

FINAL REPORT
SOUTHEAST REGIONAL FORUM
DECEMBER 2-4, 2016
ORLANDO, FLORIDA

Dear A.A. Friends,

Please mark your calendar for the next Southeast Regional Forum, which will take place in Sterling, Virginia, November 16-18, 2018 at the Washington Dulles Airport Marriott Hotel.

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LAST NAMES OF CLASS A (NON-ALCOHOLIC) TRUSTEES
AND NON-ALCOHOLIC EMPLOYEES ONLY APPEAR IN THIS REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The 2016 Southeast Regional Forum was held in Orlando, Florida. Registration for the Forum was 433. This included 254 members attending their very first Forum—many were welcomed at the Forum Orientation on Friday evening. In addition, the Southeast Regional Forum marked the 202 Regional Forum since its inception in 1975.

UNANSWERED ASK-IT BASKET QUESTIONS

- Q. Are volunteers from the Fellowship needed for the Loners-Internationalists (LIM) work being done?
- R. The purpose of *LIM* is to provide a way for Loners who live in remote areas - where there are no A.A. meetings - to correspond with others in similar situations. Internationalists, members whose work involves long stretches on seagoing vessels, also participate. The service works well for Homers, members who are homebound, usually because of physical problems or disability.

Loner Sponsors are A.A. members active in local A.A. meetings, who share their experiences and group activity with Loners, Homers, and Internationalists through correspondence. We currently have a disproportionate number of Loner Sponsors (an A.A. member,) to the number of Loners, Homers and Internationalists and we have currently *stopped* signing up new Loner Sponsors.

This may change in the future as other Loner Sponsors become unavailable, if this is the category that fits your circumstances you might consider inquiring in six months. If you would like to support *LIM* by informing members of your local groups who may know of Loners, Homers and Internationalists who might participate.

Here is the *LIM* information Sheet which is available on www.aa.org .
http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-123_en.pdf

- Q. Has G.S.O. considered somehow to communicate with the court system so as to indicate that A.A. should not be used as a sentence for drug offenders?
- R. In accordance with A.A.'s Tenth Tradition, Alcoholics Anonymous does not comment on the practices of any outside entity. That being said, there are several pieces of A.A. literature that are helpful resources to both professionals and A.A. members on communicating about cooperation with courts, what A.A. is, and what it is not.
- Information on Alcoholics Anonymous
 - If You are a Professional
 - Alcoholics Anonymous as a Resource For Drug & Alcohol Court Professionals
 - A.A. Guidelines on Cooperating with Court, D.W.I., and Similar Court Programs

- Q. When we sent Public Information letters to TV stations and press concerning anonymity, did we include letters to Facebook and other social media sites?
- R. The Annual Anonymity Letter to the media is sent to reporters, editors and publishers at print, broadcast and digital media outlets. Social media platforms such as Facebook have not been included in our mailings.
- Q. Will you consider producing a larger, poster-size version of the self-support card for use by groups, committees and workshops?
- R. The format (manner in which it is arranged and presented) of our literature is determined by G.S.O.'s Publishing Department. This suggestion regarding the production of a "larger, poster-size version of the self-support card for use by groups, committees and workshops" has been forwarded to the Publishing Department.
- Q. Is there in place a procedure to have non-Conference approved literature be approved? If so, where and how can it be found? If not, why not?
- R. Regarding "a procedure to have non-Conference approved literature be approved," it is first important to know that the term "Conference-approved" references a *process*. As such, the development of Conference-approved literature follows a path where an expressed need is first received from within the Fellowship, generally through one or more general service areas in the United States and/or Canada. Then there is a process involving trustees' and Conference Committees, G.S.O.s Publishing Department, etc. In our experience, when literature is Conference-approved it indicates that it has gone through a wide and thorough review process and speaks for A.A. as a whole. There is a wonderful service piece (SMF-29) which details the Conference-approval process and which you may find quite useful. http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-29_en.pdf
- Q. What is the maximum amount an A.A. member can contribute per year? Is this amount set to be distributed between an Area and G.S.O. or can the maximum amount be given to the Area and the same maximum amount be given to G.S.O.?
- R. G.S.O. may accept up to \$3000 in contributions annually from an A.A. member. This maximum is established by the General Service Conference for G.S.O. A.A. service entities are autonomous and may or may not have maximum amount limits for receiving contributions.



WORKSHOP REPORTS

7:00—8:15 p.m.

“Supporting La Viña: From your Story to Service” (Moderator: Irene D., La Viña Editor/Reporter: Jaret E.)

Workshop attendees discussed three main topics during this session:

- Concerns about La Viña’s financial report
- Other ways by which La Viña can carry the message
- What is La Viña’s spiritual value?

Members expressed concerns that La Viña is running with a big percentage of loss, and asked if it would affect the future of the magazine. They expressed hope that the magazine would be around in the future to serve the Hispanic community.

The workshop moderator added that La Viña celebrated 20 years in 2016. Another member asked: How many Hispanic people are getting help by reading this magazine here in the U.S.? Can a dollar amount be assigned to that? Is it possible to address this in the workshop?

A member asked, “Why is La Viña less expensive than the Grapevine?” The editor answered that La Viña publishes only 6 issues per year and while the covers are in color, the content is in black and white — all of which affect the cost. In addition, La Viña uses only one and one half employee.

A member from Sarasota shared how her area has been working toward increasing subscriptions by informing A.A.s, and participating in events. Another member shared about how Hispanic members have expressed their need for LV, and how they have organized events to motivate support. A GV chair said, “I think the magazine belongs to all the members of A.A. I want to support LV/GV, but not participate in promoting and using gimmicks.” The member further went on, “I’ve been in the trenches for the past six years with the GV. From home group to area we have done many things that have created subscriptions for GV/LV.”

Another participant asked, “So, if I purchase LV, where does that money go?” The editor answered that the sale of subscriptions covers a little less than 1/3 of the costs of making it. The difference is made up by the general service fund. This year, LV is making more money than projected. And, as mentioned, the difference is made up from the general service fund.

“The Informed Group Conscience” (Moderator: Rachel M. / Reporter: Bill D.)

Workshop attendees were asked to consider “*How our informed group conscience affects A.A. overall?*”

In answer, workshop members mentioned that it was responsible for a newcomer’s first impression of A.A. and for overcoming indifference. In addition, rotation of positions is important — and enthusiasm is imperative. An informed group conscience is reflected in the distillation of GSR reports, because we keep in mind our Tradition Five: “Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers” — we don’t bore them. In addition, with an informed group conscience, group members are better able to listen and listen objectively, repeating others views unemotionally in order to help understanding.

This, of course, helps members follow Tradition Twelve, “. . . to place principles before personalities.” Often newcomers have communication problems, but by using humor, respect and engaging others in calm discussion of opinions we can help realize Tradition One, “Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.”

The workshop members were also asked to share on the following topic: “*What are the best ways to hold an informed group conscience?*”

In response, members answered that business meetings are often combined with an informed group conscience — money discussions can be trying. Trivial concerns to some (like color schemes), can be overblown and the unity of the group threatened. To stay on the right track, we listen to all opinions; we give God time to “. . . express Himself in our group conscience (Tradition Two).” Group inventories that are scheduled monthly are common, while some groups privately decide (by steering committee) what topics are to be discussed. Still others circulate a list (a member’s presence is required for his or her topic to be discussed). A two-thirds majority is common for passing an item, some use Robert’s Rules, and others help avoid confrontation by allowing a sideways thumb to represent “I can live with it,” alongside the traditional thumbs up and thumbs down symbol.

“Attracting Newcomers to A.A.” (Moderator: Kenny B. / Reporter: Jennifer S.)

