

General Service Conference – 1957  
The Need for Authority Equal to Responsibility  
By Bill W.

The Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous in its present short form suggests that AA shall forever remain unorganized, that we may create special boards or committees to serve us - never governmental in character.

The Second Tradition is the source of all of the authority which, as you know, lies in the group conscience of which this Conference is the articulate voice worldwide.

Those are the basics on which our structure of service rests, whether at the group level, the Intergroup or AA as a whole. What we want of the service is primarily to fill a need that can be met in no other way. The test of any service really is: "Is it necessary." If it is really necessary, then provide it we must, or fail in our duty to AA and those still to come. Experience has shown that certain necessary services are absolutely indispensable at all levels. We make this distinction: The movement itself is never organized in any governmental sense. A member is a member if he says so. He can not be coerced. He cannot be compelled. In that sense we are a source of benign anarchy.

When it comes to the matter of service, the services within themselves obviously have to be organized or they won't work. Therefore the service structure of Alcoholics Anonymous and more especially of this Conference is the blueprint in which we, as flesh and blood people, operate, relate ourselves to each other and provide these needed services. And it is the evolution of this blueprint within which we function that has been my chief concern for the last dozen and a half years.

The usefulness of AA to us in it, and more particularly to all those still to come, even the survival of AA, really depend very much on the soundness of our basic blueprint of relating ourselves together so A.A. can function. That is the primary thing. That is what we have come to call the structure.

Let's have a brief overall look at our structure again. Then see at what point it may possibly need refinement and improvement. I hope we never think that the cathedral of AA is finished. I hope that we will always be able to refine its lines and enhance its beauty and its function.

Very obviously the unit of authority in AA is the AA group itself. That's all the "law" there is. Everything that we have here in the way of authority must come from the groups.

To create the voice of AA's conscience as expressed in the groups, we meet in group assemblies. And then to obviate the usual political pressures, we choose Committeemen and Delegates by the novel methods of no personal nominations and use of a two-thirds vote.

Now arrived here, how are Delegates to be related to the Board of Trustees? It was the original parent of the groups and a hierarchy of service quite appropriate to our infancy, but one which must now become directly amenable to Delegates and those closely linked to Delegates.

That question was responsible for a great deal of thought and speculation in time past. And I think our seven years' experience has suggested that, in broad outline, we are somewhere near right.

The Board of Trustees as a hierarchy had certain great advantages, which we want to keep. For the long pull, it had immense liabilities. It was a law unto itself. Now, it must become a partner. We have the Board, which is more or less of an appointive proposition, and the staff members and directors of services, largely appointed, subject to your consent, of course. We had the problem of how the electees are going to relate to the appointees.

In the first place, in this Conference, we put all of ourselves in the same club. The Trustee, for example, becomes a Conference member with one vote, and a custodial duty. A Director of a service agency becomes a Conference member, with a service duty. At the level of this Conference, we are all equal; we are all in the club. Mind you note that the appointees have been set in a great minority to the electees to insure that Area Delegates will always have adequate powers of persuasion.

The Board of Trustees, you remember, is a legally incorporated entity. It has to be that way first of all to transact business. It has to be that way to give its several members and committees appropriate powers and titles which denote what they do. We have to have that much organization in order to function.

Theoretically, as Bernard Smith has pointed out, the Board of Trustees has been legally undisturbed by all the recent change. Nevertheless, in a Traditional and psychological sense, the Trustees' relations to the groups and to you has been profoundly altered, not because Delegates have legal power but because Trustees know that Delegates are their linkage to AA as a whole. They also very well know that if you don't like what they do, you can go home and cut off Area support.

In order to have anything functional, people have to have an authority to act. Very obviously there are all kinds of questions arising where the basic problem is "Who should act? And where should the committee or board or individual act, and when should he act?" A Conference, a movement, can't actually run anything. A Board of Trustees really can't run anything. We operated on that mistaken idea for a while. We have to classify the kind of thing that each worker, each Board, does - and the kind of thing the Conference does and the kind of thing that AA must do to keep this Fellowship functioning. In other words there must always be an authority equal to the responsibility involved in service work.