

## 'Spirit of Sacrifice' Sets the Tone of the General Service Conference

As far back as 1951, when the first General Service Conference was launched on a "five-year trial period," co-founder Bill W. foresaw that while no one person can speak for A.A. officially, the Conference could "come close to being A.A.'s voice." As delegates from across the United States and Canada prepare for the 44th annual meeting of the Conference, to be held from April 17-23 at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza in New York City, that voice is stronger than ever.

The theme of this year's Conference is "Spirit of Sacrifice" and, like Conferences before it, calls for unsparring self-inventory. However, while last year's participants concentrated on examining the strengths and weaknesses of the Conference structure, the thrust of the 1994 meeting will be on spiritual inventory as evoked in the Twelve Traditions, which Bill W. saw as "a list of sacrifices which . . . we must make, individually and collectively, if A.A. itself is to stay alive and healthy."



Thus, the Conference members will be asking themselves and each other a lot of searching questions: In today's world, do we still uphold anonymity as the spiritual key to our way of life? Are we vigilant in maintaining a public-relations policy based on attraction rather than promotion? Are we holding our tongues when it comes to expressing opinions on outside issues and public controversies? Within our leadership, how are we abiding by the Rights of Decision and Participation of our members in service as outlined respectively in Concepts III and IV—rights that go to the heart of mutual trust, harmony and effective leadership at all levels of A.A.'s world affairs?



The list is long, the questions are myriad. At the core are two that reflect A.A.'s reason for being: How well are we carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers? What can we do better, and how? No matter how diverse the viewpoints, each individual, each committee and element of the Conference structure is closely linked through our primary purpose. When put together like the pieces of a puzzle, the sharings will form a true "group conscience"—one that offers a wide-angled picture of where Alcoholics Anonymous is right now and whether we are steering a sound and spiritual course into the 21st century.

Arriving at a group conscience in big matters or small is a process that can take a long time. This is because the minority, or dissenting, view of each person is considered essential to the unity, effectiveness and very survival of the Fellowship.

Oldtimer Kerry L., who served as a delegate from Nebraska in the mid-sixties, still remembers the thrill of the 1966 General Service Conference. For 11 years running, there had been a motion before the Conference to alter the majority ratio of nonalcoholic to A.A. trustees on the General Service Board. In 1938, when the board was set up, there were eight nonalcoholics and seven A.A.s—this because none of the alcoholics had more than three years' sobriety and they didn't trust themselves.

But now a large contingent of Conference participants, led by Bill W., felt that A.A. had accrued enough experience (and sobriety) to run its own affairs. At the same time, A.A. was growing by leaps and bounds; and so the resolution before the Conference called for increasing the total number of trustees from 15 to 21—

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seven nonalcoholics and 14 A.A.s.

Says Kerry: "My recollection of the restructuring brouhaha is vivid, primarily because of its importance to the future of A.A. On the opening day of the 1966 Conference, I listened to others talk, and was astonished to hear charges from opponents to the change that Bill W. was 'trying to run the show' . . . 'have things his own way' . . . was 'greedy and self-centered.'

"At 32, I was the youngest, most inexperienced delegate, up to that time, to serve. I was astonished! I idolized this man I was soon to meet for the first time. But I soon sensed that there were two factions on this issue.

"All day long I listened to their endless debates. We'd taken a straw vote and it looked as though the 'nays' had it. That night, unable to sleep and not wanting to awaken my wife, I stepped out into the hotel corridor to do some pacing, ponder the issue, and pray for guidance from a Higher Power. Imagine my amazement upon finding that other delegates were outside their doors too, . . . some pacing, others just sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall."

The next day, Kerry relates, "we assembled for the actual vote. Knowing that the overpowering straw vote the previous night had negated any change, I was astounded as vote after vote was recorded as 'YES.' Finally, after more than a decade's deliberation, the Conference had passed the restructuring resolution resoundingly. I shall never forget the look I saw on Bill's face—it was almost as if to say, 'A.A. has indeed come of age! I've done all I can do.'"

This year, as the 133 voting members of the Conference—delegates, trustees and directors, along with members of the General Service Office and Grapevine staffs—go about the business of working toward consensus on matters vital to A.A., many will be acting out the words of the late nonalcoholic trustee Bernard Smith at the 1954 Conference: "We may not need a General Service Conference to insure our own recovery. We do need it to insure the recovery of the alcoholic who still stumbles in the darkness one short block from this room. We need it to insure the recovery of a child being born tonight, destined to alcoholism.

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"We need it to provide, in keeping with our Twelfth Step, a permanent haven for all alcoholics who, in the ages ahead, can find in A.A. that rebirth which brought us back to life."

