

A.A. General Service Conference Inventory

Compendium 2013–2015

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Contents

SECTION ONE:

Introduction	3
Overview	3
History	3
The Idea Moves to the Conference	4
Planning Committee Takes Shape	4

SECTION TWO:

Summary of Themes	5
Communication and Transparency	5
Use of Technology	5
Conference Orientation and Preparation	5
Information	5
Language Equality	5
Diversity	6
Conference Agenda	6
Conference Deadlines	6
Conference Theme	6
Minority Opinion	6
Working Together and Increasing Trust	6
Engaging the Fellowship	6
Listening for the Group Conscience	7
Looking Toward the Future	7
Notes	7

SECTION THREE:

Summary of Workshop Reports	8
Process	8
Effectiveness of the Conference/ Conference Process Overall	8
Composition of the Conference	10
Committee System	11
Yearlong Process Effectiveness	11
Conference Preparation (background, content, delivery, etc.)	12
Conference Week Schedule	13
General Service Board/Corporate Boards (A.A.W.S. & A.A. Grapevine)	13
Leadership	16

SECTION FOUR:

Additional Recommendations/ Suggestions	17
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REFERENCES

2013 Keynote Address	25
Inventory Plan document	27

Introduction

OVERVIEW

Taking inventory, in the best sense of the word, is a fundamental aspect of A.A.'s program of recovery. As cofounder Bill W. reflected in *A.A. Comes of Age* (page 231), "Just as each A.A. must continue to take his moral inventory and act upon it, so must our whole society if we are to survive and if we are to serve usefully and well."

An inventory, then, at the level of general service is a natural outgrowth of that which is done to maintain individual sobriety throughout the A.A. Fellowship. However, when applied to A.A.'s general services and for the purposes of the General Service Conference inventory, the "Twelve Concepts for World Service," not the Twelve Steps for Recovery, provided the lens through which to evaluate current Conference practices and procedures, to determine how they relate to the original plan, purpose and structure of the General Service Conference.

As noted in the Keynote Address at the opening of the 2013 General Service Conference (for full text, see Reference section at the end of this report), "Self-assessment is a pervasive part of our A.A. program; fully half of our Steps are directly related to it. Inventory of the Conference and personal inventory in the Steps are not quite the same, however. At the Conference, the emphasis will be on effectiveness in carrying out the purposes of the Conference, not on 'character defects.'

"We don't take inventory simply because it is, in and of itself, a good thing (like kindness, or generosity), but rather because it is an important element of our continued sobriety. The same holds true for our service inventories, including the Conference inventory.... We are not here to take pride in doing the responsible thing by taking an inventory. We are here to help assure the unity and effectiveness of A.A. in its mission to carry the great message of hope to anyone, anywhere, who has a desire to do something about his or her drinking problem."

HISTORY

In his introduction to the *Twelve Concepts for World Service*, Bill W. wrote about the importance of the Concepts as an interpretation of A.A.'s world service structure. "They reveal the evolution by which it has arrived in its present form, and they detail the experience and reasoning on which our operation stands today," he said. "These Concepts therefore aim to record the 'why' of our service structure in such a fashion that the highly valuable experience of the past and the lessons we have drawn from that experience, can never be forgotten or lost."

In that spirit, in 2005 the General Service Board began the process of taking an inventory of itself, including its two operating corporations, the A.A. Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. As the inventories continued throughout 2006, the chairperson of the General Service Board appointed an Ad Hoc Committee on Inventories to review the three Board inventories (A.A. Grapevine, A.A.W.S., and the GSB) and to prioritize suggestions for Board consideration. As this process was nearing completion, in April of 2008, a sitting regional trustee suggested to the General Service Board that the inventory process might also expand to cover the General Service Conference itself, examining its structure, processes and procedures.

Some of the possible items that could be given thorough study, it was suggested, were: the effectiveness of the current committee system, the impact of new technologies on A.A.'s group conscience process, a creeping politicization of the Conference process versus the policy of delegation and trust, and the role of the trustees in the Conference process — as principal planners and administrators or mere order takers?

A General Service Board subcommittee was formed in August 2008 to discuss this proposal for a General Service Conference Inventory and presented a final report to the GSB in February of 2009. After reviewing the history of other Conference inventories, the conclusion of the subcommit-

tee was that while presentations and workshops had been held at the 1963, 1981 and 1993 Conferences, where the theme of each Conference was “A.A. Takes Its Inventory,” an actual inventory of the General Service Conference itself had never been conducted, and the subcommittee agreed that it seemed reasonable to conclude that “a thorough and soul-searching examination” of the GSC was warranted.

THE IDEA MOVES TO THE CONFERENCE

The subcommittee recommended that the General Service Board forward a recommendation to the 2009 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions proposing that a comprehensive inventory of the GSC be undertaken. The GSB accepted the subcommittee’s recommendation and forwarded such a proposal to the 2009 Conference. Provided as background were the full report of the subcommittee, including some detailed suggestions for conducting a GSC inventory, and the original proposal for a Conference Inventory.

The 2009 Conference Policy/Admissions Committee reviewed the material and recommended to the full conference that: “The General Service Board develop a plan for the General Service Conference to conduct an inventory of itself that includes a planning committee consisting of representatives of delegates, trustees, directors, nontrustee directors, and staff, and that a progress report be presented to the 2010 Policy/Admissions Committee.”

The recommendation was passed as a Conference Advisory Action, and in August 2009 the GSB established a subcommittee to fulfill the charge of putting together a process or procedure by which a Planning Committee with representation from all membership segments of the General Service Conference could be established. The subcommittee determined that representation should be proportional, as representation is at the GSC, and that participants be selected by lot, with consideration given to other responsibilities and the ability to serve. These conclusions were accepted by the GSB, along with some additional suggestions regarding the establishment of a Conference Inventory Planning Committee, and were referred back to the Conference Policy/Admissions Committee in 2010.

After evaluation and discussion by the 2010 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions and deliberation by the entire Conference, a detailed Advisory Action was passed recommending that “The General Service Conference conduct a thorough inventory of itself and that a Conference Planning Committee be established to develop a comprehensive inventory plan to bring forward to the 2011 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions for consideration, along with an estimated cost for conducting the inventory.” The Advisory Action also included directions articulating the specific composition of the proposed planning committee.

PLANNING COMMITTEE TAKES SHAPE

Once constituted following the 2010 GSC, the Conference Inventory Planning Committee (made up of 17 individuals: 11 Panel 60 delegates, one Class B regional trustee, one Class B general service trustee, one Class A trustee, one nontrustee director, one G.S.O. staff person and one Grapevine staff person, along with a nonvoting G.S.O. staff member to serve as secretary to the committee) began to conduct its business in early June 2010, breaking the work up into a series of subcommittees whose task, collectively, was to answer the “Who, What, Where, When and How” of conducting an inventory of the Conference.

Four subcommittees were charged with looking into the mechanics of doing an inventory (Participation, Logistics, Reporting and Finance) and four additional subcommittees were charged with developing proposed inventory questions (Structure, Concepts, Communications and Leadership). All subcommittee recommendations were discussed and voted on by the full committee during monthly conference calls and eventually, after several months of deliberation and reporting, the committee had a set of approved recommendations from which to begin drafting the overall inventory plan.

