

Report on 57th General Service Conference

April 22nd – 28th 2007

By Jeff Y., Panel 57 delegate,

Area 54 – Northeast Ohio

“The Cradle of A.A.”

Our Twelfth Step — carrying the message — is the basic service that the A.A. Fellowship gives; this is our principal aim and the main reason for our existence. Therefore, A.A. is more than a set of principles; it is a society of alcoholics in action. We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven't been given the truth may die.¹

These words from Bill W. are just as timely today as they were in 1951. Throughout the Conference week, presentations and sharing sessions re-examined the Twelfth Step call with such topics as inclusiveness, our primary purpose, working with wet drunks, and whether we are resting on our laurels.

The General Service Conference (GSC) operates year round with the annual weeklong meeting taking place in April. This meeting is the culmination of a year's worth of work by the GSO and AAGV Staff members who assist the work of the Trustees, AAWS and AAGV Directors and Appointed Committee Members. They meet several times a year in eleven different committees.²

There were a total of one hundred and thirty-four voting members for this year's Conference. The Conference consists of the twenty-one trustees of The General Service Board, (seven class A, non-alcoholic trustees and fourteen class B, alcoholic trustees – although presently we are operating two trustees short), three non-trustee A.A. World Service directors, three non-trustee A.A. Grapevine directors, 13 GSO and 3 AAGV Staff, and ninety-three delegates from the United States and Canada.

¹ *The A.A. Service Manual, 2006-2007 ed., S1*

² Archives, Conference, Cooperation with the Professional Community/Treatment, Finance & Budgeting, Policy & Admissions, Public Information/Corrections, International, Literature, Nominating, Literature and the Grapevine.

Matters before the conference are handled through the committee system³ to insure that the greatest number of matters can be dealt with in the six day conference schedule. After each committee considers the agenda items⁴ before it, its recommendations are presented to the conference as a whole for acceptance or rejection. The final order of business for the conference is the consideration of floor actions which have been submitted in writing during the conference.

“What I saw and heard and felt”

My Conference experience was extraordinary in many ways – I felt that we made history this year as a Conference. The About Alcoholism section will be placed back in the *A.A. Grapevine* magazine. We approved the revised 3rd edition Spanish Big Book. We decided that a Class B really ought to be capable of serving as Chairman of the GSB. My committee set precedent and protocol for the future handling of Appeals to the Conference under Concept V. In some ways it was very ordinary. The food was normal hotel food (don’t let anyone convince you otherwise; we ate rubber chicken one night). The seemingly endless committee reports and, at times, silly debate reminded me of a **week-long** assembly populated by people who REALLY LOVE attending assemblies. At one point, we were voting on a motion within a motion within a motion.

I made lifelong friends of some of the 56’s that I know will stand by me for years to come. I look forward to meeting the 58’s and working with the 57’s again. I don’t think I can view service work the same ever again.

So, here’s what happened...

On Sunday morning, activity began with a two hour Remote Communities Workshop. Although this meeting is not directly associated with the conference, it is important to consider the unique problems of communities outside the normal limits of easy travel and communication.

³ The thirteen Conference Committees include Agenda, Archives, CPC, Corrections, Finance, Grapevine, Literature, Policy & Admissions, Public Information, Report & Charter, Treatment, Trustees, and International.

⁴ Ideas for Conference Agenda items come from within the fellowship. An idea, suggestion, question or concern comes from AA members, GSR’s, DCM’s, Area Committees, Trustees or GSO/GV staff. It is then sent to the GSO Conference Coordinator. The idea is reviewed by GSO/GV staff and forwarded to the appropriate Trustee’s Committee. They then may refer the matter to the appropriate Conference Committee. Conference Committees meet at the GSC and make recommendations in committee reports. If a recommendation is approved, after full discussion and debate, it becomes an Advisory Action and becomes binding when approved by the General Service Board. Committees also offer Additional Considerations which do not carry the weight of Recommendations, but nevertheless point the Board in a direction for possible action in the year ahead.

Immediately following this, we queued up to register, got our nametags and received our Conference notebooks. These would guide members throughout the week. It tells us where we are supposed to be at any given time of the day. There is not much time allotted for anything else but conference business. After our Regional Orientation Luncheon was the first full session. At this session, roll is called for all conference members. Many past delegates have said it would very exciting to hear my name being called. Maybe the anticipation of a spiritual experience somehow dampened it, but I didn't feel anything special. The spiritual experience *for me* was to come later on.

Joint meetings of the Conference Committees with their respective members of the board of trustees convened between 2:45pm and 5:45pm.

