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## a past trustee looks back over a term on the General Service Board

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The work of AA's General Service Conference concludes on a Friday afternoon. On Saturday morning, the Conference members meet for a farewell brunch, exhausted and emotional yet relaxed and happy as they look back on the trials and accomplishments of the Conference week. The agenda consists of farewell talks by rotating trustee members of the General Service Board. At my first such brunch as a new trustee, a rotating trustee described the job as "no big deal," a comment that puzzled me for years. It seemed to me that certainly the tremendous amount of activity required, the decisions that had to be made, the size and importance of the Fellowship we tried to serve did, indeed, amount to a big deal.

As time passed, however, I came to understand what was meant. The process in which we were participating is a big deal. We who do it are not. We are only anonymous, ultimately

nameless and faceless members of a vast Fellowship who have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to serve AA for a time in a particular way. In that sense, service as a trustee differs not a whit from every opportunity that AA has given me to practice my own Twelfth Step. Whether as a coffee maker, group secretary, GSR, intergroup rep, hospital & institutions coordinator, sponsor, Twelfth-stepper, any chance that I've had to try to help the suffering alcoholic has been a big deal. At the same time, I have to understand that in doing it I am no big deal.

Alcoholics Anonymous is very good at driving home this sort of message. At one point during my term I attended an out-of-town meeting at my friend Jerry's home group. As we walked into the room, Jerry, then a Conference delegate, introduced me to a young man saying "Meet G—, he's a trustee," and promptly disappeared into the crowd. The young

member looked at me quizzically for a moment and said, "Gee, glad you could come. It was nice they let you out for the meeting. They treating you okay in there?"

A Grapevine article does not allow space for much of a description of the General Service Board, what it does and how it does it. All of this can be found in our *AA Service Manual* and Bill's *Twelve Concepts for World Service*. In a very real sense, the Board is at the bottom of the heap in our service structure. Put simply, AA groups, who have the ultimate responsibility for our world services, realizing that they cannot exercise that authority directly, have delegated that responsibility to AA's General Service Conference. In turn, the Conference understands that with approximately 130 members meeting once a year, it must delegate essential administrative authority for world services to the General Service Board. Decisions respecting important matters of world service policy and finance are made by the Conference. The Board's job is to implement these decisions and deal with issues of management and policy that may arise during the year.

This sounds fairly simple. How is it done? Who are the Board's trustees? How do they get there? How do they operate?

We now have twenty-one trustees. Seven are nonalcoholic (in AA's early years, the majority were nonalcoholic), chosen for their professional backgrounds, interest in AA and strength of character. Of the four-

teen alcoholic trustees, four (two each) are nominated by the AA World Services (AAWS) and Grapevine corporate boards for approval by the Conference. Ten are elected by Conference members, eight from "regions" in the U.S. and Canada, and two "at large," one each from the U.S. and Canada. The trustees attend three, three-to-four day "Board weekends" a year, as well as attending AA's week-long General Service Conference as voting members. Each trustee serves on three to four Board committees where most of the nuts-and-bolts work is done. The committees report fully and bring critical issues to the full Board, and when appropriate, to the Conference.

In addition to the Conference and Board weekends, trustees may also serve on the operating corporate boards (AAWS and the Grapevine), may attend committee meetings between Board weekends, participate in Regional Forums, and in the case of regional trustees, attend assemblies and other service activities in their region throughout the year. I served as a regional trustee for a large and active region, was an AAWS director — and missed a lot of meetings of my home group.

It is understood that while the Conference and the Board can direct the operations at GSO and the Grapevine, they have no authority over AA groups and members. At best they can make suggestions. When I was a regional trustee, many AA members involved in service came to me for

advice regarding group or area problems. My approach was somewhat similar to what I try to do as a sponsor — to not so much give answers as to try to help people use AA principles to find the answer themselves.

There were a few basic principles by which our Board was guided that still seem to me to be critical. While the Board is charged with carrying out policy set by the Conference, it may also take action on its own initiative. Lest this cause concern that the Board can disregard the wishes of the Conference and the groups, it was our unqualified policy not to do anything that was new and important, or to do anything important much differently than we had been doing, without consulting the Conference. We strove to keep the process as open as possible. No committee meetings were closed. "Executive sessions" at any level were virtually unheard of. We found no reason to maintain secrecy with respect to our conduct of

AA service affairs. We tried to answer candidly questions that any AA member might have as to what we were doing. We were constantly mindful of Conference Warrant III, that "none of the Conference members shall be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others," and the Fourth Concept dealing with the "Right of Participation." The input of staff members, nontrustee corporate directors, delegates, in fact any AA member, was welcomed and carefully considered as part of our group conscience. We did not think of the Board as a closed corporation with final and unrestricted authority. There was a real sense of "family" between Board members and the GSO and Grapevine staff.

At first all this seemed strange to me, as I served on corporate boards in "civilian" life wherein the board had virtually unlimited power. It was necessary for me to understand that this could not work in AA. In AA we

have to be more democratic and to carefully maintain a balance of power. Why is this so? Perhaps because AA members have such an enormous vested interest in the welfare of AA in terms of their own life, and, as Bill put it, "We of AA will not tolerate absolute human authority in any form."

