

■ A.A. 101: How Our Upside-Down Structure Makes The Fellowship Go Round

Scores of A.A. members, many of them active in sponsorship and service at their home groups, admit to being clueless about how A.A. functions organizationally in the U.S./Canada and worldwide. They may be familiar with the names of a variety of entities, from the General Service Board to A.A. World Services, Inc., but ask, How did they come about? What do they do? How does one relate to the other? Many also wonder, Why do we have Class A (non-alcoholic) and Class B (alcoholic) trustees? How come some are called "regional" while others are "general?" And, finally, what does all this have to do with me and my group?

The most vital, yet least understood, group of services that A.A. has are those that enable us to function as a whole, namely, the General Service Office, A.A. World Services, Inc., the A.A. Grapevine, Inc., and our Board of Trustees, known legally as the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our worldwide unity and much of our growth since early times are traceable to these entities.

Until 1950, these overall services were the sole function of a few old-time A.A.s, several nonalcoholic friends, Doctor Bob, and Bill W.

From the beginning, A.A. co-founders Dr. Bob and Bill W. sought, as Dr. Bob cautioned, to "not louse this thing up. Let's keep it simple!" ("Pass It On," p. 342) Yet back when A.A. was but a dozen years old, they were drafting a blueprint to insure the future of the movement they had begun. In an open letter to "Dear A.A.s," in the October 1947 issue of the Grapevine, Bill expressed their vision in broad strokes: "Perhaps we A.A.s can become a new kind of human society. To a degree hitherto unknown, A.A. may be able to function upon the power of its own fundamental principles rather than upon the prestige or inspiration of a highly personalized leadership.... Deep down, I think we A.A.s have begun to sense this magnificent possibility. The widening conviction that active leadership ought to be transitory and rotating; that each A.A. group with respect to its own affairs need be accountable only to its own conscience...." (*The Language of the Heart*, pp.108-09)

At the top of A.A.'s upside-down organization, as it often has been called, are the more than 60,000 groups in the U.S. and Canada. These groups, which communicate through their general service representatives (G.S.R.s) and district committee members (D.C.M.s), use their area assemblies as conduits for the election of 93 delegates from areas

across the U.S./Canada to the General Service Conference, which meets annually in April, in New York City. As Concept I states, the Conference is the ultimate conscience of A.A. It holds "final responsibility and the ultimate A.A. authority for world services...." Remarkably, it materialized through the urging of Bill W. and Dr. Bob and, in effect, replaced what Bill called their "prestige-clothed leadership."

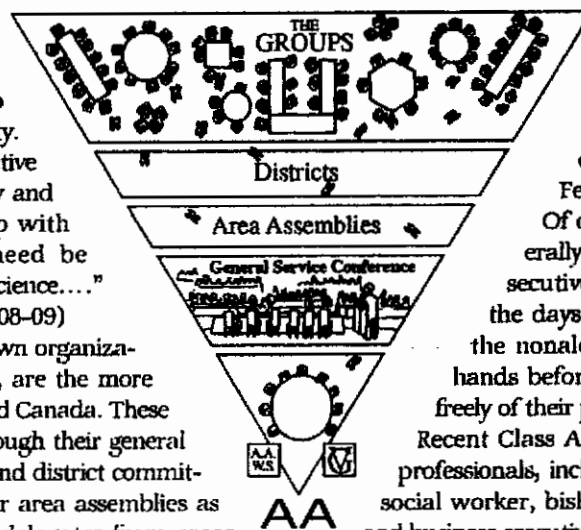
The first Conference, which convened in 1951, linked the Board of Trustees with the entire Fellowship. Until then the board had been a separate entity, basically handling the finances of the Fellowship's first effort at organization, the Alcoholic Foundation (renamed the General Service Board of A.A. in 1954) including its publishing arm, Works Publishing, Inc. The first board consisted of five trustees, three nonalcoholics and two alcoholics—Dr. Bob and a New York A.A. member. The New Yorker "soon got drunk," Bill later recounted, "but this possibility had been foreseen—drunkenness on the part of an alcoholic trustee meant immediate resignation. Another alcoholic was named in his place, and we proceeded to business."