At the Opening Dinner, Nell Wing⁵ was remembered fondly with reminiscences by Mike Alexander, GSB Chairman Emeritus and by Sarah P, a former staffer at GSO. The dinner is attended by all conference members, past trustees and guests. After dinner the AA meeting began. Chaired by Eric K., we heard short talks from Irene K, GSO staff; Tito T, delegate from Puerto Rico; Marianne H., delegate from California/N. Interior; Ray M, general service trustee and Jane T., AAWS director.

Monday and Tuesday mornings, all committees swing into action. My assignment on the Trustees Committee had a very full plate before our mini-conference. There would be another item added by the Chairman of the Board in mid-April that *would rock the Conference to its very foundation*. More on that later.... We could tell early on that we would not have enough time to finish everything on our agenda at this rate, so we also met late Monday night and worked through lunch on Tuesday.

Monday afternoon we heard reports from both the A.A.W.S. and A.A. Grapevine Board Chairpersons. All regions present their new delegates (the 57's) and we gave our Area highlights interspersed with other business. Vince E. Keefe, Class A Trustee and General Service Board Treasurer gave an interesting Finance Presentation. I had an opportunity to sit next to Vince for one afternoon and learned a lot about how the Board functioned.

⁵ A.A.'s first archivist and non-alcoholic secretary to Bill W. passed away in February. Nell worked at the Office from 1947 to 1982.

Our contributions since 1982 have grown from less than \$2M per year to \$5.4M in 2005. The cost to provide the services to our groups however costs \$7.6M. Today the percentage of groups that contribute is about 43%, down from 60% in 1982. Are the other 57% just uninformed or are they aware but not taking responsibility? A contribution of \$5.75 per member, or \$131.00 per group in 2007, would allow the Fellowship to be fully self-supporting from contributions. This is not a “money issue”, it is a responsibility issue.

Vince then talked about the pension fund. Fair market value of this fund at the end of 2006 was ~\$13M. Present value of future benefits is \$17.8M. This leaves an **under-funded balance of \$4,849,813.**⁶ If I understood this report correctly, the balance will be made up out of the Reserve Fund, which would decrease our overall prudent reserve by four months operating funds. The Reserve Fund presently stands at 8.8 months worth of operating funds. Putting it another way, taking care of Our Responsibility to our retirees for pension and medical premiums will cost each member \$3.66.

If we continue like we are:

- Higher prices will result in fewer pieces of literature being purchased and fewer alcoholics being reached.
- Higher prices will create more opportunities for outside enterprises to print AA literature.
- Services may have to be cut.
- Our trusted servants will continually struggle with the challenge of raising prices or cutting services.

⁶ Employers' Accounting for Postretirement Benefits Other Than Pensions (Issued 12/90) – Financial Accounting Standards Board Statement No.106.

This Statement establishes accounting standards for employers' accounting for postretirement benefits other than pensions (hereinafter referred to as postretirement benefits). Although it applies to all forms of postretirement benefits, this Statement focuses principally on postretirement health care benefits. It will significantly change the prevalent current practice of accounting for postretirement benefits on a pay-as-you-go (cash) basis by requiring accrual, during the years that the employee renders the necessary service, of the expected cost of providing those benefits to an employee and the employee's beneficiaries and covered dependents.

The Board's conclusions in this Statement result from the view that a defined postretirement benefit plan sets forth the terms of an exchange between the employer and the employee. In exchange for the current services provided by the employee, the employer promises to provide, in addition to current wages and other benefits, health and other welfare benefits after the employee retires. It follows from that view that postretirement benefits are not gratuities but are part of an employee's compensation for services rendered. Since payment is deferred, the benefits are a type of deferred compensation. The employer's obligation for that compensation is incurred as employees render the services necessary to earn their postretirement benefits.

The ability to measure the obligation for postretirement health care benefits and the recognition of that obligation have been the subject of controversy. The Board believes that measurement of the obligation and accrual of the cost based on best estimates are superior to implying, by a failure to accrue, that no obligation exists prior to the payment of benefits. The Board believes that failure to recognize an obligation prior to its payment impairs the usefulness and integrity of the employer's financial statements.

If we become truly self-supporting:

- Literature could be priced at cost.
- Who other than AA, would want to sell literature at cost? As long as we produce our literature, we can maintain the clarity of the message.
- Complete control over all AA literature would rest within our fellowship.
- We would establish a strong financial base to insure that our Service Structure remains in place to serve future generations.
- Most importantly, the entire fellowship would have a strong spiritual connection to our unity.

Our Theme for the 2007, 57th G.S.C. was “Our 12th Step Responsibility—Are we willing to go to any length?” The presentations on these topics were given Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons, which included.

