

The Rocky Road to the First General Service Conference of A.A.

The path to the first General Service Conference, held in 1951, was far from smooth. Bill W. had years earlier become convinced that Alcoholics Anonymous needed an annual meeting that would allow for input from A.A. groups into Headquarters in New York. But his plan stirred furious opposition by many who thought the venture dangerously ill-conceived.

A.A. had grown tremendously in the years since the Alcoholic Foundation had been created in 1938, when there were barely 100 A.A. members. In 1946, when membership had reached about 30,000, Bill had begun formulating a plan for some kind of conference with delegates from A.A. groups around the country. In April 1947, he drew up a proposal entitled “The Alcoholic Foundation of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” in which he described his ideas for such an annual meeting.

In it, Bill writes: “Perhaps the best suggestion for closing the gap between our Alcoholic Foundation and the A.A. Groups is the idea of creating what we might call The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous.... The Conference, we think, ought to be composed of a fair number of good A.A. members meeting annually, at which time we would seat our present Headquarters down in their midst. Our Service Headquarters people... would be members of the Conference also.... The Conference would then hear the reports of each headquarters department, making whatever recommendation it chose in that connection.”

A conference, Bill said, “would bring our Trustees into friendly contact with a representative cross-section of A.A.... and it would permanently close that gap of remoteness in which Dr. Bob, I, and others, are still standing.” In a statement that most found unconvincing, Bill said of his proposed conference, “It ought never... have the slightest political complexion.”

In the beginning, though, there was little enthusiasm for the project. As almost all the 15 Trustees on the board of the Alcoholic Foundation saw it, the Alcoholics Anonymous movement had flourished in the 10 years since the Foundation had been created, and they saw no reason to endorse what looked like a radical change. Bernard Smith, who joined the board as a nonalcoholic trustee in 1946, was alone in supporting the plan. A businessman and a lawyer, Smith’s backing over the next few years was to prove crucial.

Bill’s frustration at his lack of progress in convincing the board of the value of his proposal is revealed in a letter he wrote to Father Ed Dowling on April 10, 1948, in which he says of the trustees: “The idea of sharing their prerogatives with a conference... has not been very palatable. Neither do some of them like the notion of corporate poverty. They insist on putting me into an ivory tower, meanwhile keeping a firm grip on authority, titles and money. All of them talk a good line of democracy, but I fear some are totalitarians at heart.”



Assembled in the Commodore Hotel in New York in 1953 are delegates to the third of the trial A.A. General Service Conferences that Bill W. fought hard to institute. At the lectern is Bernard Smith, the only early supporter among the Trustees for the conference proposal.

Those on the receiving end of Bill's importuning, though, objected to what they saw as his abrasiveness.

In a letter to Bill in August 1948, a nonalcoholic trustee writes: "you were certainly not diplomatic in your manner of presentation and this has led to the injection of personalities, rumors, accusations, etc., which have no place in this discussion." In the same letter, the trustee writes: "I have found in conversations with AA's from California, Florida, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New York, Virginia and the District of Columbia, that they are not in favor of a conference. About the nearest thing to an endorsement has been a tolerant, 'Sure, let's have a conference — the boys will have a good time.'"

One angry faction that opposed the conference called itself the Orthodox Group, and included Henrietta Seiberling among its few members. In a letter she wrote at the time she charged that Bill was motivated by greed and suffering from delusions of grandeur, and that, "we want the people in the Groups to know just what the dangers are."

One nonalcoholic trustee, Leonard Harrison, resigned over the issue, saying in a February 1948 letter to Bill: "I have felt that a degree of isolation of the Foundation from the main currents of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement has been, and would continue to be, a stabilizing factor in dealing with the necessary 'housekeeping,' legal, and financial affairs of the A.A. headquarters. The somewhat intricate relationships envisaged in your plans... will invite more troubles than solutions, I believe."

Harrison later rejoined the board and was credited by Bill with a being calming influence that helped the Foundation weather the controversy.