The following two questions were discussed:

1. *How can we attract newcomers to A.A.?*
2. *What can we do to be more inclusive for the newcomer?*

The group came up with many solutions and ideas. Among them were:

- Introduce ourselves and let the newcomer know they are welcome.
- Have greeters at the meeting.
- Remember, it starts with me: “I am responsible.”
- Look at the venue of our meetings.
- Following Traditions makes a group more attractive.
- Work with committees to carry A.A.’s message (A.A. billboards, free P.S.A. at local theaters, pamphlets to libraries).
- Many individuals do 12th Step work for us, such as doctors, judges, etc. We need to reach out to them.
- Lead by example.
- Go to where the newcomers are.
- Our program is one of attraction, so we never know when we plant the seed, but our friends and family see how we’ve changed.
- Ensure that we have good, quality meetings.
- Remember: when we are ready, we become willing. We don’t push A.A. down the newcomer’s throat.
- Reach out to the young people in A.A.
- When a newcomer is present, help to refocus the meeting on Steps 1, 2, or 3.
- Encourage questions from newcomers and take the time to answer those questions.
- It begins with sponsorship — get the newcomer involved so they have a purpose.
- Take group inventories.
- Talk about the solution.
- Think of what attracted you to A.A. and do that yourself to plant the seed.
- Have fun. We are not a glum lot!

“Safety in A.A.” (Moderator: Jim S. / Reporter: El N.)

Workshop members discussed the following question: “What is the appropriate role for me and my home group in promoting the safety of our A.A. meetings?” In response, members came up with several questions to use as a check for safety.

- Do I participate in my group conscience and group inventory?
- Does my home group need a safety plan? If so, what should it include?
- Do I think of safety as including not only physical safety but also financial, emotional and spiritual?
- When should police be engaged in addressing a safety issue? Am I allowing the principle of anonymity to protect illegal behavior?
- Am I being responsible as a home group member as well as an A.A. member?
- Do I stop to consider “is it a fact or hearsay that I am hearing?” when making a decision? Am I considering problems of alcohol, singleness of purpose, and other principles of A.A.?
- Do we need to make some changes to our literature to include ideas of establishing safe places? Are the group pamphlet or the sponsorship pamphlet appropriate places to include such suggestions?
- When the hand of A.A. reaches out, is the message of recovery being carried in a safe manner? If not, what do I need to do?

“G.S.O. Records: Fellowship New Vision (FNV)” (Moderator: Militza Alma-Noyola / Reporter: Kevin D.)

The meeting opened with a brief introduction of a registrar. The benefits of Fellowship New Vision (FNV) include enhanced security. The program is accessed and operated from a web browser enabled with a secure digital certificate issued and controlled by G.S.O. This assures group contact anonymity and group records security. This new system is designed for more accurate record keeping and to reduce mailing. Note, in FNV the user cannot review past information. One person per area (area registrar) handles input – and must provide authentication of position. Records department handles content and maintains database of group and service position records and mailing lists. FNV tech support individual takes care of marked technical issues and supervises annual group records update. Everything entered into FNV goes into the directory. During the workshop, members reviewed drop-down of new groups’ descriptions and their meanings. Some points made were:

- System never uses “” for nicknames when inputting.
- When using others for a position not listed, must have a description.
- Mailing of literature can be generated from FNV.
- BOX 4-5-9: G.S.R.’s will receive a hard copy for group purposes and everyone else will get an electronic copy.
- Area Registrar is a voluntary position. If you are overwhelmed, please send G.S.O. information so that they can provide help.
- Each registrar is responsible for his or her job, so if there is a helper, please note that the REGISTRAR is the contact and communication point — not the helper.
- FNV manual has 196 pages. Adding comments to pages can be a great reminder tool. Inactive groups can’t be deleted, but can be brought back to life if needed.

“C.P.C. and P.I. Efforts: Fostering Effective Referrals” (Moderator: Gilberto V. / Reporter: Tito T.)

The workshop attendees discussed how we could foster effective referrals using these committees. The workshop members offered solutions to two questions. The first question asked: *“How can we help the treatment centers and professionals to carry the message?”* In response, members came up with many answers, such as:

1. Meeting with professionals.
2. Taking A.A. to treatment centers and using pamphlets.
3. Going to the universities and meeting with the nursing students in the nursing program.
4. Contact key personnel at treatment centers and carry the message so they can pass it on to their clients.
5. Call doctors and make appointments so we can talk with them about A.A.
6. Talk to our own doctors, police, DUI programs.
7. Offer open A.A. meeting listings.
8. Go to health fairs with information about A.A. and where meetings can be found.
9. Take Grapevine and La Viña magazines to doctors’ offices.

The second question asked members, *“Are we using the C.P.C. and P.I. workbooks correctly and how do we ensure the P.S.A.s are broadcasted?”* In response, members answered:

1. The workbook helps those with C.P.C. and P.I. commitments
2. Carrying the A.A. message with enthusiasm is as helpful as the information in the workbooks
3. To make sure P.S.A.s are being broadcasted, visit local radio stations to make sure they are broadcasting the P.S.A.s and, if not, try to get P.S.A.s from G.S.O. and hand them to the station
4. Do the same with the TV stations.

8:30-9:45 p.m.

***Supporting Grapevine: From your Story to Service* (Moderator: Ami B., GV Executive Editor / Reporter: Nancy)**

Workshop members discussed topics for the Grapevine magazine, such as “hitting your bottom” and “how to find more subscribers to the Grapevine.” Members also discussed:

- How to submit stories to the Grapevine
- Poster: “Carry the Message” program
- Record Your Story — workshop — and Area 45 convention
- Audio workshops and how to record seven minute stories
- Writing workshops
- Use of the Grapevine in meetings
- Grapevine roundups

“A.A. Service: Participation, Benefits, and Attraction” (Moderator: Tony S. / Reporter: Jen P.)

In the moderator’s opening remarks, he mentioned that his first service job was emptying ashtrays. Today, he said, the benefits have far outweighed what he’s put in. The more he became involved in service, the more he knew people. The more he knew people, the better his life became.

The first question posed to the group was: *How important is service sponsorship?*

- A service sponsor suggests to sponsees that they get involved in service. He or she helps to answer questions about service when sometimes your recovery sponsor may have no experience.
- We are never too young or old in sobriety to have a service sponsor. It can be our first introduction to the A.A. Service Manual.
- The service sponsor can be your rock.

The second question asked of workshop attendees was: *How can we make service more attractive?* Members had plenty of answers and suggestions, including:

- Being humble about service makes it more attractive.
- Address the problem of people not understanding our service structure on a broader level.
- Sponsor people into service.
- Be enthusiastic and be an example.
- Explain to people what different service activities are and what they entail.
- Strive for effective and solid leadership.
- Be accountable and responsible.
- Be welcoming to new people in service.
- Talk about general service in our stories.
- Bring people along to district meetings.

“G.S.O. Records: Fellowship New Vision (FNV)” (Moderator: Militza Alma-Noyola)

NOTE: For notes, see earlier workshop on “G.S.O. Records: Fellowship New Vision (FNV).” Both workshops covered the same material and the notes were combined.

“Bridging Cultural Difference to Carry A.A.’s Message” (Moderator: Graham G. / Reporter: Regina F.)

1. Workshop members were asked, “Who is missing in our room?” In response, workshop members came up with some examples:
 - African Americans
 - Homebound/Nursing Home seniors
 - Native Americans
 - LGBT members
 - Deaf and hearing impaired
 - Military personnel — active and not active

2. Where are they? How do we reach them?

- Lambda group clubs
- Use our remote community committees (if available)
- Ask these groups if they want our assistance or information
- What are we *not* doing?
- Have we grown complacent?
- Are we greeting the newcomer consistently?

Members also questioned, “How do we identify the under-represented areas and encourage participation? How can we be more inclusive and less divisive?” In response, workshop attendees said, “Focus on the similarities.”

“A.A. Corrections” (Moderator: Ernie M. / Reporter: Rick M.)

The workshop attendees were asked, “*How do we work with Corrections?*” In response, members had many ideas and experience to share, including:

1. Talk to a youth coordinator.
2. Certain states, such as Georgia, have a certification program.
If it is a requirement of a facility, do it!
3. Do not go to a corrections meeting if you have a warrant.
4. Volunteers must listen and obey the facilities rules.
5. What is the G.S.O. stance on the little red books that are handed out to those behind the walls? (Members shared that while these are not Conference approved literature, groups may do as they see fit—they are autonomous.)
6. The book “A.A. in Prison: Inmate to Inmate” is of great interest to those behind the walls. In Kentucky, a pink can is being used to buy literature for corrections facilities.
7. Bringing books in can be a challenge, so know the rules and procedures.
8. Cooperation and communication between districts is helpful.
9. Talking to a prison chaplain is a good idea — use P.I. committee to help.
10. Taking on Facilities without proper help (i.e. more volunteers) can be problematic if the area has many facilities. Make sure there are enough volunteers.
11. Some groups report having a difficult time not only getting into facilities, but staying in facilities. This is another situation to find a solution to.
12. Some inmates can start their own meetings.