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## Remembering the Basics: Our Co-founders' Legacy

Back in 1960, when A.A. was celebrating its 25th Anniversary, co-founder Bill, asked: "Have we really kept A.A. simple? Or, unwittingly, have we blundered?" As members of a society that has not only flourished but whose initial success was tied to certain fundamental principles, we might periodically ask ourselves that same question.

"Genuine simplicity for today is to be found, I think, in whatever principles, practices, and services can permanently insure our widespread harmony and effectiveness," Bill wrote in the July Grapevine of that year. A lot had happened, he wrote, since the Fellowship's early days—when "Home parlors were meeting places. Social life ranged around coffeepots and kitchen tables."

Change was not always welcome. In fact, at each crucial turn, when decisions had to be made, there were outcries of alarm. Should A.A. publish its Twelve Steps? Should it establish a world services organization, or finalize agreement on the clearly-outlined Twelve A.A. Traditions? These were burning issues in the early years and in 1950, Bill wrote, similar fears were expressed—and not just by a few—over whether a General Service Conference should be held. "For some, the event spelled disaster, wholesale brawling and politicking would now be the rule," Bill wrote.

At each step along the way, he tells us, the co-founders asked themselves: "What, in the long run . . . would really be better—and therefore the simpler?"

As we all know, it was Dr. Bob who first talked about keeping things simple. Dr. Bob was very specific about what he meant by 'simple.' "Let's not louse it all up," he said. "Our Twelve Steps, when simmered down to the last, resolve themselves into the words *love* and *service*."

As the Fellowship gears itself up for its 44th annual Conference, whose theme is "The Spirit of Sacrifice," it might be interesting to take a closer look at Dr. Bob's 'simple' approach to how he believed the A.A. program had worked for him.

"I think the kind of service that really counts is giving of yourself, and that almost invariably requires effort and time. It isn't a matter of just putting a little quiet money in the dish," Dr. Bob said. ("The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous," p. 16). Giving of our "effort

and strength and time” was what made all the difference, he said. “None of us would be here today if somebody hadn’t taken time to explain things to us, given us a little pat on the back,” taken us to a meeting. In that context, Dr. Bob warned against a kind of “smug complacency” that would affect our willingness to extend a helping hand to suffering alcoholics.

Before A.A.’s Twelve Steps had been formulated, there were four yardsticks that had guided Dr. Bob, and continued to serve him throughout his life, he said. These were “absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity, and absolute love.” They were goals and standards of measurements that, even when unattained, nonetheless helped to keep him on track. Even if “it’s very difficult to have absolute love . . . that doesn’t mean we can’t *try* to get it.” (ibid., p. 17)

The A.A. program was workable and bore fruit for him if he practiced it in a spirit of humility and tolerance, he said on several occasions. He stressed that daily practice of the program, with humility and tolerance—were the mainstays of a serene and healthy sobriety. If a recovering alcoholic wanted to do a good job of practicing A.A. principles, he needed to acquire “the spirit of service,” Dr. Bob said, and this, in turn, required faith. This, too, sometimes took effort. “I think faith can be acquired . . . it has to be cultivated.”

The humility Dr. Bob spoke of had to do with his faith in a Higher Power. “I should have a very, very humble attitude toward the source of my strength,” he said. Tolerance, he noted, was often a characteristic that developed in a person as a result of his or her working the program well. It was apparent in an individual’s kindness toward someone just beginning on the spiritual path. Tolerance was linked to an understanding of those who are less fortunate, as well as a sympathy toward others with differing views. These three qualities—tolerance, understanding and sympathy—were the fabric of a general open-mindedness.

Dr. Bob had once asked himself, he wrote, if he was “giving a good account of my stewardship” if he took six hours to explain how things were to an active drunk, which could, when *simplified*, have taken one hour. As the years passed he forged the fundamental concepts that he believed were at the heart of his continued sobriety, serenity and peace of mind. In a sentence, they were: keeping things simple, caring for others, getting to the core of things, practicing tolerance and humility, maintaining a strong faith, and guarding his own as well as others’ anonymity.

As a physician, Dr. Bob had come to realize how little his own profession understood about the alcoholism that afflicted him. In those early years of his sobriety, because there was practically no competent medical literature on the subject, he thought long and hard on what could help suffering drunks. The answer always boiled down to the those qualities cited above.