At this time, the eight subcommittees were pooled together and two larger subcommittees were appointed to develop the overall specifics of “mechanics” and “content” for the proposed inventory. Similarly, these two subcommittees presented their conclusions for discussion and approval by the Planning Committee as a whole, ultimately creating a consensus document — the Conference Inventory Plan — which was forwarded to the 2011 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions for review.

The 2011 Conference Committee on Policy/Admissions reviewed the inventory plan and proposed to the full Conference “that the General Service Conference conduct a thorough inventory of itself in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan formulated by the Conference Inventory Planning Committee.” (For complete INVENTORY PLAN see Reference section.)

The recommendation was accepted by the full Conference and passed as an Advisory Action of the 2011 General Service Conference.

With the process and procedures for the inventory finally set, the 2012 Conference Agenda Committee made a series of recommendations, accepted as Advisory Actions, suggesting that the theme of the 2013 GSC be “The General Service Conference Takes Its Inventory — Our Solution in Action”; selecting presentation/discussion topics for the 2013 GSC; and presenting the specific inventory questions to be taken up by the 2013, 2014 and 2015 Conferences.

Summary of Themes

Over the three-year course of the Inventory, a number of common and interconnected themes surfaced as overarching areas of concern that cut across a number of different questions.

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Of specific concern was the flow of information throughout the Fellowship, from the trustees to the delegates, from delegates to the areas, from areas to districts and groups. Regarding the flow of information from the trustees to the delegates, when information is transmitted unevenly, it can lead to misunderstanding and misapprehension on the part of the Fellowship. As much as possible, communication (at all levels) should focus more on the “why” of particular actions, suggestions, or recommendations. This will help improve transparency and offer greater insight into the issues at hand.

Additionally, delegates and others need to recognize and better understand what is—and is not—disclosable (confidential) at the board and business operations level of the Fellowship, as misunderstandings in this area can lead to a feeling of “us” versus “them.” In the spirit of transparency, one participant shared: “Always question authority, but raise your hand first.”

Generally, it was felt that more intensive year-round communication between trustees’ committee chairs and Conference committee chairs would be beneficial to help keep the Fellowship current on board meeting topics and discussions, and that the flow of information from regional trustees to delegates helps to provide a bridge between the board and the Fellowship at large. Transparency and the spirit of true collaboration throughout the Conference structure help to build trust and restore effectiveness.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

In the changing digital world, many felt that A.A. as a whole needs to develop a more effective approach to technology. Particularly at the Conference level, where the dissemination of information and communication is so critical, new technologies can provide the Fellowship with some benefits. Technology can be used to reach new people (both in terms of service and recovery) and to provide for the wide dispersion of materials relative to the processes and procedures of the General Service Conference.

Through secure shared websites, conference calls, blogs or other electronic meeting mechanisms, information can be disseminated more frequently, helping to stretch the Conference out over the full year rather than bunching everything together in short, intense bursts. Technology could also be well applied at the Conference itself, facilitating communication between committees, for voting and

tabulation, and for presentation of items to the Conference as a whole. (See Note 1.)

CONFERENCE ORIENTATION AND PREPARATION

Many expressed a need for greater orientation materials or guidelines for delegates and members of the Fellowship relative to what goes on at the Conference and how material is processed by the Conference. Questions were expressed about presentations/discussions, workshops and the purpose of the joint trustee/conference committee meetings, with the thought that an explanatory piece might be developed to highlight their purpose. Some felt that additional orientation needed to take place to serve as a reminder of the role of the delegate at the Conference. It was noted that some areas and regions prepare their delegates very well, while others do not; a consistent presentation prior to the beginning of the Conference could provide all delegates with the same level of preparedness. It was also suggested that a graphic presentation of how the GSB does its work might help to eliminate some confusion and educate the Fellowship.

INFORMATION

Questions were raised about the information on which much of the Conference is based: its volume, dissemination, purpose and derivation. Many delegates expressed being “overwhelmed” with the amount of material that must be gone through and some found the background materials to be inadequate in terms of providing the “reasoning” for certain agenda items. One participant wondered, “Does it serve us well to have everything?” and a second-year delegate noted, “Balance in preparation is very difficult and the smaller amount of background this year helped.” As another participant put it, there is “a lot of data, but not enough information.” It was also noted that getting an informed conscience from the groups depends on providing the information to them in a timely manner that allows the Fellowship to better understand the issues and to respond. Emphasizing the year-round nature of the Conference was again noted as a way of getting background information more deeply and effectively into the Fellowship.

LANGUAGE EQUALITY

An overriding concern expressed throughout a number of different workshop reports was the issue of language equality and the need to reach a level of parity in terms of the preparation and distribution of Conference agenda items and background information in all three languages represented by the Conference to ensure full participation throughout the Fellowship and to make certain that the Conference is not giving the impression that there are second class members. Timely translation of Conference mate-

rials into French and Spanish was seen as tangible evidence of the statement made in one workshop, “There is no us or them — it’s all us.” Recognition was made that the timely translation of Conference materials represents a difficult task, given the schedule, deadlines and fiscal constraints under which the General Service Office operates to provide support services for the Conference as a whole. However, consensus suggested that this was a highly compelling issue for Conference members and should be given appropriate attention by the trustees, evaluating all professional and volunteer resources that might be necessary to facilitate timely implementation. (*See Note 2.*)

DIVERSITY

Full participation in the Conference process was also related to the question of diversity, as many workshop groups reported, and it was noted that the Conference itself could pay attention to this issue. It was suggested that the Conference, and delegates in particular, find ways to reach out to underrepresented populations of all kinds. “Diversity begins with us, one-on-one,” said one report.

CONFERENCE AGENDA

In the spirit of full representation at the Conference and to reflect more of the Fellowship’s ongoing concerns, the question of how agenda items are developed was widely discussed, with requests made for more input from delegates in the determination of agenda items. It was expressed by some that the lack of input into each year’s Conference agenda by delegates can create a sense of inequality, as those who ultimately make the decisions about the agenda can be perceived as having unqualified authority over others. A number of avenues were suggested to allow for greater delegate input, including broader participation by Conference committee chairs at the January board meeting, greater involvement of the Conference Committee on Agenda throughout the year, and refinements to the schedule soliciting agenda items to encourage broader and ongoing input. (*See Note 3.*)

CONFERENCE DEADLINES

Recognizing the need for deadlines, many felt that the timing and distribution of Conference agenda items and background information limited input from the Fellowship, noting that getting an informed conscience from the groups depends on providing the information to them in a timely manner, which allows the Fellowship as a whole to better understand the issues and to respond. In this vein, requests were made for the trustees to reevaluate the scheduling and deadlines for the final receipt of Conference agenda items, redefining the process to facilitate greater exposure, discussion and reporting throughout the Fellowship. One suggestion made was to consider expanding the agenda development process to a full year. This would create time

for the Fellowship to discuss topics in advance, time to develop more balanced and complete background material, and time to have that background material translated into Spanish and French.

CONFERENCE THEME

It was expressed that the Conference theme could be a powerful way to encourage greater involvement in the Conference process from the Fellowship, but that the themes, in general, were not utilized in any meaningful way throughout the year. The themes are often unwieldy and unrelated to the general membership. Delegates and G.S.O. were encouraged to incorporate the Conference theme more prominently on a yearlong basis to help establish focus on the Conference and increase participation throughout the Fellowship.