Another question posed for discussion was: “*How do we get people involved?*” Members answered with many ideas, such as:

1. Workshops, presentations. Since getting people involved can be difficult, get the word out and reach people where they are.
2. If enough people are involved, it can reduce burnout.
3. If we are always going to the same people to help with committees, we need to come up with new and different ways to get members involved. Perhaps we can do it at some of the “non-service” events.
4. National Corrections workshop coming in St. Louis in November 2017.
5. Get the view of those who have been incarcerated.
6. Some never rotate out of a position — we must be mindful to have rotation.
7. Helpful to make an effort to get several people involved so that there is a rotation from district/area level.
8. Buy the new video from G.S.O. and show to all in order to get people involved.

“Spiritual Experience in A.A.” (Moderator: Barb C. / Reporter: Pat T.)

Workshop members were asked to discuss: How can an A.A. have a personal relationship with a Higher Power of his or her understanding? In response, attendees responded with many ideas, such as:

- Practice Steps 3, 11, and 12. Plant the tree, water it, and it will bear fruit.
- Intellectual methods did not work, but working the Steps was followed by a spiritual experience.
- Listen to others share their experience.
- Watch others pick up sobriety chips.
- Ask God for comfort.
- One member heard a boy pray in a cancer ward – be aware of surroundings.
- Keep a journal of comforting experiences.
- Begin a ritual.

Members were also asked to respond to the question, “*How can we convey spirituality to a non-believer?*” In response, attendees responded with many ideas, such as:

- Stress “as you understand Him” and “It’s an individual affair.”
- Look at your own prejudice and superstitions. Be open-minded.
- Pray for the experience for others.
- Pray anyway.
- Tell “Whatever” how you feel.
- Do not allow a religion to dictate the quality of your sobriety.
- Work the program and it will happen.



PRESENTATIONS

A.A. Group Life and Problems Other than Alcohol—Terry E., Delegate Panel 65, Area 27
The topic “A.A. Group Life and Problems Other than Alcohol” is very relevant today, considering that many groups struggle with how to best carry the A.A. message as more and more multiaddicted people show up in their rooms. Recently, I facilitated a home group inventory where the group was struggling with attracting newcomers. During the inventory, we realized that the attendance started to drop when members started to address singleness of purpose issues and problems other than alcohol. At their meetings, the chairperson would question new attendees as to why they were there and if they were alcoholics. Admittedly, the chairpersons were especially tough on court-ordered people who had a paper to be signed. While the meetings might have seemed more focused, the attendance fell so much that they no longer had new alcoholics walking in the door looking for help. Without the lifeblood of new members, the oldtimers didn’t have new members to sponsor.

My experience is that for the first year of my sobriety I was still questioning whether I was a true alcoholic or not. I would tell you I was for fear of not fitting in or because I believed alcoholism and drug addiction were the same, but I did not believe I was truly alcoholic. In order to follow your “rules,” I would substitute the word “alcohol” in my story when my actual experience was with drugs in specific instances. Later on in my sobriety I stopped substituting the word “alcohol” for the word “drugs” and instead opted for the term “outside issues.” However, I still lacked the fundamental understanding of identification.

In the pamphlet “Problems Other than Alcohol,” our co-founder Bill W. states very clearly that an alcoholic who is also a drug addict can be a member of A.A. but a nonalcoholic drug addict cannot. You raised the bottom for me. In open meetings, I was able to relate to the way you thought, the way you felt, and the way you drank. I saw that the Steps worked for you, and since I believed I was like you, I thought they would work for me if I did what you did. While working the Steps, I related to the description of the alcoholic in the Big Book and soon realized I was an alcoholic, too. You did not kick me out of meetings when I identified incorrectly or said something wrong, but you also didn’t ignore the uncertainty I had about my own drinking and drug problem.

Traditions Three and Five deal specifically with A.A. membership and our singleness of purpose. The long form of Tradition Three states that our membership shall include anyone who suffers from alcoholism and Tradition Five illustrates the importance of focusing on the one thing we do well: helping alcoholics by relating our actual experiences. My home group is a closed meeting with a focused A.A. message, but we are not afraid that a bunch of drug addicts are going to flood our meeting, water down our message, and destroy us. Our Traditions are not based in fear; rather, their spiritual foundation is anonymity, which is expressed as self-sacrifice and humility. We practice the Third and Fifth Traditions by realizing our own limitations. We know we cannot be all things to all people. We are simply ex-problem drinkers who have found a solution, and we stay sober by showing other alcoholics what we have done.

In addition, as sponsors we must also be aware of our own limitations. Our shared experiences, both while drinking and while sober, are the foundation of our program. The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* states, “the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is

properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours. Until such an understanding is reached, little or nothing may be accomplished.” (Page 18) Not only is it important for newcomers to relate to our experiences so we can sponsor them, it is equally important that they are able to relate their own experiences when they sponsor others.

At my home group, we have a go-round where we all introduce and identify ourselves. Our group conscience is that even if someone doesn't identify as alcoholic or as having a desire to stop drinking, we let them sit through their first meeting. However, it is also our group conscience that we are responsible to meet them after the meeting, to tell them about our own experience identifying, and to offer to take them through the Big Book to help them see if they belong. Most people have a misconception about what constitutes an alcoholic. Our Big Book takes more than fifty pages to describe an alcoholic so that people can decide for themselves. Personally, it wasn't until I read the section on the “real alcoholic” in the Big Book that I realized to my innermost self that I belonged. Remember, we do not diagnose each other in A.A. We let members relate and decide for themselves.

During the meeting, we share our own experiences as they relate to alcoholism and it is a very focused A.A. message. While rare, that doesn't mean you will never hear members talking about drugs at our meeting. We believe that there are many outside issues that overlap with our alcoholism and therefore can be relevant in our discussions of our drinking and sobriety. There is a fundamental misunderstanding of our Traditions when members are encouraged to use the words “outside issues” as some sort of censorship for the word drugs. If the subject truly is an outside issue, then it is outside the scope of A.A. and has no place in an A.A. meeting, but all of us have problems other than alcohol that are related to our alcoholism and our emotional sobriety. Also, we do not encourage members to just say the word “alcohol” when they really are talking about “drugs.” That's dishonest and problems with drugs, relationships, work, or any other major area of life may be outside issues in themselves. However, they may be completely applicable if they relate to alcoholism.

My home group believes it is our duty to maintain a focused discussion on alcoholism while helping people figure out if they belong here or in another fellowship. This requires more than calling people out in meetings if they say something wrong. I'm not sure if that would have worked for me. Fear is always a factor in one-on-one meetings, because not many of us like confrontation. However, we found that we have nearly always had success when our approach is in a loving and helpful spirit. As members of A.A., we are responsible to help the people who show up at our meetings.

An Informed Group Conscience—Chris W., Delegate Panel 65, Area 71 Virginia

The informed group conscience is a topic that I actually love to talk about. I believe it is one of the most important things we strive for as a fellowship. Tradition One reminds us that personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity. The informed group conscience is one of the main building blocks of that unity. Tradition Two states that our single ultimate authority is a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. So the group conscience is how God has a voice in our decisions. In other words, if there is no group conscience, then God can't get a word in edgewise.

The group conscience is the collective conscience of all the group members. An informed group conscience requires that all information be shared before a vote is taken. It requires that we listen to minority opinions with an open mind and that all members of the group are treated as equals. It requires us to practice all of A.A.'s principles in our interactions with other group members and to use caution when dealing with dominant opinions. It requires a willingness to work slowly with patience and tolerance for one another, sometimes discussing things many times before a final decision is made. Many of us exclaimed, "What an order!"

One of the most important things to enable the informed group conscience is a safe environment that invites all to share as equals. We should always refrain from reactions after a group member shares his or her point of view. Cheering, clapping, booing, and other outbursts can make some members feel unsafe to speak their mind. While I personally have never had a problem with being shy or afraid to share, I am aware that others might. Newcomers are particularly susceptible to this, but there are a lot of people who won't speak up if they are afraid of being ridiculed or of making others angry. Many of us do not like confrontation so it is important that we create a loving environment—a place where everyone feels safe to express themselves without fear of ridicule, retaliation, or the like.