Like everything else I have done in AA for twenty-nine active and very happy years, service on the Board was a learning experience. Among my teachers were the nonalcoholic trustees, and one powerful example for me personally was Dr. Milton Maxwell, then chairperson of the Board. Milton helped me understand that the entire AA program rests on a spiritual base, and that we could not forget AA recovery principles simply because we were dealing with AA business.

The *AA Service Manual* lists "resoluteness" as a primary quality to be desired in a trustee. There were times when my resoluteness was tested and

I found it difficult and painful to take a stand that seemed to be against the flow. The Board members at the time were very strong men and women with years of dedicated service to AA before they reached the Board. At the end of one of my first Board weekends, the Al-Anon wife of one of our AA trustees asked me if I was tired. When I admitted to exhaustion, she said, "Well, you have spent several days with a group of very *vivid* personalities." This struck me as putting it mildly. I believe that whatever "resoluteness" I was able to find came from the strength that I received from the AAs involved in service in my region — the acceptance and trust that I felt visiting their assemblies and service events. I knew that any discomfort I might feel as a result of taking an unpopular stand was a small price to pay compared to the remorse I would feel for a lifetime if I broke faith with fellow AAs by not speaking up for the things I believed.



Over the years I've become convinced that what is most important is the process, both at the level of the Conference and the Board. The process requires that we really listen to each other, that we encourage rather than intimidate those with minority views, that we not think in terms of personally winning or losing, in short, that we collectively seek knowledge of God's will for us in discharging our sole responsibility of helping AA carry its message. When we did this, the process worked. When we made mistakes we were able to correct them. But I firmly believe that if the process isn't working, eventually mistakes will be made that we will not know how to correct.

During those years the process worked. There were instances when a deeply divided Conference, with members holding strongly felt and seemingly irreconcilable positions, after hours of heated discussions would suddenly seem to come together and collectively recognize what must be done in the interest of AA's common welfare. Such moments were unforgettable — truly magical. There were times when this happened, the Conference would adjourn, and I found myself so moved I would have to remain seated in the room until I could regain composure.

In the course of my four years, I came to cherish the friendship of each and every one of the "vivid" personalities with whom I served. Although we differed greatly in background and perspective, each brought unique qualities to add to the whole. The memories aren't limited to our accomplishments or disputes. We related to each other as drunks and tried not to take ourselves too seriously. There was a lot of laughter. At one point during a trustees' dinner meeting there was some dissension between the regional and general service trustees. Some of the regionals, as old-timers will sometimes do, started to pull their length of sobriety and closeness to the grass roots. After a while one of the general service trustees said, "Well, it's true I haven't been to a lot of meetings outside of Manhattan, and we haven't been sober as long as some of you, but I got up awfully early this morning." This

gentle reminder that we are all only sober a day at a time dispelled all the tension. We roared with laughter and left the room arm in arm. On one occasion a regional trustee wanted to go to a Las Vegas style nightclub. Several of us wound up on stage dancing with the chorus — and sober, at that. On Friday night following an arduous Conference week, three of us went to a Manhattan meeting, and found ourselves back on the street before the meeting started. It was a closed meeting and one trustee was nonalcoholic. The group conscience had decided not to bend their rules, no matter who we were or what we had been doing. Not to be denied, we found another (open) meeting in the neighborhood.

It has been almost a decade since I rotated. My AA life is just as rich, but in a quieter, closer-to-home way. Certainly I'm more regular at my home group and available to a sponsee. Although I deeply appreciated the attention and respect a trustee receives from AAs involved in service, I was also grateful to find after rotation that I had not become addicted to it.

The most powerful and enduring memory carried with me from those busy and dramatic years is my profound feelings of affection and respect for all the AAs involved in service whom I knew. The depth and strength of commitment to AA on the part of GSRs, DCMs, area officers and delegates, GSO staff, and trustees was in evidence everywhere I went, at district meetings and assemblies,

Regional Forums, Conferences and Board meetings. We AAs have always been able to relate to each other because of our common suffering as practicing alcoholics and our common effort to recover through the principles of our program. For me, there is simply some extra feeling for those AAs who express their gratitude through their commitment to serving AA.

During one Conference I was working with a couple of delegates on an issue that might have had considerable import for AA as a whole. At one point we paused and asked ourselves how much our alcoholic egos had to do with what we were doing. After talking for a while we decided that no matter what we did, none of us would go down in AA history. In terms of personalities, AA history ends with the death of Dr. Bob and Bill. Any result for which we might feel entitled to credit would simply be recorded as arising out of the group conscience of our General Service Conference structure. As personalities, we would be remembered only by each other, by those with whom we had agreed and with whom we had argued, with whom we had laughed and had wept, who had comforted us and we had comforted — in short, those with whom we were bonded, despite our differences, by our shared love for and willingness to serve the Fellowship to which each of us owed our life. Most surely, that has been enough for me.

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