MINORITY OPINION

It was noted that the concept of hearing minority opinion and minority reports was well utilized at the Conference and was a concept that could be more fully utilized throughout the Fellowship itself. Continued and regular focus on the minority voice is a helpful and beneficial element in fully evaluating the issues and concerns that come before the Fellowship, yet we should always encourage full debate before voting, which may preclude the need for minority views to be expressed.

WORKING TOGETHER AND INCREASING TRUST

Three familiar areas were articulated in terms of creating a more balanced working relationship between the trustees and the Conference: a) making sure that agenda items are received as far in advance as possible to ensure full participation throughout the Fellowship; b) finding ways to keep the trustees and conference committees in meaningful contact throughout the yearlong conference process; and c) cultivating more input from delegates regarding agenda items. “For authority to be commensurate with responsibility,” said one report, “there should be ready access between the general membership and service leaders... Communication among equals helps ensure this.” (*See Note 4.*)

ENGAGING THE FELLOWSHIP

Engaging the Fellowship with relevant and ongoing information about the Conference is not a new problem. Many reports recognized the historical gap between individual A.A. members and the Conference itself. “If we are not working locally to engage the full Fellowship,” said one report, “the disconnect between the GSC and the average member will remain. The connection needs to be made between what happens at the Conference and how it helps the drunk on the corner.” Many obstacles can come between the membership and general service — such as

family and work obligations, health issues, time constraints, etc. — but trying to limit such obstacles will help attract a broader spectrum of people. The Conference process is often seen as complicated by the average A.A., which tends to limit participation, noted one report, questioning whether it would be possible to simplify communication about the Conference and its process to make it more accessible throughout the Fellowship.

LISTENING FOR THE GROUP CONSCIENCE

Progress was made in having Conference materials available as soon as possible in English, French and Spanish, as requested by the 2014 Conference, and the 2015 Conference approved two items to keep that progress moving forward (*see Note 5*). One common theme expressed through many reports was the importance of listening as a

fundamental aspect of good communication. As one report noted, “We can get so caught up in A.A. rigidity, but if motivated by the spirit of listening, our group conscience can result in good decisions.”

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

One report indicated that the Conference Inventory itself is going a long way to ensuring balance between responsibility and authority, and that continuing some sort of regular review/assessment will help avoid future discrepancies between authority and responsibility. It was also suggested that now that the Inventory is done, perhaps it is time to take a similar comprehensive, multi-year approach to the Concepts and develop a plan to look at them in depth to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of the Conference, the board, and the entire general service structure.

NOTES:

1. The 2014 Policy/Admissions Committee suggested a two-year trial of electronic voting at the Conference (2015-2016), with results to be reported back to the 2017 committee for consideration. This was passed as 2014 Advisory Action #22.
2. The following Advisory Action #11 from the Finance Committee was passed at the 2014 GSC: “It was recommended that: Because all Conference members are considered equal, all members should have equal access to Conference material and that a plan be created by the General Service Office to translate Conference Material (background material, Conference Manual, etc.) into French and Spanish for use during the Conference, with a report being presented to the 2015 General Service Conference. This plan may include coordinating the use of the volunteer network throughout the Fellowship, hiring professional translators or any other facilities that the office deems necessary. The report should include costs and any other considerations deemed necessary to allow timely translations to occur.”
3. The 2014 Conference Agenda Committee requested that the trustees’ Committee on the Conference explore the potential role that the Conference Agenda Committee might play in the selection process of Agenda items in the future and provide a report to the 2015 Conference Agenda Committee.
4. The 2015 Conference Agenda Committee again requested that the trustees’ Committee on the Conference fully explore the potential role that the Conference Agenda Committee might play in the selection process of Agenda items in the future and provide a report to the 2016 Conference Agenda Committee — See the Additional Committee Considerations section of the 2015 *Final Conference Report*.
5. See 2015 Advisory Actions #4 and #5 requesting that translation begin on selected Conference materials for the 2016 GSC according to Phase 1 of the plan proposed by G.S.O., and that the trustees’ Committee on the General Service Conference develop a plan to have all Conference materials translated, with a progress report to be submitted to the 2016 Conference Committee on Policy and Admissions.

Summary of Workshop Reports

PROCESS

To address the 44 inventory questions proposed for the GSC and to allow for an equitable and representative cross-section of Conference members, three different groupings were created, with each segment further broken down into 5 subgroups for each set of questions. Conference members were then assigned to one of the workshop groups, each with a moderator and reporter, and each containing 9 total participants.

Meeting for two-and-a-half hours during the Conference, the full range of inventory questions was covered by Conference members, with reports prepared from each workshop group.

Subsequently, each group reported directly to the full Conference, with additional discussion and commentary on the Conference floor following each workshop report.

INVENTORY QUESTIONS

A: EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CONFERENCE/ CONFERENCE PROCESS OVERALL

1. Reflecting on Concept One, how well does the Conference ensure that it is the conscience of A.A. as a whole?

The Conference, as designed, is highly effective in ensuring the conscience of A.A. as a whole, taking the place of Bill W. and Dr. Bob; communication has to travel both directions — from trustees/delegates to the groups, and back; as the Conference becomes more transparent it allows delegates to better collect the area's voice and ensure that the groups can weigh in on topics they feel are important.

Under the guidance of the Concepts, the collective conscience of A.A. is achieved through full and open debate, minority opinions, right of decision, floor actions, right of participation and other similar practices; however, we could do better at reaching out to our membership regarding the Conference process; the Conference meets to “take A.A.’s temperature,” but there are concerns about how informed the Fellowship actually is due to inadequate background material, arbitrary agenda deadlines and language barriers; there is not sufficient delegate participation in development of Conference agenda items and the yearlong Conference process concept needs to be highlighted to better serve the needs of the local A.A. communities.

2. Reflecting on Concept Two, how can we better serve as the actual voice and be an effective conscience for our whole society?

We need to educate ourselves, our groups, our areas, and the general public through clear and ongoing

communication, connectivity and planned initiatives; to engage and communicate with A.A. members and groups regarding how necessary their input is.

Utilizing — and living — all three Legacies is important to gaining full participation throughout the Fellowship. “We can’t have a democratic organization without having the top of the pyramid [the groups] fully participating.” To do this, it is important to see other perspectives and to be as informative, loving and available as possible.

3. Reflecting on Concept Three, how can we effectively balance the freedoms and responsibilities that come with the right of decision?

Keeping “the good of A.A.” foremost in our thinking — respecting the roles represented by all parts of the triangle — is critical in maintaining balance within the Fellowship. “We have to make A.A. better, not just our areas,” said one report. Actions should be measured against the effect they might have on the alcoholic who still suffers and we shouldn’t underestimate the knowledge and interest of the Fellowship. “Responsibility involves listening to all sides,” stated one report, adding that we have to be careful not to be so critical as to demoralize those we are trying to serve. “Provide the best and most timely information that you can to the group that you are responsible to so that they can participate fully and effectively in giving you their initial input; if their initial input is well-informed you are less likely to need to exercise the right of decision.”

Complete reporting of Conference actions, including an explanation of any new information that may have affected the vote, is part of the delegate’s responsibility, along with trying to balance majority and minority opinion relating to Conference decisions. “Just because we don’t *have* to consult or report about a particular item, doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t,” explained one report. And it’s important, said another, to stay friendly with those we are trying to serve, even those with whom we may disagree. “We may learn more from the minority than the majority.”