Another thing that can stifle the free exchange of ideas is angry or animated sharing. More than a few of the people I have talked to in A.A. shut down in the presence of angry people. If someone is angry or just very passionate and loud, the person leading the discussion could try to calm the situation by keeping an even tone and thanking the person for sharing. Inviting others to share and thanking them for opposing views, even welcoming opposing views by saying, "Does anyone have a different idea about that?" is a great way to defuse a situation.

It is also important for longtimers to realize that their opinions might carry more weight than the opinions of other group members and that they should allow the group to work through items without exerting too much influence. Perhaps it is best that longtimers keep silent while the other group members speak their minds and offer thoughts only after others have had their say. This can help guard against other members playing follow the leader. The comparison between the elder statesman and the bleeding deacon comes to mind here. Are you the person with the quiet, calming few words of experience that make people think? Or are you the angry or manipulative power-driver, working to get people to line up behind you?

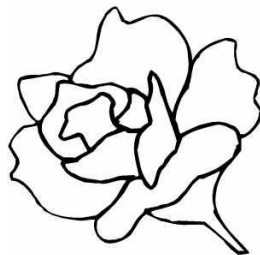
Probably the greatest enemy of the informed group conscience is prematurely calling the question. This is the one error that I have seen the most and I think is the most destructive of all. This practice stops the discussion, and if a majority of members have decided they have heard enough to make a decision, it takes the measure directly to a vote. This is a ripe

environment for a group to make a huge mistake. You might be thinking, *But that is why we have minority opinion*. And you would be correct—that is why we have minority opinion. But hearing minority opinion is not the same as allowing open discussion, precisely because minority opinion is, by definition, one-sided. There have been times when I have heard, and perhaps you have too, someone speaking to the minority and giving incorrect information at the microphone. But because the microphone was open only for minority opinion, there was no opportunity for someone else to clarify or correct the record. In situations such as this I like to say, “If your position is really the best one, convince me; don’t try to shut me up and shut me down.”

The most significant problem with all of the things that could damage a group’s ability to reach an informed conscience is that individual members are left feeling marginalized and unheard. When the discussion is not allowed to completely unfold, allowing all members to be heard, there can be disagreement that remains long after the vote. This dissention can, and often does, lead to divisiveness and taking sides, which puts the group and individual existence in danger. Personal recovery does, after all, depend upon A.A. unity. And our one ultimate authority is God . . . presuming he can get a word in edgewise.

I witnessed a pretty extreme example of this a few years ago at an assembly. A proposal that caused strong emotions for a lot of people came out of a committee. There were more than three hundred people in the room and only thirty spoke before someone angrily called the question, with fifty or more people lined up at microphones. The question was called, the vote was taken, and that was it. Think of it as if you have a home group with twenty people and only two people were allowed to speak before a vote was taken, even though five or six more had their hands up. As you might expect, the issue did not die there. It was a divisive hallway discussion for the next year when the assembly corrected its mistake. I don’t know if the vote would have been changed if the discussion had completed, but I do believe that the division would not have been so great. People were simply not finished talking about it, so they continued their discussions in little groups in the hallway. There was gossip, hurt feelings, and division among friends, all caused by the squelching of those voices left in line at the microphone.

The informed group conscience is about more than a count of “yes” and “no” votes; it is the spiritual expression of the collective group. Great care should be taken to arrive at that expression in a way that respects each individual and the autonomy of the group. Practicing all of our principles in all of our affairs to the best of our ability is the only path.



A Daily Reprieve Contingent on Our Spiritual Condition—Jim S., Delegate Panel 65, Area 1 Alabama-Northwest Florida

My name is Jim S., Panel 65 Delegate, Area 1 Alabama-Northwest Florida, and it is an honor and a privilege to do a presentation on “A Daily Reprieve Contingent on Our Spiritual Condition.” On page 85 of the Big Book, the Tenth Step promises conclude with this guarantee: “That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition.” The succeeding paragraph states, “What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” My experience is that my life hinges on whether I am spiritually fit and this is true of my sobriety, my A.A. service work, my personal relations, and my professional life. The Tenth Step chapter of the Twelve and Twelve reports that “pain is the touchstone of all spiritual progress.” That has been my experience as well.

When I got to Alcoholics Anonymous I believed that I had a drinking problem, knowing deep down that I was an alcoholic. I was a typical alcoholic who believed that somehow, someday, I might be able to drink like a normal person. Since alcoholism is an illness and the craving for alcohol is relatively short lived, I needed a spiritual awakening to resolve my problem and to relieve the mental obsession to take a drink.

I believe that taking and living the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous provided the necessary spiritual awakening and there are actions I need to take daily to combat my illness. In the beginning, it was going through the Steps with my sponsor and then guiding other alcoholics through the Steps that laid the foundation of my recovery. My sponsor introduced me to the kit of spiritual tools needed for me to stay sober: prayer, reading the Big Book, going to meetings, sponsorship, and service work.

On my initial journey through the A.A. principles it was as if the Steps were an initiation rite. My sponsor often suggested that I take a specific action and I was desperate enough to do it. I went through the Steps but I did not come clean on my first four Fifth Steps. I made a few amends but I also put some of them off. As the result of taking these actions I stayed dry, and even taking these half measures my life still got felt better.

Then life began to happen. I was not picked up on the contract I was working on and I became unemployed. I got involved in a relationship that was not healthy and ultimately failed. One of my best friends in the program passed away. My mother had six heart attacks in one night but somehow survived.

Being unemployed allowed me to be able to attend a bunch of meetings. That probably saved my life, but at the same time my life was a train wreck. I became arrogant in my sobriety. I would hear someone in a meeting say, “My sponsor has me do this,” and I would think, *You may have to do that, but I don't.* As a result, at four years sober I hit bottom. I was literally driven to my knees praying, *God please help me.* I was serious. I didn't want to drink so something had to change. I then picked up the Big Book and began looking for a solution to my problems. I was no longer reading the Big Book for sport. I began to incorporate the Steps into my life. My sponsorship activities increased and I began to do more A.A.-related service work at my group, district, and area.

My sponsor suggested that I go back to school. I did, and after twelve years I got a degree. I was forced to change my career. I had a lot of amends I needed to make as a result of my unemployment, and most of them I put off until I was miserable. My sponsor suggested that I go make those amends, and as the result of pain I did. I made those amends and the resentments went away. None of this was easy, and I continued to pray and practice the Twelve Steps as best I could.

That is how my sobriety progressed. I took positive action and that action yielded results. Positive results. Therefore, I developed a faith in the program and in my Higher Power. I began to feel better about myself. I began to love people without expecting anything in return. I began to be productive at work and I began to enjoy *going* to work. From personal experience, I came to know that if I don't do this, I can lose it. On page 85 of the Big Book it states, "The spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it." I continue to work the Steps, sponsor people, make myself sponsorable, and do my best to maintain a conscious contact with my Higher Power on a daily basis, and the payoff is real.

I want to thank all of you for this opportunity to serve. I do believe that I have had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps. I also believe that, as Bill suggests in his personal story, I can lose my sobriety if I don't "continue to be willing to perfect and enlarge my spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others. Then I wouldn't be able to handle the certain trials and low spots ahead." I want to thank you once again for allowing me to participate in this forum. As it says on page 164, "We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny."

General Service: The Basics—Glenn W., Delegate Panel 65, Area 14 North Florida

"A.A. is not organized!" Some of you might have heard this misquote of our Ninth Tradition, which actually states, "Each A.A. group needs the *least possible* organization." Imagine no organization. That would look like 1.2 million members attending their home groups with random cooperation and communication with other groups. Think of our most cherished publication, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Who would publish it? Would the content be the same? How much would it cost? Would it be available in seventy languages? What about other literature? Imagine an A.A. Grapevine with more advertisements than stories. Would the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions be the same? Would the Twelve Concepts even exist? These important values that help ensure the legacy of our fellowship is the primary by-product of general service.

We have all been touched by A.A. service work. Chances are our first experience with Alcoholics Anonymous was a direct result of some form of either general service or, as I like to define it, "service in general." "Service in general" could be positions at your home group, volunteering at your central office or Intergroup, or the essence of our A.A. program: sponsorship and Twelfth Step work. These positions are mostly focused on one A.A. member helping another A.A. member—essential for recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.