So too, with us. These many decades later, we who have hundreds of publications on the subject at our fingertips, know that *all* we can do—and the best we can do—is to keep it simple, to share our experience, strength and hope with another alcoholic, in the spirit of humility, and with the knowledge that the love that motivates us, tied to our simple, generous, honest and direct approach, is helping *us*, every bit as much as it may help another. Love and Service, these two, experience tells us, give us continued sobriety and the peace of mind we never could attain until we put the bottle down.

While it’s true that bigger can sometimes be better or the seemingly more complicated does often end up being more simple, it might be helpful when facing challenges ahead—whatever they may be—to ask ourselves the same question Bill W., did: “What, in the long run . . . would really be better—and therefore simpler?”

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## Getting Struck Sober

The A.A. message, like lightning, strikes us drunks in any number of ways, times and places. We’ll be sitting at a meeting and a way out will suddenly dawn on us or, in the middle of the night, in a cold sweat, we’ll solemnly resolve to make that call. What’s surprising is that we’re surprised when—seemingly out of the blue—we get it! *Hey, I can stop*, we’ll suddenly realize. *I don’t have to drink! Isn’t that amazing?*

But what about lightning that strikes, not when we have a terrible hangover and we’re consumed with guilt and fear, but when we’re three sheets to the wind? Now, that’s something!

Such was the case with Ruben A., a Spanish-speaking farm worker living in Cutler, California, who wrote to G.S.O. last November asking for help. Danny M., staff member on the Spanish Services desk, sent Ruben some pamphlets, along with the Big Book and some encouraging words.

“The day the mailman brought the package, and I opened it, I was drinking a few beers. I began to read it and have not had a drink since then,” Ruben wrote. “I’m in so much agreement with what this book has to say, and I believe that God sent me this book, for without it, I would not have stopped drinking as I did.”

Ruben wrote that he was out of work when the A.A. literature came, but planned to send \$5.00 as soon as his paycheck came. The newly-sober man said he also needed some advice. The Big Book recommended attendance at A.A. meetings and there were these meetings in Cutler. Was that a good idea? Danny wrote Ruben a letter of congratulations on his new sobriety and the speed with which he’d understood. “Now,” Danny suggested, “get to as many meetings as you can.”

## Brainstorming Clears Path to an Informed Group Conscience

An informed group conscience is A.A. lingo for "consensus." Some of the time, it evolves slowly as members with differing viewpoints on an issue strive for unanimity through discussions in which everybody's voice is heard and heeded. But a lot of the time, members aren't quite sure how it happened, except that everyone got tired of talking and agreed to agree so they could all go home.

Now comes an exercise, appropriately called brainstorming, that provides a way to keep "principles before personalities" and reach a consensus. It was demonstrated last September in a workshop on "Communication," at the 29th Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador Assembly of A.A., by district committee members Craig H. and David B.—the latter having used it successfully in his work.

Explains David: "At the workshop we divided the group of about 40 participants into four small groups and asked a series of questions, from 'What qualities should a communicator have?' to 'How can we improve communication between the group and the district?' After allowing 10 to 15 minutes of discussion about each question, we proceeded to write one (different) answer from each group on a flip chart. Then we started all over again, asking each group in turn to give an answer that was not already listed. After all the answers were put up on the chart, they were read aloud and a tally was made of the number of groups having each one somewhere on its list." The resultant score, he notes, formed the consensus of the whole, as in the following example:

*Question:* How can we improve communications with the still-suffering alcoholic?:

*Answers:*

1. Good committee work by Public Information and Cooperation With the Professional Community (4)
2. Honesty with own story (1)
3. Setting a good example (1)
4. Pamphlets and literature (1)
5. Efficient intergroup office (1)
6. Greeters at door (2)
7. Looking after struggling members (2)
8. Real live answering service (1)

"Number 1 clearly forms the consensus," David observes. Noting that the question is a fairly nonsubjective one and therefore lends itself easily to consensus, he stresses that the brainstorming method works as well with more complex issues. "Each time I use this formula, it works," he reports, "and others who have tried it are amazed. After the Communication workshop, a number of participants were very excited. One A.A. said

she couldn't wait to try the method in a group sharing session. Another figured he'd use it to settle arguments at home."

Here David smiles, adding, "What I've found is that communication is the key to consensus every time. Let me share with you a simple rhyme I read that tells it like it is: 'A wise old owl lived in an oak/The more he saw, the less he spoke/The less he spoke, the more he heard/O, make me like that wise old bird.' Yes indeed!"

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## Iceland Celebrates Forty Years of A.A.

This spring the frosty little island republic of Iceland will mark its 40th A.A. anniversary. According to old-timer Gudmunder J. who was there and chronicled the event, "the formal foundation day was April 16, 1954, which happened to fall on Good Friday. All 14 people present for the meeting signed a declaration that stated: 'We the undersigned hereby decide to found a society whose objective is to help alcoholics to stop drinking alcoholic drinks. As a basis, we propose the 12 rules of A.A. and entrust in other respects the prospective board of our society to compose rules for our work.'

