

# About AA

## A.A.'s Collective Conscience Looks to the Future

"A.A.'s Future—Our Responsibility" was the chosen theme of the 36th General Service Conference, the collective group conscience of the Fellowship. Delegates from 91 areas of the United States and Canada convened for the A.A. business meeting at the Roosevelt Hotel, New York City. They sought to clarify and improve ways in which A.A. as a whole carries its message of sobriety, and expressed a firm commitment to assure the future of A.A. by drawing on the experience and strength of its past.

Originally set up in 1950 by co-founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the Conference is the practical instrument by which A.A.s govern themselves. As a decision-making body, it seeks "substantial unanimity" in its voting procedures for any recommendations it makes. The Conference Charter, adopted in 1955, is not a legal document in the strictest sense; but it insures that changes within A.A. come only as a response to the needs and wants of all A.A. members, not of just a few. It is an informal agreement between the Fellowship as a whole and its trustees, setting forth the means by which Alcoholics Anonymous can give service worldwide.

### Kenneth H. Williams, M.D.

As Gordon Patrick, nonalcoholic chairperson of the General Service Board, opened the Conference, he announced that Dr. Kenneth H. Williams, Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, had died of a brain tumor only seven days before, at the age of 49.

In a memorable talk at the International Convention of A.A. in Denver in 1975, Dr. Williams said that he had seen a great many sick alcoholics in his internship at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, and during his residency at Yale-New Haven Hospital, but had never met a *recovered alcoholic* until he was taken to an A.A. meeting in the late 1960s. He was fascinated, and as a result, devoted much of his professional life to educating other physicians in alcoholism and the treatment of alcoholics. In 1979, he became a trustee of the General Service Board of A.A., where he served on most of the standing committees during his term. He was also a member of Al-Anon and, as the adult child of an alcoholic, contributed to the literature of that organization.

### Conference Highlights

Space unfortunately does not permit us to mention all the illuminating presentations given at the 1986 General Service Conference. Following are excerpts from four of them that, directly or indirectly, touch on areas integral to A.A.'s spirit

of cooperation with the professional community:

*The Future of A.A.* — In his keynote address, rotating Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee Jim Estelle stressed the importance of "repeating that part of our history which is stated so eloquently in the simplicity of our Twelfth Step." At the same time, he declared, "We can take risks, make changes and modify attitudes without compromising those truths which have served as the very foundation of our future for over 50 years."

The only requirement for A.A. membership, he reminded the assemblage, "is a desire to stop drinking. We did not demand any age, gender, race, language, economic level, political affiliation, occupation, educational achievement, character references or length of experience as a drunk." Then he issued a final caveat: "Our mission here is the future of A.A. There will be issues that may confound you momentarily in their seeming complexity. Let me suggest that if the issue is too complex to relate to the still-suffering alcoholic, it is an issue not worthy of much time or energy."

*Anonymity* — "The words powerful enough to describe the spiritual substance of anonymity all are used in our daily A.A. lives—love, sacrifice, honesty, service and the elusive ingredient necessary to practice these principles—humility." So wrote delegate Charles F., of Central Michigan, in a presentation delivered by another delegate in Charles' absence. "Anonymity as we perceive it in A.A. always has spiritual substance. It begins with protecting the trusting disclosure of a fellow member's identity. It has to do with the reverent, mutual confidentiality given to our moments and hours of sharing our experience, strength and hope as well as our weaknesses. . . . It is found in the anonymity abounding at every tier of the A.A. structure. From the individual member through the group, district, area and central office, this spiritual substance flows, uniting our society, pulling us together to serve a common cause: helping the still-suffering alcoholic."

*The Home Group* — "The home group has been called the heartbeat of the Fellowship," said delegate Richard B., of Western Missouri, "and I believe each of us needs one. When we took those first faltering steps to recovery, many of us would have stumbled and fallen once again if we had to make what was to be a miraculous change by ourselves. In my case, the first rays of hope came from those sometimes loving, sometimes cantankerous old geezers who sat around the table in my hometown group. A long time before I believed or even heard what they told me, I began thinking there might be a chance: If they could do it, so could I."

*Group Conscience of A.A.* — Bob P., senior advisor to the General Service Office, and recently retired after a decade as

general manager of the A.A. General Service Office, "If this Fellowship ever falters or fails," he told the Conference, "it will not be because of any outside cause. No, it will not be because of treatment centers or professionals in the field, or non-Conference-approved literature, or young people, or the dually-addicted, or even the druggies trying to come to our closed meetings. If we stick close to our Traditions and our Concepts and our Warranties—and if we keep an open mind and an open heart—we can deal with these and any other problems that we have. Or ever will have. If we ever falter and fail, it will be simply because of us."