So, let's say you have just been elected general service representative or G.S.R. As a G.S.R. you will serve the group and its members, similar to other group positions. However, more importantly, and the reason why the position is titled "general" and not "group service representative," is that as a G.S.R. you are now asked to look at service from a different point

of view. Instead of considering what's best for the member or the group, we are asked to pivot and consider issues in terms of what's best for A.A. as a whole. This manner of looking at our service of A.A. as a whole to carry the message is the fundamental spirit of general service.

Most unusual, our organization is commonly referred to as an "upside down" triangle. At the top level is our membership, which then cascades down to the trusted servants below. At your local level, G.S.R.s will group together into districts led by a district committee member, or D.C.M. Districts are then grouped together into a geographic Conference area. Areas, along with their committees, meet a few times per year with the primary responsibility of electing and informing their area delegate.

The area delegate plays an integral role in the decision and custodial workspace known as the General Service Conference. The Conference is represented by three voting bodies that meet annually for a week to consider, deliberate, and decide on actions affecting A.A. as a whole. At least two-thirds of the voting body are the area delegates, with the remaining voting members serving as either trustees of the General Service Board, directors of A.A. World Services, and A.A. Grapevine or A.A. General Service Office staff.

The General Service Board consists of fourteen alcoholic (class B) and seven nonalcoholic (class A) trustees. This is essentially the legal, custodial, and formal part of A.A. The trustees volunteer an incredible amount of their time, meeting in person at least four times a year, traveling to visit regional events and forums, and meeting virtually by numerous emails and conference calls in the interim. As volunteers, they are only reimbursed for travel and materials to provide the custodial responsibility to carry out actions decided at the General Service Conference.

The A.A. World Services (A.A.W.S.), General Service Office (G.S.O.) and A.A. Grapevine offices consist of *only* one hundred paid staff who carry out the day-to-day functions. To summarize this enormous effort, imagine a headquarters for an organization of 1.2 million members. Maybe a giant building with thousands of workers? To the contrary, our one hundred or so employees cheerily answer all of our phone calls and emails, keep records, publish and provide our literature, and ensure our "meeting in print" arrives monthly.

A.A.'s Twelve Traditions provide guidance to safeguard our unity. Similarly, A.A.'s Twelve Concepts for World Service provide guidance in which organization, structure, and policy can be blended with spiritual principles. All of what I have just shared is explained in detail in the *A.A. Service Manual* publication. In summary, to borrow a phrase, we in general service "think globally, act locally."

A few final thoughts. I have just described this extraordinary process by which any member can have a voice, yet less than 50 percent of our fellowship participates in this process. Why is that? Is it a lack of awareness? Is it a lack of understanding about the purpose of general service? Is it simply an apathy toward general service, perhaps brought on by bad past experiences? When I hear in conversation that "general service is not for me," instead of trying to convince, I try to listen and understand why. Those members are A.A.'s silent majority.

For me, as an area delegate, I believe I serve all members. While encouraging groups to participate and have a G.S.R., I believe no group or member is more special than another. I

need to be mindful in my message to not create a feeling of represented versus not, or “less than” due to a lack of participation whether by choice or by chance.

I’m also mindful that, as a trusted servant, I am often placed in an unsolicited position of “A.A. police.” This is a tough spot because I know my response to the inferred Tradition violation is often not what most members are looking for. In response I’ll share my experience, the liberties of group and member autonomy, and the “right to be wrong,” and I’ll reassure that this issue will not break A.A.

I know that general service is not everyone’s cup of tea. But for those that see “spirited debate” instead of “arguing,” have the patience to foster an informed group conscience, and can set aside personal goals, I encourage you to make yourself available. At each level of service, I have been both humbled and spiritually fulfilled and these experiences have truly enhanced my sobriety and way of life.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to serve Alcoholics Anonymous.

Unity: Our First Tradition—Harry B., Delegate Panel 66, Area 37 Mississippi

When we think of unity we can first think of just *how* we are united. Certainly we are united in our desire for our own survival as individuals through the Twelve Steps. Our survival as a fellowship depends on our adherence to the Traditions, which guide us through controversy. The Concepts are the ideas on which we agree to base our Conference actions. All of these are based on the principles that we live by.

Our co-founder Bill W. states, “These principles are ancient and the property of all mankind.” The principles of hope, surrender, love, honesty, humility, forgiveness, tolerance, responsibility, faith, courage, justice, willingness, integrity, perseverance, trust, wisdom, and service are all things we aspire to. These concepts are benign, like gravity, and hold no grudge nor demand any belief; they simply exist whether we think so or not. However, also like gravity, I ignore them at my own peril. The quality of our lives depends on how well we follow these truths of good living.

Love is the one principle that made me believe I could understand enough of God to stay sober. Love of my family and friends made me want to be better and more responsible for them. The love with no demands shown me by A.A. members melted my selfish ways. This love has been handed to drunks like me, one to another, around the world. It is what energizes our fellowship. Again, as our co-founder Bill W. stated on page 319 of *As Bill Sees It*, “The A.A. Traditions are neither rules, regulations, nor laws. We obey them willingly because we ought to. Perhaps the secret of their power lies in the fact that these life-giving communications spring out of living experience and are rooted in love.”

It is no small statement to declare that A.A. is a spiritual kindergarten. The ravages of our disease scar us all emotionally. Some of this may be inherent to the disease; I suspect most are a result of our attempts to live with it. This immaturity may be a gift to keep us on our knees. We are children who need the presence of a loving father. To try to live otherwise is to invite disaster both in our personal lives and as a group.

As the junior partner in a family business I had to face the prospect that my opinion counted, but it was counted last. To show up and be helpful without trying to get my own way became the path to greater peace and harmony in the business and in our family. We have no junior

partners in A.A. but we do respect one another as equals—some with more experience than others. This experience does not transmit directly to wisdom, however. We each have personal assets that we bring to the table. The ability to recognize those qualities in one another is the hallmark of working together.

The short form of the First Tradition reads, “Our common welfare comes first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.” *E pluribus Unum* is Latin for “out of many, one,” which was adopted as our national motto by the United States Congress in 1782 until it was changed in 1956 to “In God we trust.” The long form of Tradition One reads, “Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.”

And what of the individual? A conscious contact with one’s higher power can only be experienced in a very personal way. We encourage each individual to seek his or her own understanding of God. We each add our findings to the pile that is the collective wisdom of our recovery. Many voices are in the choir but together we are one voice. We do not push conformity for we are united not by a common belief but by the common action of our primary purpose, which is to stay sober and to help others achieve sobriety.

What a force A.A. has proven to be against the disease of alcoholism! Its mix of psychology and spirituality has influenced practically all remedies and treatments. Many other ailments have similarly and successfully been solved by this philosophy pioneered by the eminent psychiatrist Dr. Carl Jung. A.A. has since become the single most effective solution to the disease of alcoholism the world has ever seen. If our success leads to complacency, however, it could spell our downfall.

So it is that we embrace the Traditions out of love for our sobriety, our fellowship, and each other. We cannot function in a state of turmoil. Being the critic without any solution is counterproductive. Certainly we know what the other fellow needs to do, but where is the growth in that? Learning to let go and let God is even more vital in service than it is in recovery because we are dealing with things that affect large numbers of people, not just ourselves.

Just as Step One contains the principle of surrender, so does the First Tradition. We must surrender our will over again before we can proceed with the rest of the Steps. Unity contains the same principle of surrender and it is through that surrender that we can agree on the other eleven Traditions. Unity also can involve tolerance and a willingness to accept others. Anger can destroy unity and can destroy a group. It can also destroy A.A.

Unique to A.A. is the fact that we either help others recover or we wither and dissipate as a society and therefore suffer as individuals, causing our own eventual demise. In helping others we cast aside our own opinions that might interfere with someone else’s recovery. Our constant awareness of our primary purpose will guide us. Yet survival takes a back seat to the joy one finds in being useful, valuable, and needed. By a divine irony our greatest defect becomes our greatest asset and we find that our past is not wasted and remorse is not irrelevant. We cast aside our personal desires when it would damage the group or A.A. as a whole. As stated on page 129 of the Twelve and Twelve, “The unity of A.A. is the most cherished quality it has. Our lives, the lives of all to come, depend squarely upon it. . . . Without unity, the heart of A.A. would cease to beat; our world arteries would no longer carry the life-giving grace of God.”