"There is an apt Icelandic proverb," Gudmunder adds. "It says, 'A little body often harbors a great soul,' and surely the A.A. bud that was planted in Iceland was like a weak straw in the beginning. But before long, it started to grow and prosper, and today it has become a big tree that stretches its branches and limbs across Iceland."

It all started back in 1948, when Gudrun C., an Icelandic woman married to an American and active in New York A.A., visited her homeland and held a public meeting. Subsequently, a few Icelanders found their way to the United States for detox and rehabilitation. When two of these now sober alcoholics, Jonas G. and Gudni A., returned to Iceland, A.A. received public-

ity—but no group formed.

Meanwhile, Gudmunder J., a self-described drunk in the capital of Reykjavik, stopped imbibing on his own in 1950; several years later, after reading a newspaper account of Gudni's recovery, he wrote to him. Together they contacted Jonas G. and held the first "official" A.A. meeting.

For a long time, A.A. in Iceland seemed contained in this one group. The members generally stayed sober but engaged in little Twelfth Stepping and no service work. A.A. literature translated into Icelandic was almost nonexistent. Then a breakthrough occurred in the early 1970s, when a government-sponsored program began flying alcoholics to the U.S. for help on a regular basis. Almost invariably, they returned eager to carry the A.A. message at home, and their efforts led to publication of the Big Book in Icelandic in 1976. Explosive growth churned up considerable confusion and turmoil but resulted eventually in the formation of intergroups, a general service office, a board of trustees, and more than 236 groups with at least 4,500 members.

Former board member and World Service Meeting delegate, Bjarni D., reports that the history of A.A. in Iceland is now being written. It is a heartwarming part of Fellowship lore that in this cold little country under the Arctic Circle and no bigger than the state of Kentucky, A.A. started with one drunk sharing with another, just as it did here when Bill W. shared with Dr. Bob some 20 years before.

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## A Group Celebration in Norway

*Vi Hygger Oss Pa A.A.-Vis! (We Are Enjoying Ourselves the A.A. Way!) So, come, everybody—med godt humor! (with good humor). And they did—all 70 of them. First there was blomkalsuppe (cauliflower soup), then biffindrefilet (filet mignon), followed by thick slices of iskake (ice cake), all of it washed down with lots of—you might have guessed it—mineralvann (mineral water) and pots and pots of kaffe (an international drink A.A.s are familiar with). Afterwards came Underholdnings-Innslag o dans (entertainment and dance). And everyone had a merry old, sober time of it.*

All of the above dishes had been tastefully prepared, and were gratefully shared, by members of the Fellowship celebrating the 25th anniversary of The Kongsgardgruppa (The King's Garden Group) in the seaport town of Kristiansand, in south Norway, last October. We got news of the celebration—with its distinctive local flavor yet, at its core, like so many others around the globe—from staff member Susan U., who was visit-

ing the country with her husband, Erik, a Norwegian, and former member of the group, who was celebrating his 20th A.A. anniversary.

The group was actually started in 1968, at a clinic for alcoholics, through the initiative of a local A.A. member and a few patients in the clinic. Besides offering sobriety, the group wanted to give patients as strong a grounding in the A.A. program, through its slogans and Twelve Steps, as they could muster before the patients' release to their various hometowns. Dr. Oscar Olsen, the clinic's medical director, not only gave the group his enthusiastic endorsement, but he has been an active, nonalcoholic supporter of A.A. ever since.



Dr. Olsen, now 85, was the evening's first speaker and he spoke with warmth of his work with alcoholics during the last 40 years, as a former nonalcoholic trustee on Norway's General Service Board, and a delegate to World Service Meetings, from 1978 to 1982. Now retired, he told the assembled group celebrants that he wholeheartedly agreed with our co-founder Dr. Bob's dictum to "keep it simple."

There had been a time, Dr. Olsen said, when he'd thought he knew a lot about alcoholism, but he had realized he had better discard all of his supposed expertise. Instead, he said, he had learned more about alcoholism from talking to the alcoholics in treatment than from any other source. Now, he told the assembled guests, he had difficulty stopping from talking about A.A.! As to how to keep things simple, he said the best way was to: "Keep active, go to meetings, use the Steps, the Traditions—and pass it on to others."

Thanks to the Kongsgardgruppa's starting up 25 years ago, there are now groups meeting every night of the week in Kristiansand and in nearby towns.