Throughout A.A., Bob concluded, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as in an A.A. group, a bunch of sick people is transformed into a healing force that has electrified the world, and a bunch of society's losers becomes transformed into winners—so all of us here are more than just the sum of ourselves. We are transformed into the group conscience of A.A. as a whole. We also are the torchbearers for those who have gone before. Just as they passed the torch to us, so shall we pass it on to those yet to come."

### Conference Advisory Actions

On the last two days of the Conference, the entire assemblage considered recommendations of the various committees. From these discussions emerged a number of Conference Advisory Actions, or recommendations, that mirrored the collective conscience of A.A. in the U.S. and Canada, and may serve as basic guidelines for A.A. groups and individual members. Some of the recommendations, which also may hold special interest for professionals working in the field of alcoholism, are as follows:

- Contact sponsorship — that the trustees' Treatment Facilities Committee study ways to develop contact sponsorship for A.A.s to be in touch with prospective newcomers just leaving treatment facilities.
- Double trouble groups — that such groups, specifically for alcoholic persons who are diagnosed as having mental illness, such as schizophrenia and manic depression, not be listed in A.A. directories.
- Literature — that updated versions of the pamphlets "Too Young?"; "A.A. and the Armed Forces"; and "Memo to an Inmate Who May Be an Alcoholic" be completed . . . that the revised versions of "A.A. for the Woman" and "If You Are a Professional . . ." be published . . . that a survey be conducted to determine if a need exists for more literature in large type.
- Audiovisual material — that the focus of public service announcements be on alcoholism identification . . . that three new public service TV announcements be approved; that a film based on the pamphlet "It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell" be developed.

All projects still in progress will be submitted to the 1987 Conference for further consideration before they are released.

### Guidelines Widen Scope of Professional Exhibit

A.A. has used Professional Exhibits to carry its message to the professional community at their conferences and conventions since the mid 1950s. The first exhibit was shown at a

1956 meeting of the American Public Health Association.

Today A.A. uses six such exhibits that vary in size but not in usefulness. Each year they appear in approximately 25 professional conferences and conventions in the U.S. and Canada. In 1985 G.S.O. received roughly 1,600 requests for additional information about A.A. and 1,500 requests to receive this bulletin from professionals who visited the exhibit.

In 1973 a clarifying Advisory Action of the General Service Conference recommended that G.S.O. and members of the Fellowship "cooperate with agencies dealing with alcoholism"—welcoming referrals, being guided by applicable Traditions, and keeping in mind our primary purpose: the welfare of alcoholics and their recovery. The Conference further reaffirmed that the furnishing of information about A.A. to professional organizations and their membership is not in violation of the Traditions.

The trustees' Committee on Cooperation with the Professional Community developed guidelines for the use of the exhibit which were approved by the 1986 Conference. Included in the guidelines is a recommendation that G.S.O. explore the possibility of seeking invitations to exhibit at conferences and conventions of professionals outside the field of alcoholism where we've not exhibited before, and, where we perceive a need for an awareness and knowledge of A.A. The guidelines also set in place a procedure for an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the exhibit and for keeping local A.A. service groups informed of its appearance in their communities.

### A.A. Retrospective in the Works

Members and friends of A.A. who have turned to the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* as their main source of information about A.A. from 1935-1955, will be pleased to know that a companion volume is planned. Thanks to an Advisory Action of the 1986 General Service Conference, a definitive book about A.A. from the years 1955-1985 will be published by A.A. World Services, Inc. The author—a veteran A.A. who, in accordance with the Traditions, shall remain anonymous—says that the work will not follow a chronological order. Instead, it "will face outward," containing information of interest to professionals as well as to A.A. members. Most importantly, "it will put A.A. in the context of the world we live in today."

As yet untitled, the new, illustrated volume will begin with an introduction to the Fellowship as it was in 1955, the point at which *A.A. Comes of Age* ends. Like its predecessor, it will emphasize A.A. Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service—in the framework of a later time. Succeeding chapters will give an overview of the Fellowship's rise in the U.S. and Canada; and discuss A.A. programs in hospitals and treatment centers, correctional facilities, the Armed Forces, and business and industry, to name a few. Changes in the composition of A.A. (men, women, special groups) will be covered, along with intergroups and central offices; Regional Forums; the A.A. service structure, and much more.

The proposed work is scheduled for publication in 1988, assuming consensus of the 1987 General Service Conference.