1) Inclusiveness in AA:

- a) Our 3rd Tradition
- b) Growth of the fellowship
- c) Reaching Out to All Who Want It

2) Our Primary Purpose:

- a) Attraction Rather Than Promotion
- b) Working with Wet Drunks
- c) Practicing These Principles in all Our Affairs

3) Humility and Responsibility

- a) Expressed by Anonymity
- b) Are We Resting on Our Laurels?
- c) Raising Literature Prices or Footing the Bill?

A short subway ride north on Tuesday afternoon brought us to the General Service Office and the A.A. Grapevine Office. I could have spent a LOT more time there talking to the staff, but too soon it was time to let them go home for the day. Besides, we weren't done working for the day. A working dinner of just the delegates lasted from 6 until 9 pm.

I was ready to let off a little steam when a fellow delegate from Ohio suggested that we hit the little neighborhood meeting right across the street from the hotel. I was honored to be asked to speak at the meeting as they were celebrating April anniversaries that week with all celebrants giving a short talk. The group presented me with a XXII year token and a big slice of cake. What a bonus! All the locals were scratching their heads trying to figure out who were all these well-dressed out-of-towners invading their meeting. Afterward, we all lingered in the warm evening air on the sidewalk for a while.

Savoring the short break from our business, I was approached by a couple of young people who had been at the meeting. They were curious about why we were all in town. As briefly as possible, I said that we were here from all over North America to conduct the yearly business of A.A. After a little more conversation, the young girl, Meg, said thoughtfully, “I think I’d like to do that someday.”

Here was the spiritual experience I was waiting for – here was the future leadership of A.A. standing in front of me. I kid you not - Nineteen years old, two years sober, leaning on her skateboard and playing with the piercing in her lip. She recognized the value of what we do, though. I asked her and her boyfriend Jack if they were in a hurry to get home – “No, not really.” I said, “Come on, let me show you something really cool.” We walked over to the hotel and I took them up to the 4th Floor pre-function space outside our two ballrooms. The staff from AAWS and AAGV had lovingly filled this area with all of our literature in all of our formats. There was a very attractive Grapevine display with all the new products that had been rolled out that week. Literally hundreds of items overflowed the tabletop displays. These kids were truly being turned loose in a ‘candy store’ containing our message. It was gratifying and invigorating to see them run from table to table, shouting to each other, “Hey, look at this!” I felt like a kid again myself. After all, I was only 22 when I came in. Back then, I think I would have been so impressed to meet a bunch of delegates at their age (today we know better...).

Finally, we approached the *‘piece de resistance’* – the table with all the Big Books in over 50 languages displayed row after row, column by column. The murmurs of awe and surprise continued. Book after book, they marveled at the foreign languages into which our message had been translated. They thought it was odd to see that some of the books opened

from right to left. The boy mentioned that his step-father could benefit from a big book in Polish. I reminded them where our GSO was located and encouraged him to go soon. Too soon, the evening turned to late night. We said good night, but not before letting these young, future leaders of AA know how to contact their delegate and encouraging them to stay curious and keep coming back!

Wednesday morning was a workshop on the “Spiritual Value of Our AA Dollars.” All of us were jumbled into different groups than our usual committee assignments and included the Class A’s, B’s and staffers. More area highlight reports filled up the rest of the morning and brought us to another Regional lunch. The afternoon session was highlighted by regional elections of three Class B trustees. As a member of the trustees committee, I was included in the pool of voters. There are as many votes from the Trustees Nominating Committee and the Conference Committee on Trustees as are needed to match the number of delegates in that region. Each delegate area in a region may put up a candidate and all delegates have two minutes to tell the assembled body about the candidate from their area. This helped flesh out the dry material on every candidate’s resume. Since I didn’t know anyone who was standing, the delegate presentations helped me make up my mind. It was an amazing process to see the Third Legacy procedure used at that level. It works as well as it does here. No one went to the hat this year, though. All new trustees were elected with a clear mandate of more than 2/3 majority. Starting on Wednesday evening, committees began giving their reports and recommendations came to the floor.

My committee assignment (Trustees) was chosen to present our recommendations pretty early – Wednesday evening. Our report took about three hours to present, finishing up on Thursday afternoon.

First order of business was to approve the slates of candidates for Trustees, Directors, and Officers of the Board – this is relatively routine. The next item is one which many of us discussed at length at our Mini-Conference this spring. Should any alcoholic trustees be considered in the selection of the next Chairperson of the GSB? Our answer was a resounding YES! All of the usual arguments were made pro and con from the floor microphones – anonymity, balance of the Board, and so on. Our by-laws do not preclude the possibility of a Class B trustee as Chairperson. In fact, the possibility is specifically mentioned vis the balance of A’s to B’s. But the feeling was that we are honoring the legacy of Bill W. by taking another small step toward

autonomy in all of our affairs. We are coming of age just a little more by this decision. One delegate pointed out that most of the arguments against this change are fear-driven.

