

AROUND



Preserving Our Fellowship — Our Challenge

On Sunday, April 21, 1996, the Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous convened at the Crowne Plaza Manhattan Hotel in New York City. The 1996 Conference members included delegates from the ninety-two service areas, the members of the General Service Board of Trustees, the directors of the Grapevine Corporate Board, AA staff members of the General Service Office, and AA staff members of the Grapevine. The Conference was kicked off with a dinner and an open AA meeting on Sunday night. A highlight of the evening was the presentation of the fifteen-millionth copy of the Big Book to Ellie Norris, widow of Dr. Jack Norris. "Dr. Jack" served AA as a Class A (non-alcoholic) trustee for twenty-seven years.

The theme for this year's Conference was "Preserving Our Fellowship — Our Challenge." Alex P., delegate from B.C./Yukon, addressed this topic by focusing on "Preserving or Fellowship—Let it Begin With Me." At the conclusion of his talk, Alex said:

"Since I was in first grade, I've felt more at home sitting in the back row than I ever did up front. In fact, shortly after I came back to AA, I was attending a closed men's meeting and at the end someone pointed at me and said, 'It's your turn to chair the meeting next week.' I won't tell you what I thought but I never went back!

"Little did I know I would someday become delegate of our area. With all the responsibility that goes with the job, it's important for me to remember where I

came from and to give to my fellow members the same breathing room that I needed. I need to guard against the idea that I know it all or that I'm always right; we all have the right to be wrong and to make mistakes — and we all do just that. I need to remind myself that we're like pieces of coal — heaped together they can burn warmly and brightly, but push them to one side and they grow cold and black and no longer give light. I might be the only Big Book that someone may read, and if it is to begin with me, I must be the best example I can. There's no end to what I can do to help preserve what we have.

"At each meeting of my home group, we read the following: 'When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.' If enough of us truly believe this, I believe that AA can and will be preserved for future generations, and that it can begin with me."

The Committee System

For six days, Conference members exchanged ideas and information and gave presentations. The real work of the Conference is done in twelve committees which deliberate on important matters affecting the Fellowship or the service

structure. Beginning on Wednesday night and continuing through Friday, the committees give their reports to the general session of the entire Conference. If a committee makes a recommendation, and that recommendation receives a two-thirds vote from Conference members, it becomes an Advisory Action.

Pamphlet on the Grapevine

The Grapevine Committee made two recommendations to the Conference, one of which did not receive a two-thirds vote (that the Grapevine Corporate Board and staff utilize mailing lists similar to those used by the General Service Office to disseminate information about the Grapevine). The following recommendation, however, was passed as an Advisory Action: That a manuscript be developed for a pamphlet providing basic information on the AA Grapevine magazine and its place in Alcoholics Anonymous and be brought to the 1997 Conference for approval.

The idea for a Conference-approved pamphlet (as distinct from a piece published by the Grapevine itself) originated with the Grapevine Editorial Advisory Board. The purpose of the pamphlet is to let more people know about the Grapevine. Conference members speak-



ing in favor of the pamphlet said, "It will be a good service tool" and "A Conference-approved pamphlet can help dispel the misconceptions about the Grapevine — that it is somehow not 'AA literature.'" There's another practical reason: Conference-approved literature is sometimes available at meetings where there's no sign of the magazine; with this service piece, a newcomer looking over a rack of AA publications would have the chance to pick up a pamphlet on the Grapevine along with ones describing the General Service Office or sponsorship or AA and the Armed Services.

The Grapevine Committee considered several other issues about which it made no recommendations. 1) It discussed returning the "About Alcoholism" section (the "gray pages") to the Grapevine and decided no action was necessary. The committee saw no clear need or desire in the Fellowship for the section, stating that information from the field of alcoholism doesn't promote AA's primary purpose and is readily available elsewhere. 2) It looked at several suggestions for related materials and forwarded to the Grapevine Corporate Board two ideas for development: a third volume of the Best of the Grapevine and audiocassette tapes by and about young people in AA. The materials under consideration would be scheduled for possible production in 1998.

Guardian of AA

In the December 1950 issue of the Grapevine, co-founders Dr. Bob and Bill W. introduced the idea of the General



Service Conference to the Fellowship by asking the members of AA to "assume the guidance" of the general services of AA and "guard them well." The Conference charter describes the purpose of the Conference as "the guardian of world services and of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Conference shall be a service body only; never a government of Alcoholics Anonymous."

And so today, forty-six years later, the Second Tradition continues to inform the workings of the Conference. Guidance and guardianship are the principles behind it: the Conference is the means by which the Fellowship of AA takes responsibility for itself.

Some Conference 'Firsts'

Even though the theme of this year's gathering was "Preserving Our Fellowship — Our Challenge," there were a couple of bona fide "firsts." As a matter of general house-keeping, on the opening day of the Conference a vote was taken which made this the first ever no-smoking Conference. While smoking was not allowed



during the general sessions, a smoking room was made available and an effort was made to include "smoke breaks" at regular intervals throughout the Conference. However, since no Conference action is binding on the next Conference, whether to smoke during

general sessions or not is a decision which will be made fresh each year by the members of that year's Conference. The other notable "first" was the presence of Ben B., delegate from Area 92, Washington State East, the first new area admitted to the Conference since 1973. ~

Digest of Advisory Actions

Some significant Advisory Actions appear below in condensed form

Agenda — that the theme for the 1997 General Service Conference be "Spirituality—Our Foundation."

Correctional Facilities — that a one-page newsletter be published four times a year for AAs in prison; that a sample video be produced, encouraging more AAs to carry the message into correctional facilities and brought back to the 1997 Conference for review.

Finance — that the pamphlet, "Self-Support: Where Money and Spirituality Mix," be revised to include only two pie charts (which suggest ways groups can apportion contributions to intergroups, service areas, and the General Service Office).

International Conventions/Regional Forums — that the following cities be given equal consideration as a site for the International Convention: Atlanta, St. Louis, San Antonio, and Toronto.

Public Information — that the 1996 Membership Survey be conducted by area on a random basis as was done in the 1992 Membership Survey.

Treatment Facilities — that a soft-cover Treatment Facilities Handbook be developed; that a concise, streamlined version of the existing Treatment Facilities Workbook be produced; that the Treatment Facilities Newsletter be discontinued, as the expressed need appears to have diminished.