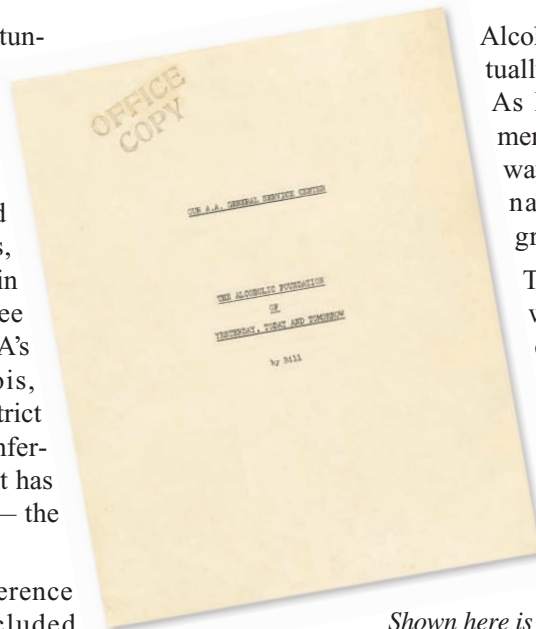
Bill candidly admitted that his headstrong approach was creating ill-will, but felt it was unavoidable. In an April 1948 letter to Father Dowling, he writes: "The collision has been



Leonard Harrison, a nonalcoholic trustee, at first resigned in disagreement over the issue of a conference.

pretty severe and awfully painful to me. It's pretty difficult to oppose one's best friends. Because of my recent mood of exasperated table thumping, [Horace C.] and two of the Rockefeller men have resigned. It's too bad. I suppose force is never justified in these situations, but I did use it. I felt that if I didn't, the Groups someday would, and that would cause a much worse course."

Bill feared that after he and Dr. Bob passed on, the



Shown here is a copy of the April 1947 proposal for an annual gathering of representatives from A.A. groups that Bill W. sent to the Board of Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation. The response to the proposal was strongly unenthusiastic.

Alcoholic Foundation would eventually suffer a loss of legitimacy. As Bill saw it, such a development would hurt A.A. in various ways, including diminished financial support from A.A. groups for the New York office.

This rationale for a conference was seized on by a critic who charged that the proposal was a "scheme to create a swift, swelling and continuous stream of revenue which shall flow into the New York treasury, there to be used for the aggrandizement of a bureaucratic Headquarters."

Writing to an A.A. member in San Diego at the end of 1947, Bill says: "we shall have to do something... about the New York Headquarters.

A self-perpetuating Board of Trustees unknown to most A.A. members could never stand up over the long future. So we shall have to have some kind of annual conference in which out-of-towners delegated for the purpose would sit down and talk things over with the Trustees, the office, and the Grapevine, and make a joint annual report to the Groups."

Summing up the thorny problem of how to bring off such a meeting, he adds, "But how in the hell to choose this conference without politics and uproar has always been the puzzle."

Bill and Lois Cross the Country

Starting in February 1948, Bill and Lois took what turned out to be a three-month trip around the country to visit A.A. groups. Bill wrote that the purpose of the trip was to "help explain and consolidate the Traditional material I have been publishing in the Grapevine."

During that trip A.A. members told Bill they backed his idea, but he was skeptical, as he indicates in his letter to Father Dowling: "On this trip I've been presenting a tentative plan for the selection of conference delegates. It seems to have met with almost 100 per cent approval. Approval seems almost too unanimous. I sometimes think the boys are 'yessing me.'"

Opposition at New York Headquarters meanwhile had him stymied, and in a letter to Dr. Bob dated July 6, 1948, Bill writes: "Though for the time being I have quit pressing the Conference business, it did seem wise to set down on paper an outline of the material I have been presenting for groups and the Trustees."

Bill knew that he needed the blessing of the co-founder of A.A. for his plan, and he had turned to him early on in his campaigning. Dr. Bob, though, at first failed to see the need for a conference.

In that letter to Dr. Bob, Bill refers to the “long and fruitless debate” at Headquarters. “At the moment, the situation seems quiet. Most of the alcoholics on the Board are due to get off at the year end. But... they will probably try to nominate as their successors people who think as they do — people who will keep the office well smacked down and see to it that we have no representative conference... Unless, of course, the groups set up loud cries for one or you and I insist something be done.”