4. Reflecting on Concept Four, how effective are we in treating all Conference members as equals (no one regarded as second class)?

The use of Concept Four throughout the general service structure ensures that we are all treated as equals — with different service roles, but each serving the Fellowship equally; mutual respect and finding similarities are key; trustees want to hear from delegates — whether they have good things to say or bad; people

sometimes hesitate to ask questions, however, and we need to transcend ego to bring forth all the issues that need to be discussed; communication styles based on kindness and courtesy reflect the spirit of equal participation; “We want to hear from everyone, but we need to use good judgment on how often we speak on a particular subject”; There is no us or them — it’s all us; this is “our” Conference, we each have one vote.

Nevertheless, we can give the impression that there are second class members due to the level of language accommodations made throughout the Fellowship relating to Conference background material; additionally, the lack of input into each year’s Conference agenda by delegates can create a sense of inequality, as those who ultimately make the decisions about the agenda can be perceived as having unqualified authority over the others.

5. Reflecting on Concept Five, how well does the Conference facilitate the hearing and resolution of minority appeals/report? How could it be improved?

There is a difference between minority opinion — usually verbal and taken after every vote — and minority appeals/reports — which are written and follow a specific process for submission to the Conference; the minority appeal/report is the last resort for issues to be brought to the Conference and the process should be respected; the spirit of the principle of minority reports is stressed through the understanding that what is done at one Conference can be changed or corrected at another; we should always encourage full debate before voting.

The concept of minority opinion, reports/appeals doesn’t just happen at the Conference — an area can bring back an item if they don’t agree; the concept should be used in many places, in many ways; floor actions are sometimes also a form of appeal; through minority opinion we have the opportunity for our voice to be heard — we may not get our way, but we have been heard.

6. Does the structure encourage each individual in the Fellowship to feel and act as a member of a “society of alcoholics in action”? If not, how could we improve?

The structure allows everyone to serve, regardless of the language and origins; all service is equal — even Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees feel like members; however, while the structure provides opportunities for members to serve, many choose not to participate.

Throughout the Fellowship, membership is not increasing and many groups are not contributing at the same levels as in the past; demographics and geography pose challenges; the structure can sometimes be a hindrance to transparency; negative per-

ceptions can be developed, as in the confidentiality statement signed by trustees, which can be perceived as the flip-side of transparency; members often don’t participate in their group’s business meetings and so are uninformed about the service structure; sponsorship and service sponsorship is vital; delegates need to “connect the dots” of service to the alcoholic who still suffers; demonstrate that each voice can be heard; transmit the passion.

7. Does the yearlong Conference process effectively encourage all Conference members to lead (or serve) in the spirit of our upside-down service structure? If not, how can we encourage all Conference members to do so?

For delegates, the Conference is a yearlong process as they visit districts and take the pulse of the Fellowship in their areas; communication takes place throughout the year through the website, dashboard, board weekends and the minutes generated from them; some areas are quite participatory in responding to agenda items while others have more work to do to get individual members to understand their importance in the upside-down structure and to interact with the delegate.

Most Conference committees do not meet or communicate much during the year — perhaps more regular communication or caucusing could be encouraged; some committees need more time at the Conference, as the workload can be overwhelming; the upside-down process can be made more transparent by providing information more widely throughout the Fellowship — “by providing everyone with whatever I receive,” says one Conference member.

8. How well is the use of Floor Actions serving us?

Floor Actions can provide a failsafe mechanism to get an issue back on track or provide an opportunity for an issue to be heard; they emphasize that everyone has a place to express their opinion; they are a protection for the minority voice; however, there are very few emergencies in A.A. and the Conference has the power to decide whether or not to hear a floor action.

Not being on the agenda, floor actions bypass the committee system and often need time for thought, consideration, input from the Fellowship and pertinent background information; floor actions should generally be discouraged but in certain instances are needed.

9. Reflecting on Concept Ten, how well is the authority of the Conference defined?

Overall, the Conference Charter and the scope of Conference authority are clear, with checks and balances defined by tradition and spiritual principles; sometimes, though, there is a difference between definition and application, with a fine balance between too little definition of the Conference’s authority and too much; the Conference and the General Service

Board are interdependent and need to work closely together to avoid creating given responsibility without commensurate authority.

The Conference is the place where business and spirituality mix, and the current composition of the Conference continues to provide an adequate balance of authority and responsibility.

10. How well does the Conference fulfill the General Warranties of Concept Twelve?

The Conference is excellent at encompassing a wide variety of abilities, shows impartial restraint and is an honest and open process — ever evolving, ever changing — and the Conference structure itself provides an adequate safeguard to protect A.A. from any misuse of authority, whether actual or perceived; the Warranties provide us with a dock of safe return, teaching us how to treat one another, guiding us away from “us” and “them” and tying us together as one.

Rotation helps to avoid accumulation of power; democracy, fairness and equality ensure that all levels of service are the same; substantial unanimity and insistence on the minority opinion are highly valued principles; the Conference exercises stewardship, not governance; however, politics can enter into the picture and there is room for improvement in reducing the influence of past trusted servants on current Conference members.

11. How might any one of the Concepts be revised in essence or wording to more effectively and relevantly guide our leaders?

“We don’t need to change the Concepts — just live them,” was a sentiment often expressed. Yet, many recognized the difficulties of applying these principles in a changing society and engaging the Fellowship to learn more about our Third Legacy. “Participation by the average A.A. is blocked by the idea that the Conference is complicated, intense.... Can we simplify communication about our process? Find a way to demystify the language?”

Some felt that the Concepts can be seen as separate entities, with some more important than others, rather than as an interconnected group of matched principles. Additionally, it was expressed that without cooperation and communication, ideas like the right of decision can be pitted against the right of participation. It’s important to focus on the relevance of the Concepts at the group, district and area level in order to engage the interest of individual members and to communicate in ways that resonate with diverse groups and all ages.

B: COMPOSITION OF THE CONFERENCE

12. Should delegate areas be more consistently based on actual membership numbers?

Conference composition should not rely on rigid proportional representation by population alone; a variety of factors should be considered, all with the collective goal of good communication within the area.

Small areas and large areas face different challenges; large areas may want to consider the value of breaking down into smaller pieces to spread out necessary service work, while some smaller areas, perhaps, might want to consider merging.

There is a cost in time and money to unity that is different for each area; high and low population density, geography, cultural differences and diversity must all be considered by areas evaluating a change.

13. Should regional divisions be based on membership numbers, the number of areas contained in each region or some other criteria. Please explain.

There is a process in place to split areas when they become too big, but nothing similar for regions; nevertheless, regional divisions should not necessarily be made on membership numbers or number of groups; it is critical that the regional trustees be able to visit all areas in their region.

But, some ask, “is it fair for an area with 300-500 groups to have the same vote as an area with 2,000 groups?” — perhaps creating more or reconfiguring existing regions would even things out.

14. Is the size and structure (proportions of delegate/trustee/staff) of the Conference the most effective for conducting the work of the Fellowship? If not, how could it be made more effective?

It was the general consensus that the proportions and structure of the Conference are good, but that more work needs to be done to develop diversity within the Conference body. To be truly representative of the Fellowship, the Conference needs to keep inviting diversity by reaching out to members of all ages, races, income and education levels, those with special needs, and those with differing professional backgrounds.

