

General Service Conference – 1960

On Communication

By Bill W.

*We reference the past and its lessons for so long as those teachings work.
When they don't, we re-adapt and we re-shift. That has been our history.*

This is the 25th anniversary year of our fellowship, it is the 22nd year of our Trusteeship and it is the 10th year of this Conference on which so much of our destiny depends. I wish I had the capability to communicate to you what these 25 years have meant to us — to Lois and me, what the Trusteeship has meant, what the labors and the demonstrations of this Conference has meant. But I really can't do that. I can just make a stab at it.

At a time like this, before thinking about today or tomorrow, old-timers like Lois and me think about the past.

I think a key word, by which you might convey some little part of what has happened, might be the word "communication" — now coming so much into the forefront of our minds.

When you think about it, A.A. is a unique means of communication. Our lives have depended on communication. Our unity depends on communication. Our functioning depends on communication.

Everything is hung on this business of communication. And I can think back to a time when there was virtually none. Lois and I were isolated, and drawing further apart, each in retreat - no communication. Dr. Silkworth makes a communication; it takes some hold on us, first of hope, then -- happily -- of hopelessness.

My sponsor sits across the kitchen table - on which there was no coffee; in those days it was gin. And then the unique communication starts: one drunk talking to another.

So it has been. It has been a story of communication. Well, this Conference is a great network of communication. And as the time approached I tried to visualize how firmly this effort is beginning to rest on a base composed literally of thousands of interested people, trusted servants, working at the business of functioning worldwide: thousands of GSR5, hundreds of committeemen, you Delegates. I tried to imagine you going about your appointed tasks in the year past.

What have you been saying, what have you been feeling, what have you been doing? How many thousands of miles have you traveled? How many man -- and, yes, woman hours - have you put in so that this meeting might be yet another success, our tenth?

So, first of all, on behalf of A.A. worldwide, and all of us who work here in the headquarters, and especially for Lois and me, our warmest affection, our deepest thanks for all that has been done to bring us together at this fine hour.

I can say that the progress of this Third Legacy idea, the growing knowledge, the growing sense of responsibility throughout A.A. is really more rapid than was the adoption of the Traditions, which has now become so firmly imbedded and so cast in iron that, indeed, we have a class of gentlemen whom I call the "Tradition Lawyer," whose construction of the Traditions is so strict that I hardly know them sometimes.

We now come to the topic of this Trusteeship of ours and how it happened. And in a way it was the first great and momentous change in our affairs. In those days, 1938 to be exact, A.A. was a matter of coffee and cake; it was a time of halcyon simplicity and we were almost a secret society. There was no public relations, nothing of that kind. But we began to see, a few of us, that we would have to get into the communication business in a big way.

First of all, how was this message to be transferred from us very few to the millions of drunks who surrounded us, some within gunshot? Well, that meant publicity, and there was the question of literature; this message could be very seriously garbled. There had to be literature. Somehow the experience of the few groups had to be transmitted to the new ones forming.

So it meant that we had to have here in the middle of A.A. an overall service project that could do for A.A. what the groups or areas couldn't do for themselves. And this was the beginning of our Trusteeship.

What our friends, the non- alcoholics, have done for this Society is beyond anybody's estimate.

We are in yet an era of change. Our Twelve Steps probably won't change, the Traditions, not at all likely. But our manner of communications, our manner of organizing ourselves for function or service-let us hope that this goes on changing for the better, forever.

There is a very natural resistance we have toward change. We are apt to say, "Well, it worked very well the way it was, so why change?" But, after all, we have undertaken several tremendous changes.

You will remember that in the very early days, people said: Well, why a self appointed Trusteeship? Later, people said, Why a book? and now, in 1960, very many people say, Why a Conference?

So I cite that to show that, on good evidence, with the need clearly in sight, we are indeed ready to make all kinds of change. Not that any great changes are in prospect, but I think that we ought to stay open-minded on this matter of change.

We reference the past and its lessons for so long as those teachings work. When they don't, we readapt and we re-shift. That has been our history. The lessons of the past, however, are something that we ought to preserve. Sometimes we go to the other tack, throwing out the baby with the bath water, ignoring the lessons of the past. We might want to change, but we must also understand the past and its lessons. In connection with this Service Conference, I have been trying to do a set of interpretive essays, and have cast up a new batch of points, called "Twelve Concepts for World Service."

You will remember that our Third Legacy manual, except for its little historical sketch, is a manual of procedure. It tells you the *how* - how do we serve as group representatives, as committeemen, as delegate, trustees, directors, staff and so on. Now these essays would attempt, on the basis of the lessons of the past of our history, to show the *why* of it. How did we happen to get related together in this way, and what have been the lessons? There are a few suggestions for change in these points.

The basic thing to remember is that we began to function here in these services almost exactly as a group started to function.