PAST TRUSTEES' SHARING

Michele Grinberg, Class A Trustee, General Service Board

What I want to share with you is the incredible experience I have had learning the language of the heart. That's really the greatest gift I have received among the many I have received from you. I learned in A.A. Today, published in 1960, that Bill W. wrote a little about of the language of the heart and what that meant. He wrote about Dr. Silkworth: “. . . he ministered to me with the language of the heart during the last shattering years of my alcoholism. Love was his magic, and with it he accomplished this wonder: He conveyed to the foggy mind of the drunk that here was a human being who understood, and who cared without limit. He was one who would gladly walk the extra mile with us . . .”

And that exactly what you have shown me since the first day I arrived. I am just going to share a few of those “language of the heart” moments with you. The first one involves EI, a wonderful past trustee. She chose to meet with me before I even began my service. We spent a day and half where she tried to explain to me everything that happened at Conference, and what it meant. What an order! I got to meet a wonderful woman, had a wonderful experience, and we shared some things from the heart. And that was when I began to learn that I could really trust you — and that you were willing to trust me.

I was in Vancouver, at the behest of A.A. to do some work — I was on the site selection committee for the 2025 International Convention. I was also attending an international conference that AI-Anon was putting on. I was very tired, so I went and sat in some comfy chairs and saw that there was a woman across from me. She looked at me and smiled. And she said, “Hola.” And then she said a few more words in Spanish. So, I said, “Hello.” And then I said a few more words in English. So, both of us knew that neither of us spoke the other's language. Then, she beckoned to me, and I came over. She was wearing a lanyard with the soles of feet outlined and blue and each foot was one of the Twelve Steps, in Spanish. And, in Spanish, she started reading the Steps to me. We both cried. That was the language of the heart.

I really could go all day, but the last thing I am going to share is how, at the International Convention, when the two Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine came out on Terry's arm, I saw the love they had for us and the love that Terry had for them. That was the language of the heart, reaching out to us, across all the years, and I was truly moved. Thank you for welcoming me into your heart, please know you reside in mine.



Pam R., Class B Past Trustee, 2009-2013

One of the forums I attended, as a regional trustee, was in South Dakota. It was a Native American special forum and it was the most spiritual forum I have ever attended in my entire sobriety. I always love to hear from the first time forum attendees, because it is then that they realize we are real people and not just “some people from New York.” Don, El, and I served the whole four years with Terry Bedient. A fair percentage of Class B trustees who serve on the board seem to have an opinion on everything! But the Class As are very reserved, and they kind of just hold on while the rest of us voice our opinion. They are such a stabilizing influence, and for the wisdom, serenity, intelligence, experience and background they bring — right from the beginning of A.A., we can never repay them. We owe the Class A trustees a debt of gratitude. That is all I wanted to say, except to voice my concern — and it has been and is my concern — about self-support. We began to look at that when I was at A.A.W.S., when we realized that we would not be able to continue to sell a million Big Books a year, like we had for decades. Among other responsibilities, the Board must be visionary and anticipatory and plan for what we are going to do when that happens — when we do not sell a million Big Books a year. But sitting here, I am reminded of what good hands we are in.

Don M., Past Trustee-at-large/U.S. (B), 2009-2013

I love this event, I love this forum, I love this region, and I love Alcoholics Anonymous. It reminds me of an event I attended in my family recently. Forums are kind of like a family wedding, in a sense. I’m not the groom or the bride of the wedding, but I have a family member — who I love — who has their special day, loves the person they are marrying, and they are having a great day. My role, really, is to stand back and watch the continuity of my family. I feel the same way at this event — it is really not about me. I’m part of it and I play a small role, but it isn’t about me. Also, if it is like my family, there are probably some people who step out in the parking lot and there is going to be a fight.

I want to talk about continuity and “them and us.” Our service structure is about continuity — we know that from Bernard Smith’s talk. It isn’t about me, it isn’t about my home group, but it is about the drunk stumbling in from the night. That is what a service structure should be doing. If we can’t connect the dots between the activity in front of us and continuity, then maybe we are not doing what we should be doing. But, regarding “them and us” — I have been thinking about it all weekend. There is always going to be a “them and us,” because in the most basic sense, “us” is people in A.A. and “them” are the still-suffering alcoholic.

But structurally, the original way our board was set up, as the Alcoholic Foundation, it was set up to be constituted of “thems” — of Class A trustees who existed for the purpose of not letting us wreck our Fellowship and serving as good stewards. But there were struggles between the “them” and “us”. In the early 60s, Bill W. didn’t persuade others on all the issues he believed in, but ultimately there was a compromise in the number of “us” (alcoholics on the Board) and “them” — the Class A trustee members.

Having served on the board, it’s almost laughable to think of Class A trustees bonding together on a vote, for example. But what does happen, and happens today, is we have a structure held together by its different parts and pieces. I’ve said, from time to time, that are things held together by tension that are pretty impressive structures. The Golden Gate Bridge is a

structure held together by tension. If you asked a cable in the Golden Gate Bridge “how do you it?” It would probably answer “Ugh, I’m under tension! It’s awful!” So being in it, it’s tense. I loved being on the board, but probably some of my least favorite moments were going to board meetings. That’s straight up honest, but I cherished the opportunity to be on the board. The part about the structure — it has to have balance. And when we are out of whack and out of balance, that’s when I start feeling like it’s “them” and “us.” And if the “we” at the top of the structure is our groups and we are serving the alcoholic who is still suffering, and we are looking to our continuity, then we are probably in balance.

The way we progressed with our structure and A.A.s balance and continuity is kind of like my family. It’s loud. It’s like having a kid. Taking on that responsibility is loud, and it’s inconvenient. It’s noisy. It doesn’t feel good all the time. And if these little people would simply take my instruction, and follow my script, the world would be better. When A.A. is working, it is loud. A system that works well is full-throated, and alcoholics are people with passion. I’ll remind our Class As (who I love deeply and dearly): If you see an alcoholic in service and they are not passionate, look closely to see if they are stealing something! (Laughter)

EI N., Class A Past Trustee, Southeast region, 2009-2013

I was thinking about Michele Grinberg’s sweet sharing. Language of the Heart – that was our first meeting. It was abbreviated to LOH. To Michele, LOH was the Lobby of the Hotel. But those of us who understand Grapevine speak, we know that is the Language of the Heart room, and that’s where we were going for our meeting. But to Michele, she was going to hang out in the lobby of the hotel. So we worked with her. It came to me, that in communication, when we in A.A. say “The Traditions,” we know what we’re talking about. We might not follow them, but we know what they are. Have you ever tried to explain to a nonalcoholic that we have Traditions with a capital T and then we also have these customs, these small t traditions? That was the only way I could help explain to Michele that “Listen, sometimes people are going to say “tradition” and you’re going to have to find out whether it’s a custom amongst ourselves or is it one of our Twelve Traditions.” I have learned a lot from our Class As in trying to communicate with them. My job today, as a rotated trustee, is to find the next Class A trustee to serve us. But not only is that my job, that is your job. We desperately need people to lead us in service. Not because we have lousy people who are serving us currently, but because we want to make sure that in the future we have people with a passion. A second job that I have is to figure out a way to connect my home group with A.A. as a whole. Yes, we have a G.S.R. and assemblies, and we are connected to our delegate and all that, but we are somehow disconnected. If it wasn’t for all the hard effort of our General Service Office with their communications, regional forums, and Box 4-5-9 and minutes, I would have no idea what is going on in A.A. as a whole. And it isn’t because it isn’t being shared; it is because something is broken in communication. So I am hoping, sometime along the way, I will have a brilliant idea that will save us all.