Bill sought to persuade Dr. Bob to go along and to do so on the record: “if we can both agree what sort of a program for a conference we wish to see some day inaugurated, I will then attach to this material [i.e., the proposal for a conference] a letter that such is our joint wish... If the undertaker got both of us while our Trustees and friends are still thinking things over, there would exist a clean-cut record of how we felt the conference ought to be got underway.”

A short time before Dr. Bob died of the cancer he'd been suffering from (he passed away on Nov. 16, 1950), he and Bill met. It was then that Dr. Bob gave his blessing to the conference plan.

Conference Granted Trial Run

Shortly thereafter, the trustees gave their grudging consent. As Bob P., who years later was general manager of the G.S.O., wrote in his account of the period: “the trustees voted reluctantly to ‘give the Conference a try.’ It was agreed that Conferences would be held on an experimental basis from 1951 through 1954, and that in 1955 the whole concept would be evaluated and a final decision made.”

Bill always credited Bernard Smith, known as the “architect of the Conference” for his role in its formation, with convincing fellow board members that the plan had enough value to merit a trial.

There were many details to be worked out, including how the Conference was to be funded, how representation from around the U.S. and Canada would be apportioned, how the delegates were to be elected, and how much authority the Conference would have. Bill put all his ideas for how these issues should be handled in a booklet called “The Third Legacy” (later to be expanded into *The A.A. Service Manual*.)

In a letter to Leonard Harrison at the end of 1950, another

trustee writes: “A substantial portion of the pamphlet is devoted to a witches’ brew of elections, assemblies, representatives, delegates, tellers, chairmen, secretaries, treasurers, committeemen ‘available’ and committeemen ‘unavailable’, election by trial, election by lot, reports, duties, panel No. 1, panel No. 2, one-year delegates, two-year delegates, extra delegates and so on, all of which means ‘politics’ in anybody’s vocabulary and understanding, vehement protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.”

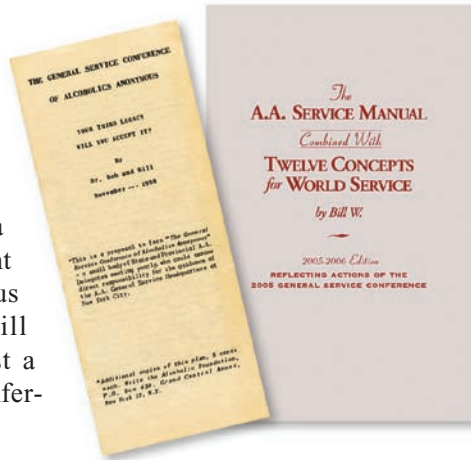
On April 20, 1951, though, 37 delegates from the U.S. and Canada came to New York and spent three days meeting with the 15 trustees, Bill, staff members from G.S.O. and the Grapevine.

For those at Headquarters, this first visit created some anxiety. Dennis Manders, who was comptroller of the G.S.O., at the time had this to say: “The feeling was that, wow, here are all these out-of-state examiners coming in, like bank examiners, to see what we are doing.” He goes on to say, though, that “Very quickly it settled into the typical feel of a General Service Conference, even that first one.”

That Conference and the three that followed during this trial period were a vindication of Bill’s original vision that an annual meeting of delegates from A.A. groups could work for the good of Alcoholics Anonymous.

His comments at the closing session of the 1954 Conference, the last of the four trial gatherings, indicate his great relief and happiness at the success of his plan: “As recently as six or eight years ago, my own confidence in our destiny was terribly shaken... The debate was about whether or not we would have a Conference. Back in those days the Traditions had just taken form..., but there still remained this terrific question of how to guarantee our overall function, and how to create a structure that could withstand power drivers and the ravages of time and of adverse circumstances.”

He went on to say: “Today, in this last hour of the time of experiment, I share with you the promise of its certain success and am more moved than at almost any time in my A.A. life. The moment of the transfer of authority to serve, from us old timers to the movement, is at hand.”



“The Third Legacy” booklet shown here contained Bill W.’s ideas for the many organizational details pertaining to the General Service Conference. It was later expanded into The A.A. Service Manual.

Coming Soon:

Markings via Email

Soon you will be able to have the latest *Markings* delivered directly to your email inbox. Stay tuned for details about how to subscribe to the electronic *Markings*.