This occurred in 1938, just three years after Bill and Dr. Bob had their celebrated first meeting in Akron. There were no "oldtimers"—an A.A. with even four or five years of continuous sobriety was unknown; most members were barely dry. Helping each other to keep the bottle corked was the tall order of the day, and dealing with matters pertaining to foundations, trusteeships and organizational procedures was heady stuff. At the time, much of the public and press dubiously viewed early A.A.s as "reformed tipplers" or "elbow benders" who "used Bible-thumping methods to help lift drunkards

onto the water wagon, many straight from the gutter." In most quarters, A.A. trusteeship was regarded as less than prestigious. But the nonalcoholic trustees were needed in the early days to keep the new Fellowship afloat.

Of our nonalcoholic trustees, who generally may be elected to serve two consecutive three-year terms, Bill wrote: "In the days when A.A. was unknown, it was the nonalcoholic trustees who held up our hands before the general public. ... They gave freely of their professional and financial wisdom."

Recent Class A trustees include a wide range of professionals, including a psychiatrist, former judge, social worker, bishop, correctional facilities warden and business executive.



From "The Twelve Concepts for World Service Illustrated" P-8

For 23 years the nonalcoholic trustees continued to outnumber the alcoholics by a majority of one. Then in 1961, when the Fellowship felt it had the experience to chart its own course, the ratio changed dramatically. The board was reorganized to include seven Class A and 14 Class B trustees. To date the chairperson has always been elected from the ranks of the Class A trustees. The 21 trustees select the directors of two corporations operating under the A.A. umbrella—A.A. World Services, Inc. and the A.A. Grapevine, Inc. They also have overall responsibility for the General Service Office.

Of the 14 Class B trustees, each serving a four-year term, six are from the U.S. and two from Canada. Additionally, there are two trustees-at-large, one from the U.S. and one from Canada. Finally, there are four general service trustees, two from the A.A. World Services Board and two from the Grapevine; they serve on these boards and are available at any time for the solution of problems on which the General Service Office or Grapevine staff members need help. Because of this requirement, all general service trustees originally came from the greater metropolitan New York area and were sometimes known as "in-town trustees." With the advent of faster transportation and technology, an Advisory Action of the General Service Conference recommended in 1989 that these positions no longer be restricted to greater New York area residents.

In addition to selecting the directors of A.A.W.S. and the Grapevine, the trustees carry out their duties in a committee system to consider and act on the various matters that come before them. Several trustees' committees seek the participation of members with strong experience—A.A. or professional—in such areas as corrections, treatment facilities, public information and literature, to name some.

Most every A.A. is familiar with the A.A. Grapevine. Only nine years younger than the Fellowship itself, the Grapevine was the brainchild of several New York members who in 1944 had the "crazy idea" of starting a local newsletter in order to foster "knowledge and understanding among groups." After receiving a nod from Bill W., the six "ink-stained wretches," as he affectionately dubbed them, managed—on a wing and a prayer and lots of elbow grease in place of money—to put together the first eight-page, tabloid-size issue. Today the magazine has been expanded to 64 pages and reaches more than 103,000 subscribers.

La Viña, first published in 1996 by the Grapevine, has been welcomed by thousands of Spanish-speaking members. For many years the Grapevine, Inc. has published spinoffs from the magazine: books, audiocassettes and other material. It has a recently redesigned Web site (www.aagrapevine.org), and a Digital Archive to give the Fellowship access to almost every Grapevine story published. There presently are nine directors on the Grapevine board: two general service trustees, two regional trustees,

one Class A trustee, three nontrustee directors, and the executive editor, who serves as president of the corporation.

Finally, a word about A.A. World Services, Inc. which, among other things, oversees A.A. publishing operations, G.S.O. service activities, implementation of Conference and General Service Board recommendations, copyright concerns and reprint permissions. The A.A.W.S. board is composed of nine directors: two general service trustees, two regional or at-large trustees, three nontrustee directors, one paid staff member and the general manager of G.S.O., who serves as president of the corporation. Because of the number and complexity of the issues A.A.W.S. must deal with, the board does much of its work through four committees—services, finance, publishing and nominating—which meet separately from the full board meeting and make reports and recommendations to the full board.

A.A. has mushroomed dramatically since 1935 when it all began with two drunks, Bill W. and Dr. Bob, sharing their experience, strength and hope in order to stay sober and carry the message of sobriety in A.A.—ultimately around the globe to millions of alcoholics.