Will the next Chair be an alcoholic? Maybe not. Increasing the pool of eligible candidates will ensure that the very best person is chosen, who may or may not be alcoholic. The procedural issues of how anonymity will be handled are an opportunity, not a stumbling block. This is the chance for our Fellowship to squarely face the press and say, “Here are the reasons why we don’t appear full face in published or broadcast media.” It is an opportunity to educate the world about some of our spiritual principles – humility, honesty, willingness to overcome our fears.

Now, for the part of our deliberations that so many of my committee were concerned about. The last item of business was an Appeal to the Conference for a Minority Report to be heard. Rumors of the exercise of this rarely-used procedure by a small group of Trustees reached many of the delegates just days before the Conference began. It had been assigned to our committee since that’s where it seemed to fit, but there had only been one other instance of this happening, in 1962, by Bill W. himself. There was no record in the archives how that was handled, so we were making a little history and setting a precedent for future Conferences. Delegates rushed to the microphones all over the room when it was brought up. Everyone was upset (although wildly uninformed) about the Appeal.

- “Why didn’t we receive any background?”
- “We demand to know what the Minority Report says!”
- “What is the Board trying to hide/circumvent/railroad?” – pick your favorite conspiracy theory – they abounded everywhere...
- “I heard this or that from my trustee, etc.”
- One delegate respectfully requested that the Presiding Chair recuse himself from the debate as the subject matter of the Minority Report involved his service position.
- When the Chairman of the GSB replaced him at the dais lectern, he also was asked to stand down. Chagrined and a little frustrated, Leonard Blumenthal asked us, “Well, who **would** you like up here?”

As I said earlier, in the minds of some delegates and other conference members, the way this Appeal was handled could rock the very foundation of the Conference.

So, here's what all the kerfuffle was about: A question was raised at the Board level whether a search should begin for the next General Manager of GSO. As this is a very important executive position, it will take upwards of 18 months to complete the process (or so I've been told). A majority of the 19 Trustees voted to not start a search at this time, but the vote was not unanimous. The minority did not feel that their Right was given a sufficient hearing. Considering that this decision could be a grave error on the part of the Board, this group of Minority voters filed what is called a Minority Report with the Conference. This Appeal to the Conference is one of our checks-and-balances described in the Concepts (specifically Concept Five). It is a seldom used, but cherished part of our Third Legacy.⁷ Our committee requested that the Board give the Minority Report a full hearing at the next Board meeting and that the Procedure for Hiring a General Manager be updated and clarified.

As a result, I'm happy to report that the State of the Conference Process is **safe and sound** following the disposition of this Appeal. The State of AA is sound for another year, safe even from us.

I would say that this was the Year the Conference re-discovered Concepts V and VI.⁸

On Thursday, interspersed amid more committee presentations, there were theme presentations and reports by Dorothy W., Trustee US-at-large, Murray M., Trustee Canada-at-large, and Doug R., staffer on the International assignment concerning their travels this past year. We worked from 9 am until 10 pm most days, or later.

Friday, the body sensed that the end was near. We forged ahead through many more committee reports and finished the business of the 57th GSC around 7 pm. This also included consideration of floor actions, followed by a sharing session at which each of the outgoing Panel 56 delegates made

⁷ In the light of the principle of the "Right of Appeal," all minorities — whether in our staffs, committees, corporate boards or among the Trustees — should be *encouraged* to file minority reports whenever they feel a majority to be in considerable error. And when a minority considers an issue to be such a grave one that a mistaken decision could seriously affect A.A. as a whole, it should then charge itself with the actual *duty* of presenting a minority report to the Conference.

⁸ Concept V. Throughout our world service structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered. Concept VI. On behalf of A.A. as a whole, our General Service Conference has the principal responsibility for the maintenance of our world services, and it traditionally has the final decision respecting large matters of general policy and finance. But the Conference also recognizes that the chief initiative and the active responsibility in most of these matters should be exercised primarily by the Trustee members of the Conference when they act among themselves as the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

brief remarks regarding their conference experiences and said goodbye. The conference was closed with remarks by Greg M, General Service Manager, followed by the Serenity Prayer in Spanish, French and English.

On Saturday morning, in a meeting chaired by Leonard Blumenthal, farewell talks were heard from rotating trustees:

Allen Ault, Class A Trustee.
Gary K, Southwest Regional Trustee,
Murray M., Trustee, Canada-at-large
Mike P., Northeast Regional Trustee, and
Arnold R., General Service Trustee,

We are shaping and making the history of A.A. by our actions each day we serve this fellowship. I was reminded by one presenter; “We may be the only Service Manual someone ever reads.”

In love and service,

Jeff Y., Panel 57 delegate, Area 54 Northeast Ohio