

The First General Service Conference and
The History of the East Central Region
Jack R. Meagher - 28 September 1987

In A.A. Comes of Age, Bill Wilson writes:

"That period, 1945 to 1950, was one of immense strain and test. We were confronted by three grave issues. The first had to do with money, the second with anonymity; and most dangerous of all, there was the question of what was to become of Alcoholics Anonymous when its old-timers and founders had gone. . . . This situation had been a matter of great concern to me ever since the publication of the traditions in 1946. . . . When Dr. Bob became ill, I began to feel the serious urgency of the problem. So did Mr. Bernard Smith and one or two others. But the majority of the Board did not share our apprehension. They felt that creating a conference, or even an advisory council, would entail unnecessary politics and expense. The Foundation had done well for ten years, so why could it not go on in just the same way?"

In 1949, Dr. Bob was definitely failing. Bernard Smith was a business man and a lawyer; he favored corporate management of the A.A. office and an elected conference to sit with trustees as the final plan of service structure for A.A. "Let's give the conference a try" he urged.

In the summer of 1950, the first international conference was held in Cleveland, Ohio (3,000 attendees), highlighting Dr. Bob's last public appearance and the confirmation by the convention of the 12 traditions as the permanent platform of unity and function on which the fellowship would henceforth stand. Traditions were reduced from the "long form" of 1946 to capsule statements which in length matched our familiar 12 Steps of Recovery. The Grapevine began carrying the new Traditions in every issue.

Dr. Bob finally agreed that the problem was not for him and Bill to run but A.A. After many board meetings of the Foundation it was decided that the movement's delegates could come down to New York and see what A.A.'s world affairs were really like. They could then decide whether they would take responsibility or whether they would not. This would make it a movement decision, rather than one taken in silence by Dr. Bob and Bill. Bill felt that he had to have Dr. Bob's agreement to call a conference. Finally, Bob looked up and said "Bill, it has to be A.A.'s decision not ours. Let's call that conference. It's fine with me."

FIRST GENERAL SERVICE CONFERENCE -- Hotel Commodore, New York City---April 20-21-22---1951---37 Delegates, 8 Class A Trustees, 7 Class B Trustees, 5 GSO staff people, and 5 Grapevine staff people plus Bill Wilson in attendance for the three-day Conference. Bill's talk at the opening session of the Conference on Friday afternoon outlined the history of A.A. Services.

Development of A.A. services at the national level has followed closely the pattern that is familiar in a typical local A.A. group, Bill said. In the local group, there is first a "founder". The founder and his friends, in the early days of the group, constitute a self-appointed service committee that does the various chores that have to be done in a new group. For a time this committee in effect "runs" the group. It programs the meetings. It arranges for refreshments. And it coordinates Twelfth Step Work.

As the Group increases in size, the newer members usually put to work the principle of rotation in handling group affairs. They select a service committee, which may or may not include the founder and his friends. They change the committee at regular intervals. Whereas in the beginning responsibility for group services rested with a small number of self-appointed workers, this responsibility had now been shifted to the membership of the local group as a whole.

This is a natural and logical development, Bill pointed out. The same processes have been at work in A.A. at the national level and the time had now come when responsibility for national services can similarly be turned over to a rotating committee representing the membership as a whole. The General Service Conference is the tool for accomplishing this.

The Conference is a "huge rotating committee" in whose hands has been placed responsibility for A.A.'s worldwide services-- assistance to the groups, public relations, preparation and distribution of literature, foreign propagation and other activities.

Bill concluded his summary of Service History with this enjoiner: "This is your legacy of service. Guard it carefully. We hope you will like the stewardship we have given you."

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In response to Bill Wilson's call for panel members for the first General Service Conference in April of 1951, the first Assembly Meeting to elect a Delegate and a General Service Committee was held in Grand Rapids on March 9, 1951. Quoting from the minutes of the October 5, 1952, General Service Committee meeting: "The first assembly meetingfollowed the plan of the pamphlet on General Service Committee organization sent out by the New York Foundation, with the exception that the Western Michigan Committee selected its own officers."

Fisk McIntosh, of Muskegon, was elected as Panel 1 delegate from Western Michigan and H.R. "Mike" Eshleman was elected as Panel 1 delegate at Eastern Michigan's assembly.

By December 1951, the Western Michigan Area had been divided into nine Districts, each represented by a Committeeman dedicated to spreading the gospel of A. A. service to the groups in his District.