There was a little meeting in Akron in 1937 and Dr. Bob and I proposed to create something to provide an overall service. So we got authorization. In other words the small group conscience of that meeting of 18 by a majority of about one, incidentally -- asked me to come back to New York, as at least a fairly trusted servant, to start this jump.

So Dr. Bob and I had all of the authority, and all of the responsibility there was, to create a service structure. So we got authorization. In other words, the small group conscience of that meeting of eighteen (by a majority of about one, incidentally) asked me to come back to New York - at least as a fairly trusted servant - to start this job. Dr. Bob and I had all of the authority and all of the responsibility to create a service structure. And since Dr. Bob was in Akron, and since it was thought that the money we needed would be here in New York, he turned over that part of it to me. So, just for a moment, I had all of the immediate authority and responsibility to set this thing in motion. But of course, it was instantly realized that I couldn't do this by myself; I had to have help.

First of all, we began to get together some friends - some non-alcoholics, people who could take a money interest in us, people who could relate us to the world outside, people who could insure the trusteeship in case the drunks got drunk and started drinking the money up. We needed friends and we needed them very badly. So, very much like an A.A. group, this thing started with an originator and his friends.

Pretty soon it was realized that if we were going to get any money, we had to be organized; there had to be a bank account; an informal committee wouldn't do. So we formed a trusteeship which first started off as merely an agreement by people to be trustees for A.A., and then became a formalized body of trustees (since actually incorporated).

Then came the problem of what will we do for money. None was forthcoming. So we raised money, mostly around New York, and got the Big Book together after a great struggle. At first, the book belonged to the people who had contributed. For my work, I had a third; we had another promotion fellow around here and he had another third. But we realize that this book couldn't be the property of us. So after a while we said, "Well, this trusteeship can hold this book." The book began to sell slowly and some money came in, and they became the trustees for this money. Pretty soon we began to get some publicity, and in came some inquiries, and we had to have an office. So the money coming in from the book was spent to run the office and the trustees became managers of the office.

So we have a book and we have an office and we have a paid worker and we have a board of trustees.

Progressively Dr. Bob and I turned our service function over to the board of trustees. Well, the office grew, and its function grew and pretty soon we had terrific publicity-the Saturday Post piece. Thousand of inquiries came in. The book sales wouldn't pay the help in the office so we came to the movement and said, "Won't you give us some help?" So those contributions began to come in from the groups on the express idea that they would be for office purposes only, which they still are. So then the trustees came into possession of the group contributions. And in some years we'd save some book money and that was put into a separate fund which today has grown into a reserve.

By this time we began to have a tremendous public relations problem -a very ticklish one. We had all sorts of enthusiastic and somewhat self-appointed public relations agents through out the country. Some wished to sell life insurance in connection with A. A., and others, shaving soap; it was like an anarchy. There had to be some head or tail to it so we write the group and say,"Here is this body of friends: the non-alcoholics are in a majority. You're safe, boys. So, you've entrusted your money, your office, your book; why don't you entrust this body with your public relations?"

Then after a while came the Grapevine. This gained in circulation and it got to have a national subscription list. Finally they got tired of licking the stamps, and the volunteers came and said, "Won't this trusteeship take this thing on?" So that is how the trusteeship grew.

And until 1950, it was just like an A.A. group: this whole movement - so far as services were going - was being run by a pair of founders and their friends in this incorporated trusteeship. By then, of course, we realized that this couldn't just go on forever. The ghastly open end that we then faced was that the linkage between this unknown board of trustees and the movement might get thinner and thinner. It really depended very largely upon Dr. Bob and me and a couple of gals in the office, and we were the only ones who had began to have a world connection with A.A.

Then came the day when it was discovered that Dr. Bob was fatally ill, and we suddenly realized that founders are perishable. So, if the linkage went out and if the board made a mistake some day, this would be the end A.A., and there would be no means of reinstating it. Well, I suppose it was the most hazardous thing that we've ever undertaken, the formation of this Conference.

Our society wasn't so mature as it is today. Our fears were far greater. So, a great many people said, "My God, delegates from every state of the union and committeemen and group representatives? This will be a political chaos."

Finally the day had to come when we had to take the risk of finding whether this would be political chaos or whether, in silence, we would let people feel that things were fine just the way they were -and then the old timers would pass away, and the thing would then collapse. We had to choose between the two risks: the one of almost certain collapse later on; the other, the tremendous gamble of bringing the Conference in.

Well, I'm so glad the decision to change was taken. This ushered in a whole new era in our affairs and began to put them, service wise, upon a sound and permanent base. And this involved just really, the replacement of Dr. Bob and me with you people, who have come here to stand in our shoes: you have become the linkage between our trusteeship and the movement.

We took the risk, and you people showed us that it wasn't a very big one, because the success of this thing has exceeded our wildest imagination. Therefore, we enter this 25th year, stepping across one more threshold into the future.