In terms of participation at the Conference, it was noted that a good idea can come from anyone, and that staff, delegates and trustees have equal access to share information. Some questions were raised about increasing the representation of staff at the Conference and the possibilities of adding new areas as ways of expanding the Conference body itself. However, in general, it was felt that the current size of the Conference is workable and while expansion is something to keep on the radar for continued discussion, no changes were needed at this time.

C: COMMITTEE SYSTEM

- 15. Does the Conference committee system function in accordance with our principles? If not, what changes should we consider regarding: a) structure b) composition c) effectiveness?**

Most reports recognized the benefits of working within the committee system, but questions of balanced workloads and expanding collaboration between Conference committees were also raised. Some committees (for example, Literature) characteristically seem to have a heavier workload and can be over-taxed for time, while other committees are lighter. Finding ways to balance these workloads is important.

Additionally, it was felt that there could be more collaboration between committees and that cross-pollination is a good thing. Committees can become insular and this may lead to micromanaging agenda items and getting bogged down in excessive wordsmithing rather than keeping the focus on substantive issues.

The benefit of working in small groups was noted, which helps achieve transparency among delegates, trustees and staff. “Quit separating us,” added one report, “Delegates need more interaction time with trustees and staff.”

- 16. What is the right balance of participation among committee members (delegates, staff) and how can we best achieve that balance?**

The balance of participation between staff and delegates in Conference committees is good; staff role is supportive, not directive — extremely helpful as resources in gathering information; when asked, staff should feel free to voice opinions; balance of 1st and 2nd year delegates is also important within each committee; committee system works well.

Balance in joint trustees/conference committee meetings can pose challenges, especially for 1st year delegates — 10 or more trustees, directors and staff members can be a formidable presence, particularly when contentious agenda items are up for discussion.

- 17. Could the committee process be improved to more effectively introduce change in the Fellowship, and if so, how?**

Change should come from the Fellowship and be introduced in a measured way, keeping the flow of information positive; flexibility is a key ingredient in change, and not everything has to be in black and white.

Good communication with the Fellowship is key to dispelling the perception that something is “hidden”; better communication following the Conference and before the July board meeting between the Conference committees and their corresponding trustees’ committees could help in the development of

appropriate agenda items and background material; cross-pollination between committees could help to alleviate workloads; more involvement from delegates in the development of the agendas would be beneficial; Conference materials needs to be made available in other languages to accommodate diversity and facilitate change.

D: YEARLONG PROCESS EFFECTIVENESS

- 18. What improvements could be considered to make sure the agenda selection is more effective?**

Agenda selection is a yearlong process that could be enhanced by more education at the group level regarding the ability of groups to participate in the formulation of items; agenda items need to be for the good of the whole Fellowship.

The Fellowship could be better informed about trustee discussions — some trustees supply minutes from their meetings, though this is not universal and the G.S.O. reporting is seen as too general; the role of the regional trustee is vital in developing awareness of agenda items that may be coming up throughout the year.

- 19. How well is the message of the Conference theme being carried out throughout the year?**

Throughout the year, in most areas, the Conference theme is given very little attention: the theme often gets lost and the focus shifts to agenda items, especially controversial ones; theme is sometimes complicated, seems more like a corporate theme; in many areas the theme is never mentioned until it starts into Conference time.

Conference as a whole needs to acknowledge the importance of institutionalizing the practice of observing the Conference theme all year long to establish it as part of the area culture; delegates, trustees and G.S.O. need to encourage use of the theme throughout the Fellowship and build it into yearlong events.

- 20. How well do all Conference members communicate to the Fellowship about why we have a Conference and how the committee system works? How could we improve in this communication?**

Most Conference members are informed about the committee system and how it works; the difficulty is in reaching those who are “not part of the choir.”

Increasing participation in the Conference process throughout the Fellowship is a primary concern, with some areas having great success and others finding it more difficult to engage and educate members; areas with mock-Conferences, mini-committees, or pre-Conference assemblies find this an effective way to educate the Fellowship about the Conference; the

use of technology could be helpful in reaching out to DCMs and GSRs, especially through videos.

21. *How can we better communicate that the Conference process is more than one spring week in New York?*

Reaching — and engaging — the Fellowship with relevant and ongoing information about the Conference is not a new problem. Many reports recognized the historical gap between individual A.A. members and the Conference itself. Communication remains the principal means of bridging this gap and it was suggested that communication is best achieved on a face-to-face basis and be framed in language that is meaningful to an A.A. member rather than using “academic” language or service jargon. Noted one report, the connection needs to be made between what happens at the Conference and how it helps the drunk on the corner.

Several reports mentioned the low percentage of participation in general service in their areas, making the importance of communication even greater. Also discussed were breaks in the chain of communication, sometimes occurring at the DCM and GSR levels.

While it is primarily the job of the delegate to make the Conference connection throughout the Fellowship, G.S.O. can help facilitate communication about Conference matters and can reach out to the general A.A. population on an ongoing basis with information about the Conference.

22. *How do the delegates and regional trustees support the yearlong process effectiveness?*

All levels of the service structure — GSRs, DCMs, delegates, trustees, etc. — serve together to accomplish the task of supporting the Conference process. However, when the delegates and trustee within a region form a strong bond, each delegate has many sources for help. Keeping past delegates and past trustees involved can be very helpful in carrying the message of how the Conference process works, and coordinating and collaborating with area chairs can help provide the Fellowship with pertinent Conference information.

Having regular conference calls between regional trustees and delegates, delegate chairs and committee members, delegates and alternate delegates, delegates and DCMs/GSRs can be invaluable. Additional technologies can also enhance effectiveness and magnify the reach of our communication efforts: podcasts, CD recordings of the delegate’s Conference report, password protected area websites. Ongoing communication about the Conference strengthens unity.

23. *What other suggestions do we have for how to improve the effectiveness of the yearlong process?*

Ongoing communication throughout the service structure is the key; the flow of information goes both ways

— from Conference to the Fellowship and from the Fellowship to the Conference; find ways for GSRs to stay involved and interested — educate and engage GSRs in the Conference theme.

**E: CONFERENCE PREPARATION
(background, content, delivery, etc.)**

24. *How can we improve the manner in which Conference background material is developed and distributed?*

Gratitude was expressed for the three formats available for the delivery of background material; however, an overriding concern was voiced that background material be distributed, at the same time, in all three languages of the Conference, to clearly manifest the right of decision and the right of participation; “we aren’t operating as a society of equals.”

It was recognized that this would have to come at a cost, though consensus seemed to indicate that the issue is critical enough that it should be addressed sooner rather than later, with funding pulled from other services, derived from literature price increases, developed through volunteer resources, or solicited from increased Fellowship contributions.

25. *How well do the delegates balance their preparation for the Conference, especially in keeping with Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter? How could we improve in the practice of our rights and responsibilities under Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter?*

Delegates sometimes feel overwhelmed with the amount of information that must be gone through and so must prioritize; Concept Three acts as a reminder that the job of the Conference is to set policy, not set practice.

Right of Decision is a great responsibility, carrying with it the importance of providing reasons why a decision was made; explaining the “reasoning” behind conclusions reached at the Conference is helpful throughout the Fellowship.