So what happens after rotation? This time I can stand up here and not totally fall apart. But I have fallen apart throughout the whole weekend because I miss you desperately. My service to A.A. in going and doing the task was part of a very special job. What I miss is my accountability to you and to your passion, and my responsibility to try to help make A.A. better so that you can do a better job — that is what I miss. Not being trustee is hard. It’s not hard for me to go because you need *me*, it’s hard to go because I need *you*. Grief and missing you

was something I've struggled with. I've never stopped attending my home group, I've never stopped being of service, being available, sponsoring women, and all that continues, but after rotation, I needed a new life — new direction and new passion. If you have retired and you don't have something to get up and go do, then it's a very empty world. At least once a week, maybe more, I go to the zoo. And I can help people learn about our animals and our fragile world. I'm a docent. Who would have thought that I would be taking someone back to feed a giraffe — someone who had never seen a giraffe? I have learned so much, so it's not just about having something to do, it's about being able to continue to learn. To continue to teach, be engaged, and be part of life. I am also going to Africa, Galapagos, Peru, and Costa Rica. After that, I'll be living in a refrigerator box because I'll have no money, but life does go on after rotation. It takes a lot of effort to face big feelings, but it takes no effort to continue to love you.

Howard L., Class B Past Trustee, Southeast region, 2005-2009

Most families have what is known as the crazy uncle. Most groups have a member, a man or woman, who, when they begin to talk (particularly at a business meeting), people cringe and say, "What's coming *now*?" My name is Howard, I am an alcoholic, and I am *that* guy.

When I rotated, apparently I got different directions than what others got. They told me, what you are supposed to do now is comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable. I've made that my mission ever since I have rotated. When Bill was writing Tradition 9, he references the oldtimers who "view with alarm for the good of A.A." He said they meet the most stubborn resistance or, worse still, laughter.

I think he was talking about himself, because right after that is when he and Dr. Bob got involved in initiating plans for the General Service Conference. So I wonder if they were thinking, "I view with concern the good of A.A., so maybe we'd better do something." I am sort of in that school right now. I view with concern for the future of Alcoholics Anonymous. I don't know how I ended up in the preacher's spot, but here I am and I am going to make the best of it.

You're familiar with Washingtonians and the Oxford Group, right? What do they have in common? They are gone. The other thing they have in common is that they have had success (or not) with recovering alcoholics. And that is where we came from. Another thing that they have in common is that they lost their focus. They tried to become all things to all people. That's why I am concerned with Alcoholics Anonymous today. I am concerned that we are losing our focus. If you listen here, and in business meetings, and to a lot of the conversation that comes from the General Service Board, we are focused on (secondarily) things like diversity, we are focused on having new people brought into A.A. We have to raise money because... fill in the blank. And we report worst-case scenarios. Our financial projection by 2020 we are going to be through our reserves. We'll be out of business. As was pointed out, that's not really the case, but when we hear that, well, I don't know about you, but I am sort of a reactionary alcoholic. When I hear that the sky is falling, I react to that. And I don't ever react in a good way; I overreact.

All of these things, individually, are not bad. Diversity in Alcoholics Anonymous is not a bad thing, it's just not a goal. What A.A. is supposed to do, as I understand it, is make sure that it is not possible to open the door any wider than it already is; to make sure that anyone who

wants to come in can come in. And we are to carry a message that says “I don’t care who you are or where you came from, or if the Martians have landed, if you are alcoholic like me, come on in!” That’s the diversity that we have. It’s not that we go out and target segments of the population and say, “well, we don’t have enough of Martians. Let’s go get some.”

We call it “membership growth,” or getting people in, and that is how we are saying it. But we don’t need more people coming in. We need the alcoholics who want to get sober coming in. If that is a higher number — great. If that is a constant number — great. But it shouldn’t be about looking at the population number and saying, “we are growing — that’s good” or “we are not growing — that’s bad.”

The real message is this: Go to the A.A. groups. Do we have new members there who are working the Steps, learning the Traditions, and staying sober?

We say we are not growing, but if you look at the membership survey, that’s not the message it conveys, and I’m not even a fan of the membership survey. But it says our largest segments of people are in the 1-5 year sobriety range. If we don’t have new people coming in, that means that everyone is relapsing and staying at the one to five year cycle. I don’t see that, so apparently we have new people coming in.

But I don’t think focusing on membership growth is what Alcoholics Anonymous is intended to do. I think what we, as a Fellowship, should be doing, at any level, is focusing on the spiritual program of Alcoholics Anonymous, carrying it to every alcoholic out there who wants to get sober — and not just to anyone who is an alcoholic, but an alcoholic who wants to get sober. If we got all alcoholics, we’d have, maybe, ten times the amount of people in our rooms, but about ten percent really want to get sober and come to Alcoholics Anonymous. That’s what we need to work on. If we do that, we will be fulfilling our mission. If we sink the ship because we are worried that we are not reaching the Martians, it will be like the scenario referenced somewhere in our literature. There, it refers to a future time where there will be drunks, like me, who heard about a thing called Alcoholics Anonymous, who heard they had an answer, but what a crying shame it’s not there anymore.

I will close with this: We have a solution to our problem; it’s called the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. We have directions for addressing things in our service structure. That is called the Twelve Concepts for World Service. If we use those principles to guide us, we will get to where we are supposed to go. If we don’t, we are screwed, plain and simple. Bernard Smith looked at a similar situation. He said, in A.A. Comes of Age:

“Clearly, I thought, the Twelve Steps of A.A. must have been spiritually conceived to meet a serious and growing challenge to all of us, nonalcoholic as well as alcoholic. What is that challenge? It is the challenge to a generation that will deny the spiritual basis to human existence, and to accept in its place a currently socially accepted basis that is mechanistic and materialistic. It is a challenge to which A.A. will never yield, for the tenet of its faith and indeed its existence is founded on the certainty of a Spiritual basis for life on earth.”

That’s our message to alcoholics, not to the rest of the world.

Dick G., Class B Past Trustee, Southeast region, 2001-2005

I am a “has-been.” I “has been” a G.S.R., I “has been” a D.C.M., I “has been” a delegate, and I “has been” a trustee. I have traveled as far down the triangle as you can go. I cannot describe to you the pleasure and joy I have had in all of these years of service and from all of your support. I have visited all of the areas of the southeast and I have gotten to work with all of your delegates.

Everyone is expressing gratitude for our Class A trustees. Why do we need Class A trustees? Because they do not think like us! They don't. They sit there, at board meetings, while we are all fired up. And we present the solution that makes sense to us, and they are sitting there, with these wide eyes, clearly wondering what we could possibly be thinking. And then they address the issues, and then we are the ones to sit there with big eyes. Somewhere in between their guidance and wisdom, we are able to come up with a solution that makes sense to both of us.

After 12 years of being out, you would think that I have finally accepted that I have rotated. But there has never been a position, from ashtray cleaner to trustee, that I have ever wanted to rotate from. I have always loved the experience — despite some of the bumps in the road. After watching today's presentations, and the wisdom that came through this microphone, I don't know why we let them rotate. We need the knowledge and experience that is achieved by these long timers who have come through this Fellowship.

I envy you, here at this forum, for your future experiences, the new technologies, and the new situations you will need to face and address. If you text me, do not expect a response. I do not have a smartphone. I have a phone. It stays in my car. If I get lost, I call my office on it and say, “How am I supposed to get where I am supposed to go?” However, I believe that we need the new technologies that are out in order to carry the message to the so many alcoholics dying from this disease. So, my message to you, to those younger in sobriety who are coming into this Fellowship, is don't be afraid to use the new media. Do you think, if Bill W. were alive today, we would not be on Facebook? Do you think we would not be tweeting, twittering, whatever it is? We would be using them — we would find a way. And you will find a way. Not me. I have had my turn. It is your turn now. Thank you.

CLOSING REMARKS

Terry Bedient, Class A (nonalcoholic) General Service Board Chairperson

***This is the last Regional Forum Terry will close as Chairperson of the General Service Board**

Terry Bedient, Class A (nonalcoholic) General Service Board Chairperson

I just took a big gulp of water. So I hope I can make it through this for a couple of reasons.

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable. That's where it all starts. I am Terry Bedient, just another amateur who loves what A.A. can do for the alcoholic. Thank you for inviting the General Service Board and the G.S.O. and the Grapevine here to this Regional Forum. To all of my old and new friends in the southeast region — you made it all worthwhile, and for Cecilia, the host committee chair, and for the host committee, you made us feel truly welcomed, so thank you. And to my travelling buddy Ivelisse, thank you for guiding me through each and every forum I've served on this General Service Board and our Regional forums. I have to say that I have the privilege of serving with the best board that's ever been. We'll talk some more about that a little bit later. I am not really a Giants fan, but I wear a tie with a Giants logo to honor those giants of A.A. that we have on the stage, including Chet and Dick, Michelle, El, Don, Howard, Pam. It's humbling for me just to be up here in the same space as those guys, so that's why I am wearing the Giants tie. It's an honor to even be here. The other part of the story is that the tie came from an A.A. member who just happened to be a New York Giants football player. So it's something I'll treasure for the rest of my life. Chet, thank you for your service, your visionary service on the board has been helpful, I can't express how much I appreciate that. I had a great speech prepared, Steve said I should shelve it and just talk about my experience in A.A. so maybe someday you'll invite me back to give the real speech.