What does the future hold for us? What may its perils be like? How can we strengthen ourselves against the time of peril — to put it negatively. To put it positively, how can we increase our communication with the sea of drunks around us? I realize that while, on behalf of all, I have been saying nice things about us - congratulating us upon our successes so far - we ought nevertheless to soberly reflect that this Society has made only the smallest scratch on the total problem of alcoholism.

We've got a new book coming out, *A.A. Today*, from the Grapevine, and in that book I discuss this matter of communication, not only on the basis of what we have so providentially been able to accomplish but also on the basis of what we haven't been able to do.

And I took note of the fact that in this generation - which has seen A.A. come alive, this period of 25 years - a vast procession of the world's drunks have passed in front of us and have gone over the precipice. And based on figures, which I was careful to get, it looks like, worldwide, there was something like 25 million of them. And out of that stream of despair, illness, misery and death, we fished out just one in a hundred in the last 25 years. I think we're fishing somewhat bigger and better, but is this not an awful good question?

And isn't this question closely related to the future of this Conference? This Conference is here to preserve what we've got in full measure but how much more shall we need? In the way of communication with this procession, how are we going to reason? How are we going to make them want to approach us? This problem is our single greatest problem. Now it is quite true that those who are just entering on this fateful path can't be reached because, well, they're young. They say, "It couldn't be me." Youth doesn't like to be defeated. And then they come into the area where perhaps they could be reached, and they're in there for a while, and then they pass beyond A.A. So how can we walk into this stream and draw more out of it.

Obviously, it is by better communication. And this means bigger and better public relations. It means a vast increase in the friends of this Society in all the media of communications. What they've already done for us is beyond estimate, but this is still only a beginning. How can we first reach them more effectively and they, in turn, this melancholy and ever-flowing stream? I don't know the answer.

We must also remember that a great many of these condemned passers by are not amenable perhaps to Alcoholics Anonymous. Therefore, I think we ought to begin to stress a point. We ought to cast aside some of our early fears, however justified they were at the time and try to increase our friendly cooperation with whomever and whatever is trying to tackle this field - whether we agree with their methods or we don't. A lot of people are trying in different ways to make a dent on this huge problem.

A.A. has now become so solid in its unity; the adherence to our Tradition is so astonishing. Really, when you stop to think of the power driver like me who would like to bust loose at the public level and all that sort of thing, A.A. is full of these people. And yet the conformity to these traditions is beyond belief. It isn't just a matter of self preservation; it's the spirit of A.A. that makes this possible. Now, A.A. has grown up in the last decade so that our fears of the mistakes that other people in other efforts make as they might affect us are today are far overdone. There was a time when we had reason to be afraid, but I don't think so anymore.

So I think we can go a little overboard on the friendly side because these people are in touch with drunks who may approach them, but won't approach us.

So therefore we need friendliness with every possible outlet and contact with the passing stream of misery. In other words, it's a problem all around of better communication. That is looking outward upon the world in which we live, and it is looking forward, I think, too, that we can look to ourselves. Our numbers are considerable: we have size. There is a great security in numbers. You can't imagine how it was in the very earliest two or three years, when nobody was sure that anybody could stay sober. Today it's a very different story.

Along, however, with the big security in numbers, there has come a certain amount of liability. The more people there are to do a job, it often falls out the less there are. In other words, what's everybody's business is nobody's business.

A doctor came into the office the other day from a foreign land where A.A. is flourishing and doing darn well by any estimate. He said that he referred a great many people to A.A. but that the turnover seemed to him unnecessarily large. He had repeatedly discovered that people would come and say, "Yeah, I went over to A.A., I went to X number of meetings, and it didn't work for me."

"Well," said the doctor, "of course the fellow really didn't try hard enough." But it seems to me there were other things needing. Somehow or other this fellow did not make friends over there. Now, he wasn't a psychopath. Maybe it was because nobody went out of their way to make friends with him.

Numbers of these people came back, never having heard that Alcoholics Anonymous had Twelve Steps. Maybe they heard some drunk stories, saw that people were sober.

(Sponsorship isn't just a question of a couple of visits and "Now you're in the group, boys." Loving friendship is a part of the sponsorship.)

So size is bound to bring complacency unless we get increasingly aware of what's going on. This Conference - at least we who are soon to pass off the scene believe - will be the inspiration that can overcome complacency. Out of it will come a better communication with our friends and through every possible medium to an increasing segment of the people we haven't to reach.

I have a profound confidence in the future of this Conference as an instrument guaranteeing our unity and our functioning. I'm not too good an A.A. in the spiritual sense. A lot of people have done a lot better. Most of my life in the past fifteen or twenty years has been an effort to figure out - God knows with plenty of help - how this top function can be anchored to this movement, how to keep the cupola on the old A.A. barn so she just can't blow off. So, I'm looking to you with utter confidence - you and your successors - to keep that cupola there. Yes, it's been 25 years, our trusteeship is 22 years old and you are 10 years old. My friends, the future belongs to you.