Importance of Concept Three in making distinction between sharing experience and lobbying; put Conference decision-making experience in personal terms when sharing with the Fellowship.

26. *What more could be done to prepare delegates for the Conference?*

Given the time constraints of the Conference process, it was felt by many that what materials there are for committee members are well-delivered via either the dashboard or CD. However, three general issues came to the forefront in the discussion of this question: the timing of delegates receiving agenda items and background material (they are needed earlier), the languages that the materials are available in (should

be English, French and Spanish), and the most effective use of time at the Conference (more focus on the yearlong process would be helpful).

F: CONFERENCE WEEK SCHEDULE

27. *How can we improve the way time is allotted during the Conference for reports, presentation/discussion/workshop topics, and thorough discussion of agenda items?*

Committee time is precious and there may be too many other Conference activities that draw away from the primary business at hand; it may be helpful to dispose of routine information throughout the year rather than taking actual Conference time.

Conference week is laid out well, has evolved and been improved upon by the process of natural selection; however, Conference could be more dynamic, with presentations eliminated or shortened on the basis of the Conference workload at the time.

Conference is amazingly efficient at cramming a lot of stuff in, but there is a delicate balance between moving the Conference along and ensuring thoughtful, deliberative and inclusive discussion; Conference members need to be concise and respectful of the limited time the Conference has to do its work; stick to the topic, don't repeat sharing; having a clear understanding of time allotted and work to be covered helps committees reach an informed conscience with all voices heard from.

28. *What Conference activities give participants the most opportunities to be leaders?*

It was generally felt that all Conference activities provided opportunities for leadership. Committee work, being present and prepared, the responsibility of considering the area conscience and voting for what is best for A.A. were all cited. Said one report, "It is important to remember that we are leaders and that we are also servants. Some of our leadership derives from how well we perform as servants to the Fellowship." And another: "Leadership is not a thing but an attitude of service." It was noted, as well, that even after rotation, the mantle of leadership does not dissipate; it just changes.

29. *At the Conference, what is the difference between being a leader or being a reporter? Can a person be both at the same time?*

The delegate is both a leader and a reporter — one job is subjective and the other objective; reporting to the areas requires delegates to be both: sharing facts in a balanced way while reflecting thoughts, feelings and emotions; a leader has the capacity to accept the ideas of others, while a reporter informs the Fellowship about what happens; can be both, but may have a

tendency to move more toward one and may not accurately carry the group's thoughts.

Being both is difficult because one leads from passion and one reports facts; one can't do the tasks of leader and reporter simultaneously, but one can be both at the same time.

30. *Does the time allotted and the manner in which information is communicated from the trustees and board members allow delegates to adequately understand and/or question their reports? How could this be improved?*

Recognizing that board and trustee reports provide a lot of detailed and critical information, it was generally agreed that more time would be helpful for these reports to be digested and questions formulated, perhaps spreading them out over more than one day. The finance report was mentioned specifically as needing more time, along with the A.A.W.S./Grapevine reports and the joint meetings between trustees' and Conference committees. One report noted, "A.A. should not go the way of the world, where everything is accelerating. We should take the necessary time to do our business well and fully."

31. *How are leadership and participation affected by late night work sessions?*

Late night work sessions may create a negative "badge of honor" that belies the reality that cognitive processes regress and personality conflicts increase as sessions go late, decreasing ability to make informed decisions.

The pace of the Conference should be even, not rushed at the end of the week; Conference members are here to conduct A.A.'s business and while that may take additional time on occasion, we need to reduce repetition: "Is the comment serving me or is the comment serving the body?"

G: GENERAL SERVICE BOARD/CORPORATE BOARDS (A.A.W.S & A.A. GRAPEVINE)

32. *Reflecting on Concept Six, how can the Conference ensure that the authority we delegate to the General Service Board is commensurate with the responsibility we have entrusted to them?*

Recognizing the unusual relationship between the board of trustees and the Conference, many reports expressed gratitude for the structure of checks and balances as it is set up. This is not the experience, typically, in business, and provides continuing evidence that "the A.A. way" works. It was felt that transparency and open communication between the trustees and the Conference lead to trust and a truly informed group conscience and that, along the way, we should not shy away from difficult discussions. Additionally,

it was noted that the need for transparency goes beyond the week at the Conference. “For authority to be commensurate with responsibility, there should be ready access between the general membership and service leaders... ‘communication among equals’ helps ensure this,” said one report.

Three familiar areas were articulated in terms of creating more balance between the trustees and the Conference: making sure that agenda items are received far enough in advance to ensure full participation; finding ways to keep the trustees and Conference committees in contact throughout the yearlong conference process; and allowing more input from delegates regarding agenda items. Progress in these areas, it was felt, would go a long way toward keeping the flow of information to and from the Fellowship open. “We need a balance of authority and to outwardly look for demonstrations of trust,” said one report. “A great start happened this year allowing delegates to participate at board weekend, but we must continue to talk, eyeball-to-eyeball.”

Keeping the focus on “what will help the still suffering” is a good way of keeping ourselves on track, as the focus can sometimes veer too much toward the business details related to the work of the trustees. Ours is a fellowship of the spirit and we need to maintain that outlook.

One report indicated that the Conference Inventory itself is going a long way to ensure balance between responsibility and authority, and that continuing some sort of regular review/assessment will help avoid future discrepancies between authority and responsibility.

33. Reflecting on Concept Eight: (a) How well is the General Service Board exercising custodial oversight and how effectively are they serving as the principle planners and administrators of policy and finance? (b) What are the boundaries between oversight vs. delegation? When is each practiced?

The general consensus was that the board is exercising its custodial oversight well, and that the administrative aspects relating to A.A. operations take a great deal of time. Nevertheless, there are a number of areas in the operation of A.A.’s essential services where the Fellowship would like to have input. “This Fellowship is unique as a large nonprofit corporate entity,” explained one report. “Individuals who have recovered from cancer cannot or dare not suggest how the American Cancer Society run its board. Yet we in A.A. have a cooperative, almost interpersonal, relationship between board and members.”

With issues of interest ranging from self-support and reserve fund management to organizational initiatives to improving communications and the use of technology in today’s changing world, it is important

for the trustees to recognize that there are matters the Fellowship would like to have input on. And by asking questions about these and other issues, delegates and A.A. members are not implying that the trustees are not fulfilling their oversight responsibilities. Questions and answers on matters of interest to the Fellowship lead to the ongoing flow of communication — often repetitive (as something may be clearly explained to one panel of delegates but not as clearly explained to the next) — that ultimately leads to understanding.

It can be difficult for the Fellowship to assess GSB oversight of the corporate boards, as reports provide mostly business criteria and it is difficult to know if the actual interactions between the entities are good, bad, or indifferent. So trusting the process is a key element, especially when boundaries between the corporate entities must be flexible in order to achieve necessary goals. “We are only as good as the information we are provided with,” added one report, and “there is room for improvement in clarity and accuracy when communicating mistakes in large fiscal or policy matters.”

34. Reflecting on Concept Eleven, does the General Service Board exercise serious care in having the best possible assistance in carrying out their duties? How can this process be improved?

The General Service Board has exercised due diligence and informed care to insure the best assistance in carrying out its duties; “with the lens that I have as delegate, I see qualified people serving as nontrustee directors, G.S.O. staff, etc.”; in selecting people for service positions on the boards, “we look for the person who will best serve A.A.”