My auspicious start in the Twelve Steps came in grad school when my professor was talking about the relationship between A.A. and Al-Anon and assigned each student to do a visit and a report on a Twelve Step group that had been approved by A.A. to adapt the Twelve Steps. So I was assigned Emotions Anonymous. If there are Emotions Anonymous members here, I am sure it is a great group — I can always share my own experience, strength, and hope. There were about 15 people at the meeting, they sat in a circle and read their Twelve Steps. It was a discussion meeting, and the topic was, well . . . sexual positions.

I didn't share, and I didn't keep coming back. I think I passed the course. Several years later, I was a young army officer in charge of an alcohol and drug clinic, and one day a senior sergeant, probably a C.P.C. member, said, "I want to show you how alcoholics really stay sober." So, off we went to an open meeting. There were about a dozen of the most cheerful, friendly and happy people I have ever met. And we had a very nice meeting. For some reason, I kept having this compulsion to say, "I am not alcoholic, I'm just visiting. I'm not alcoholic, I'm just visiting." I perceived the fact that they were smiling when I said that was because they were cheerful, but they'd probably heard that expression somewhere before.

Originally I went to college to study music and then counseling. But decided that both of those things require talent, and so I went into administration. My job currently is directing a statewide program monitoring the recovery of physicians throughout the state. You might think that doctors, equipped with prescription pad, we would have mostly outside issues. Not so. Despite the other problems, 70% of the physicians in the program are alcoholic. And I've had the privilege of observing what A.A. can do for several thousand recovering physicians and I've also seen the devastation when they don't grab the program, and most of them who embrace A.A. are, in fact, successful.

Our state's chief judge appointed a commission a number of years ago to study the question, "Is there an alcoholism problem among the 150,000 lawyers in the state?" The chief judge agreed with you, and I was appointed to oversee an employee assistance program that was really A.A. based and for several years I was privileged to attend an A.A. retreat for this lawyers program as a guest of Judge Charlie a distinguished Supreme Court Judge. For me, the most moving part was, and still is, the sobriety countdown. They did it in a different way, but it really was the same thing. So, Charlie stood up for 33 years. I was really impressed. The next year Charlie stood up for 34 years and I was really impressed. The third year, the countdown started. Charlie stood up at 29 days . . . And it didn't surprise me that you would love Charlie back in, but what really surprised me was that Charlie trusted you; he trusted you to love him back in.

So I was thinking about Charlie, years later, when I was asked to consider A.A. service. Someone once said about general service – you don't find general service. It finds you. It was 2005 that I spoke at a professional program, kind of A.A.-based, and after the meeting a guy named John K. took me aside, introduced himself as an alcoholic and a trustee, and he asked if might consider serving as a trustee on the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was chagrined that I had misled him into thinking I was an alcoholic. And not having a more intelligent reply, I stammered something like, "I am not an alcoholic, I'm just visiting." John had a great laugh, at my expense, and then began to explain about the General Service Board: 14 trustees are alcoholic, 7 are nonalcoholic. Immediately, I spotted the problem. Two-thirds majority — alcoholics were going to all vote alike. But I quickly learned that alcoholics don't think alike, and don't vote alike and I am grateful for the richness and diversity that the Fellowship provides to the General Service Board through trustees from various walks of life and thoughts.

A.A. has provided me with the opportunity to work on many things, including humility. My very first talk as a trustee was at a service assembly that happened to be in the state of Massachusetts. I was nervous and so asked the delegate for some speaking advice and she said, "Don't lie, don't swear, and don't let it go to your head." I could pretty much figure out what "don't lie" meant and "don't swear" meant, but I said, "What does this mean, 'don't let it go to your head'?" She said, "Oh, Terry, they clap for everybody." They did clap for me.

As I look at my A.A. service I may have a bit of survival skill because alcoholism is something that has not touched my family at all. But there might be another side of the coin. Because my family may not have the same spiritual support that members have come to appreciate from being a part of this wonderful Fellowship.

New on board, I surveyed trustees based on their perceptual difference between the Class A and the Class B trustee. Some of it was really powerful, but here are a few that I will share with you:

1. Which Class is more fun? Class Bs are more fun!
2. Everyone knows why a Class B is here, but nobody knows why a Class A is here. Some members think the term "Class A trustee" means an inmate on pass from prison.
3. Class As receive gratification by observing the gift of sobriety. Class Bs find that they cannot keep the priceless gift unless they give it away.

As a new trustee I did have some surprises. I was surprised to learn that anonymity is more about preserving the Fellowship than protecting the anonymity of an A.A. member. As my friend Tom, from Canada said, A.A. anonymity protects A.A. from alcoholics. I was surprised at the amount of good humor at A.A. meetings. Every level I've been there has been a good deal of humor, never at anybody's expense. And so I've come to expect laughter in A.A.

I was surprised to learn that A.A. is not an anti-alcohol organization. New to the board, I attended a dinner in San Antonio, for past trustees and their guests. I was greeted at the door by a lovely young lady offering me a drink. My first thought was, I am in the wrong room. My second thought was, is this a great Fellowship or what? They serve alcohol at A.A. meetings! But soon I recognized that A.A. is not about alcohol, but rather about this devastating disease and recovery from it. I was surprised that despite all of our instructive literature, A.A. is not a "you should" Fellowship. But it is a "we did" Fellowship — capturing the indescribable magic of one alcoholic talking to another.

I was surprised to discover that A.A. literature does not portray the founders, Bill and Dr. Bob, as saints, but quite the opposite. The incredible contribution made by our imperfect founders, and by the millions of you who have followed in their footsteps gives hope to all of us, like Bill W., who are painfully aware of our weaknesses. I was surprised to learn that in A.A. the process is often more important than the resulting decision. And I was surprised that the General Service Board has no authority to set policy for any group in any way, shape, or form. A.A. may have some problems, but one problem we do not have is a lack of enthusiasm, energy and creativity in Y.P.A.A. Special interest activities are a vital part of Alcoholics Anonymous and young people are a prime example of the diverse and inclusive nature of A.A. You truly made me feel welcome, but at times I felt kind of like a duck out of water. And I tell this story with permission:

At lunch during a board weekend members were sharing booze stories, so I joined in. So I said, while on vacation I discovered a product called Everclear. And brought it home to share with my friends at a party. We poured out shots and discovered it was too strong, poured the shots back into the bottle and it still sits in my basement. Across the table Cindy blurted out, "I can tell you're not an alcoholic." So I said, "Why?" So she ripped out, in rapid fire succession, "Well, because you had friends, you shared the best stuff, you used a glass, you found that alcohol was too strong, you poured the shots back into the bottle and in your basement there is a bottle that you know about."

Years ago, my friend in Winter, Gary Glenn, his advice to me as a new trustee was, "If you are ever asked to read "How It Works" don't do it." And I didn't quite understand that, wanting

to be helpful, but I understood it after reading about Bernard Smith's nickel therapy plan. Remember, that was Bernard Smith's plan to give a drunks a nickel to call him if they ever felt like drinking? Bernard said they called only after they ran out of more suitable drinking plans. But he said, that rarely, if ever, can a nonalcoholic help the alcoholic. Bern said we don't enjoy the advantage that you have of directly helping your neighbor. So we help in other ways.

As a nonalcoholic I see miracles in A.A. Maybe different than you, but the ones I see are the miracle of the alcoholic who finds another chance of life through this wonderful Fellowship. There is the miracle of the A.A. group, which operates with autonomy except to the group conscience. And there is a miracle that for eight decades, A.A. has been able to maintain a consistent message of hope and recovery within a Fellowship that operates without rules and mandates. And even no membership criteria. Save a desire to stop drinking. Thank for the opportunity to serve this wonderful Fellowship, I'm not alcoholic, I'm just visiting and thanks for letting me visit.