By early 1952 it was decided that more effort was necessary to inform the groups of the functions and purpose of the General Service Conference, and thus attract more groups and members to service.

An "Open Meeting Forum", featuring "four eminent A.A. speakers" was then planned, to which all groups in the area were invited. The flyer for the event announced that it would be held on Sunday, March 23, 1952 at the Grand Rapids Civic Auditorium. It went on to state: "Since the program is divided into two parts it will last about two hours and fifteen minutes including the break between the A.A. talks and the panel portion of the schedule. In any event you can be home by bedtime." The four speakers, all Delegates on Panel 1 of the first General Service Conference, were:

"Luke Hunt ----- Number 3 A.A. in Chicago
Mike Eshleman ----- Number 2 A.A. in Michigan
Dick Stanley ----- Number 7 A.A. and a Trustee of the Alcoholic
Foundation - Cleveland Heights, Ohio
George Strachan ----- Outstanding A.A. and speaker from
Milwaukee."

This event was such a success that another similar Big Open Meeting was scheduled for Grand Rapids on October 6, 1952, this time featuring Ward Montgomery, Panel 1 Delegate from downstate Illinois and Helen Brown, staff member of the General Service Office.

From the flyer for the October meeting: "Why are we having this meeting? Your committee feels that by having two such meetings a year, every AA in Western Michigan will have a chance to hear a number of outstanding AAs from other sections of the country that they otherwise might never hear. Also such meetings give us all a chance to get to know one another better. . . . P.S. Remember some of us don't have cars so don't come with an empty seat in yours."

In April, 1953, the last of the "Big Open Meeting" gatherings sponsored by the Western Michigan General Service Committee was held in Grand Rapids, featuring that well-known "dynamiting expert", Ellsworth "Icky" Sheridan from Dallas, Texas. Quoting again from the flyer: "He (Icky) tells us that he spent 28 years drinking while intoxicated, and that, plus his many years of sobriety on the Program should qualify him as a real A.A. Icky is a dynamiting expert in Texas, and the message he has is **REAL DYNAMITE!!** Don't miss him!! Bring the kiddies along, folks, as this meeting will be over by 4:30 pm, and you can all get home by bed-time."

Now that the Regional "concept" is here, how did it all come about? In January 1962 the General Service Board, after much prodding by Bill Wilson, recommended that the U. S. be divided into six regions, that the method of selecting "Area" Trustees be changed and that four additional Trustees (2 A.A. and 2 non-alcoholic) be added to the 15-member Board. The ratio of alcoholics to non-alcoholics would remain at 9 to 10, in spite of Bill Wilson's seven-year battle to change the ratio. The recommendation was approved by the General Service Conference of 1962, along with the proviso that each of the six Regions would be eligible to elect a Trustee at six-year intervals.

During 1962 nominations for Regional Trustee were solicited from three of the six U. S. "Regions"--the Southwest, the East Central and the Pacific.

At the 1963 General Service Conference, Howard Bennhoff, who had been the Panel 7 delegate from Northeastern Ohio, was chosen as the first East Central Region Trustee. Unfortunately Howard Bennhoff died during his first year as Trustee, and at the 1964 Conference D. Bruce Mansfield of Akron was elected to succeed him. In 1965 the U. S. Regional trusteeships were increased from 3 to 5 by adding the West Central and the Northeast Regions, and a trusteeship was established for Canada.

At the General Service Conference in 1966, Bill Wilson finally won his 11-year battle when the Conference voted to change the composition of the General Service Board from 9 Class B (alcoholic) and 10 Class A (non-alcoholic) Trustees to 14 Class B and 7 Class A Trustees. This change was historic, because ever since the Board (then called the A. A. Foundation) was formed in 1938 with 5 members, non-alcoholics had always been in the majority by one. As established by the 1966 Conference, the 14 Class B Trustees would include the eight Regional Trustees (one from each of the six U.S. regions, and one each from Eastern and Western Canada), and six "General Service" Trustees (chosen for business skill)---four from the New York City area, one from Canada, and one from anywhere in the U.S. In April 1970 Jim Hiers was elected as the first Trustee-at-Large, U.S., and Tom Grafton became the first Trustee-at-Large, Canada, in April 1971.

The General Service Board was enlarged gradually. When Andy Anderson of Southeastern Michigan was elected Trustee in April 1967 for a 4-year term the ratio of Class B to Class A Trustees was 11 to 10. The following year it was 12 to 10, then 12 to 8, and finally, when Jack Meagher of Western Michigan was elected Trustee the ratio had reached 14 to 7.