Communication issues can sometimes be problematic, however, as board reporting is not detailed enough in some instances regarding the activities of the trustees (ie, quality of minutes) and the distribution of information about openings on the board and staff can be too limited; trust is important, but so is transparency; the time, respect and willingness to have disagreements and extended discussions are important to healthy functioning; it may be that pockets of the Fellowship think that service at the board level is about being part of the “in crowd”: if a person is a delegate, then appointed committee member, then nontrustee director, then general service trustee, they may be around for too long, like “when a GSR keeps the position for many years — it’s not good”; taking an honest inventory and raising awareness of challenges the board faces can help develop trust; there is a tricky balance between flexibility and openness, which are important to innovation, while still maintaining the principles that sustain A.A.

35. Does the current role of the board most effectively address the needs of the Fellowship? If not, how should their role be changed?

The board does an admirable job of addressing the needs of a diverse and far-flung Fellowship; we need the board to be an anchor for the core principles of A.A. — “to always have a beacon to find our way back.”

To address the needs of the Fellowship more effectively, however, there needs to be more communication between the board and the delegates regarding the Conference agenda; is the less-than-half level of group participation in contributions and general service an indication of a deep problem between the Fellowship and the board?; communication is a two-way street and needs encouragement in both directions; the challenges of dealing with policy matters, the balance of power and questions of delegated authority have always been with us; when we seek to criticize or place blame it is hard, if not impossible, to keep the focus on spirituality and unity; throughout the Fellowship we need to admit when things are difficult and ask for help; “the service structure is only as good as the people in it.”

36. Is the current makeup of the board (numbers and proportions) still the most effective? If not, what changes should we consider?

The current ratio of board members (Class A/Class B) is adequate, and the continuity of the “pathway” from appointed committee member to nontrustee director to general service trustee is beneficial, especially for those with professional backgrounds; Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees could benefit from more training on the Concepts and Traditions, and service sponsorship for board members, including Class A trustees, can be helpful.

Professional expertise is an important qualification for trustees, though it can also be beneficial to lean on Conference committees for input and suggestions.

Some feel the corporate boards are still not effective and that the numbers and proportions could be revised.

37. Should the Fellowship have more direct influence in the selection of Class A trustees, corporate directors, and general service trustees? If yes, how might that be accomplished?

The Fellowship should not necessarily have more direct influence in the selection of board members and trustees, but should have more influence in generating the pool of candidates from which these A.A. servants are chosen. Often the actual roles of these trusted servants are not well known, so disseminating more information throughout the service structure on what these people are asked to do for the Fellowship might help enlarge the pool of available candidates.

38. How could we improve the methods used to solicit trustees and directors to get the most appropriate people interested in the positions?

C.P.C. committees can be helpful in recruiting new Class A trustee candidates, and broadly advertising board openings is necessary to cast a wide net; International Conventions can provide good “auditions” for potential Class A positions; Forums are also extremely helpful.

Balance needs to be struck between vision/leadership skills versus professional background when soliciting trustees.

39. Is the selection/election process for trustees and directors effective and impartial/fair? How would you change it?

“A.A. is like a self-cleaning oven. I don’t believe any one person can make or break A.A. I trust the process. I believe what Bill said — that A.A. will be around as long as God will have it. I believe in the Alpha and the Omega in the entire process.”

The system for selecting regional trustees, with regional delegates, randomly-selected nonregional delegates and trustees, etc., really helps to deter manipulation of the election; the selection of nontrustee directors is vigorous and thorough; widening the pool of candidates would help develop diversity, as sometimes we miss the quieter-voiced candidates; we need more information on the slate of officers proposed for each board to better evaluate candidates; trustee-at-large elections can be strongly influenced by size of the regions; it takes real courage and dedication to set aside personal/geographic loyalties in the selection of the most qualified candidates.

40. What more could be done to insure the General Service Board remains transparent and thorough in their reporting to the Fellowship?

Good communication is the key to transparency at the board level — let the Fellowship know what’s really going on, keep the at-large A.A. member in mind when transmitting information; recording the reasoning behind board decisions helps keep the GSB transparent; transparency brings trust.

Regional trustees need to be more consistent in passing on information to their delegates — an uneven flow of information to delegates can create ill will and lack of trust toward the GSB; continuity in reporting will help the Fellowship better understand what goes on at the board and Conference level.

Communication needs to flow both ways and members need to recognize that all information cannot always be made available due to business concerns, privacy, matters of confidentiality and such, and sometimes information must be held until discussion has been completed on a particular topic; in such cases, patience and trust must be relied upon.

H: LEADERSHIP

41. Reflecting on Concept Nine, are the qualities of leadership, as identified in the leadership essay in The A.A. Service Manual, still the qualities that we should try to encourage in Conference members? If so, how successful are we in encouraging those qualities? If not, what changes should we consider?

Leadership, integrity, conviction — we need these qualities now more than ever; sponsorship is a key ingredient; humility and working with others.

“Leadership” is not a bad word in A.A. — there must be some for A.A. to function effectively at all levels; we should encourage each other to lead and be willing to follow as well.

Leadership in A.A. should not be a competition; passion and desire are as important as professional background; we should not fear challenging authority; leadership must listen to criticism.

The Conference needs more of the vision quality and a continued willingness to look at what is good overall, not just what may be good for one particular area or segment of the Fellowship.

42. How can we improve the methods of selecting effective leaders and nurturing leadership qualities in our trusted servants?

“In my area, when I see someone I think has something that would be a great help, I encourage them to get involved”; “train, support, share, walk with, review reports, get notes on reports — these are what people have done for me. It is so important to help the person along. It’s our responsibility”; sponsorship at all levels is essential; “leading by example can only be encouraged by leading by example. Leadership that drives by mandate generates more leaders of that nature”; emphasis on selection of GSRs is the foundation for good leadership throughout the Fellowship.

We need to recognize the value of all kinds of leaders: good organizers, good talkers, good listeners, good cheerleaders, and the multiple roles we need to fill;

for elections at the Conference, a review of the qualifications for the position, not the candidates, prior to voting would be helpful in keeping the focus on what A.A. needs; it is our responsibility to educate people to serve and to provide a much more extensive orientation for our trusted servants — the investment would be well worth it.

43. What more could be done to ensure broad diversity of representation in our leaders?

How are we encouraging A.A. members to be active at all levels of our service structure?; “efforts like translation to increase inclusivity at events are helpful, but what needs to be broadened is personal acceptance of others”; “we have a lot to do as a Fellowship in the area of diversity. Lots of barriers. If we can show we are making advances in language areas, we can make a difference in diversity”; “diversity is not a reason to elect someone. Diversity is a concern for our entire Fellowship. We need to nurture people into leadership. Service teaches loud people how to listen and quiet people to have a voice”; “we not only need to reach out, but to do so in a sensitive and informed manner”; “differences should be recognized and respected, but if emphasis is kept on our common problem and our common solution these differences don’t need to be perpetuated or become problematic to overall unity.”

44. How well is the Third Legacy Procedure serving us? How could it be improved?

“The Third Legacy Procedure embodies our best principles of trust, love, humility and service,” stated one report. “It is more than just the hat. It’s thoughtfulness, concerned with the welfare of the whole and the well-being of the individual.”

