feet up on a chair. He remembers, too, the get-togethers in restaurants, hotel rooms, coffeeshops, and the group of delegates and staff people who rode up and down Fifth Avenue in an open phaeton, "like a bunch of drunken kids."

The June Grapevine that year devoted several pages to "Delegate Impressions." From California: "I know how frightening it is to us to think of Bill ever leaving; I know also he can never be replaced. But Bill believes and I gather that 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. I am convinced, now that the first Conference has ended, that this will come to pass."

From Florida: "What impressed me most was the manner in which the problems confronting AA as a whole were presented, and the staggering amount of work undertaken by the

General Headquarters staff in preparing this material for easy assimilation by the delegates."

From Massachusetts: "The informal caucus of Thursday night was a gem of an idea. A myriad of regional problems were thrown into the pot, sorted overnight, and returned to us in orderly fashion for discussion at subsequent formal sessions. I think now that we understand better the meaning of AA services."

From Canada: "What greatly impressed me was the unanimity among all the delegates. [They were] unanimous in enthusiastically accepting the responsibility of 'taking over,' but only... with the general understanding that the Conference is not a government."

In his July 1955 Grapevine article, "What Is the Third Legacy?", Bill W. said of that first Conference: "The delegates handled several thought puzzlers about which we at Headquarters 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 AA'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 AA could never break down in the middle, that Alcoholics Anonymous was at last safe from any storm the future might bring."