Some concerns were raised, however, that while pulling a name from the hat takes the ego and politicking out of the selection process, are we getting the people with the best qualifications? For some, the process seemed to be “a crap shoot,” while most seemed comfortable with how the procedure is used, not only at the Conference but throughout the Fellowship.

Additional Recommendations/Suggestions

A: EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CONFERENCE/ CONFERENCE PROCESS OVERALL

Reflecting on Concept One, how well does the Conference ensure that it is the conscience of A.A. as a whole?

- Encourage groups to participate more fully in the Conference process.
- Feedback from the areas is very important to delegates and the current schedule for distributing background material and the agenda makes it difficult to have area membership discussions; reevaluate timing of current schedule for developing, selecting and submitting agenda items.
- All Conference members should have information in their mother tongue; Conference communications with the Hispanic community need to be more inclusive; if it is too unwieldy to do it beforehand, consider translating agenda items and background material after the agenda is distributed.

Reflecting on Concept Two, how can we better serve as the actual voice and be an effective conscience for our whole society?

- Give more time to the minority opinion at the area level.
- Reaffirm that the groups are in charge; show how the Conference impacts groups; involve DCMs in the communication process to and from the Conference.
- Reach out to unregistered and nonparticipating groups — attend and absorb what these groups value and what their message is.
- Consider video conferencing to reach geographically remote communities.
- Translate background material into French and Spanish.
- Involve delegates more in the Conference selection process for agenda items.
- The makeup of the board of trustees could better reflect the diversity of the Fellowship.
- Try to make it easier and less time-consuming for members to participate in general service. This will help attract a broader spectrum of people.
- The A.A. Membership Survey could be an effective tool to reach underrepresented groups.
- Delegates should try to involve more groups in the pre-Conference process.

Reflecting on Concept Three, how can we effectively balance the freedoms and responsibilities that come with the right of decision?

- More time at the Conference should be spent on substantive issues, not word-smithing. When Conference members get microscopic it takes away from important issues.

- Some decisions can/should wait until we obtain a fuller group conscience. It's important to better involve the groups in the Conference process, even if it takes more time.
- Concepts workshops at the local level can help the Fellowship better understand the right of decision.
- Increasing the time between releasing the agenda and background material and the start of the Conference itself may help to increase the Fellowship's understanding of issues facing A.A. as a whole.

Reflecting on Concept Four, how effective are we in treating all Conference members as equals (no one regarded as second class)?

- Pay more attention to linguistic minorities; translate all Conference background material into Spanish and French.
- Encourage diversity; think about who is not in the room — for example, young people — as the average age at the Conference is 57.
- Review process of selecting Conference agenda items to include more input from delegates.
- Continue utilizing the “buddy system” at the Conference, as it encourages camaraderie and the feeling of equality.

Reflecting on Concept Five, how well does the Conference facilitate the hearing and resolution of minority appeals/reports? How could it be improved?

- The process for submitting minority appeals/reports is not well known and needs to be clarified to Conference members.

Does the structure encourage each individual in the Fellowship to feel and act as a member of a “society of alcoholics in action”? If not, how could we improve?

- Find ways to reach out to underrepresented populations — young people, etc. “I would like to see a deaf delegate one day.”
- Translate all background material.
- Find avenues to pass the service message along to those who are unaware of how the structure works to support A.A. In this effort we need to be mindful of how we carry ourselves: “We may be the only copy of the *A.A. Service Manual* some A.A.s ever see.”
- Explore ways to utilize PI and CPC to create excitement and enthusiasm about A.A. membership.
- Encourage attendance at Regional Forums.
- Promote greater use of unusual service connections and innovative service tools that have aided and enhanced the sobriety of members in many different circumstances.
- Continue to acknowledge and support all types of service, not just general service.

Does the yearlong Conference process effectively encourage all Conference members to lead (or serve) in the spirit of our upside-down service structure? If not, how can we encourage all Conference members to do so?

- Delegates need to teach people what to do with the information they get from our service entities.
- Consider changing the deadline for agenda items to December rather than January to allow for broader discussion.
- Preparation of background material could benefit from more participation and oversight from trustees' committees rather than just leaving it in the hands of staff to determine what to include.
- Delegates should share amongst themselves online or otherwise about how to be more effective in getting out the information from the Conference.
- Consider establishing or supporting "GSR schools," where everyone is invited to learn more about their service responsibilities, how agenda items are developed, and how the upside-down process works. How well is the use of floor actions serving us?
- Provide background information to delegates on floor actions and the process by which they are handled at the Conference.

Reflecting on Concept Ten, how well is the authority of the Conference defined?

- Delegates should stay better plugged into board activities throughout the year.
- Concerns exist regarding the unequal authority of the GSB to set the Conference agenda; review how agenda items are developed and consider greater inclusion of delegates in this process.

How well does the Conference fulfill the General Warranties of Concept Twelve?

- In response to an expressed concern about the disenfranchisement of groups and A.A. as a whole from the general service structure, consider holding the Conference at a less expensive location, perhaps rotating it around the US and Canada to reduce costs and increase participation.

How might any one of the Concepts be revised in essence or wording to more effectively and relevantly guide our leaders?

- Annotated, narrative and simplified Concept tools need to be developed for use throughout the Fellowship — along the lines of the Concepts Checklist and the "Twelve Concepts Illustrated" pamphlet.
- The Conference process does not provide enough time to focus on and address the future needs of the Fellowship; it is important that the Conference not become entirely reactive, but also extend a vision for A.A.'s future.

- Now that the Inventory is done, take a similar approach to the Concepts and develop a plan to look at them in depth at next year's Conference, and beyond.
- Have more workshops on the Concepts at the local level; include more stories about the Concepts in Grapevine, La Viña and *Box 4-5-9*; create a summary table of contents similar to what is in the Twelve and Twelve.
- The Concepts are not a history book or a policy document. The Conference could take three Concepts a year for four years and develop clearer narratives reflecting current experience, including examples of how we actually use the Concepts within the Fellowship. These examples could then be included in the *The A.A. Service Manual*.

B: COMPOSITION OF CONFERENCE

Should delegate areas be more consistently based on actual membership numbers?

- Further discussion is needed on the question of whether or not our largest member centers should consider resizing.
- When evaluating the possible resizing of areas, the "domino effect" that changing areas would have on groups, districts, regions, boards, committees and the Conference should be considered.
- The redistricting of delegate areas is not thought to be feasible or necessary at this time and if it is to be considered in the future a clear census and rationale should be provided.

Should regional divisions be based on membership numbers, the number of areas contained in each region or some other criteria. Please explain.

- More information is needed on the history of how regions were created and how they grew; more data is needed before an informed decision could be made, though many felt the situation is fine as it is.

Is the size and structure (proportions of delegate/trustee/staff) of the Conference the most effective for conducting the work of the Fellowship? If not, how could it be made more effective?

- Perhaps linguistic districts could become areas with their own delegates?
- Translation of background material is needed to empower and strengthen participation for all members.
- Greater use of technology will enhance communication.
- The time may be approaching to consider new delegate areas/regions to achieve greater equity in terms of numbers of groups represented and geographic area covered, as it relates both to delegates and regional trustees.

C: COMMITTEE SYSTEM

Does the Conference committee system function in accordance with our principles? If not, what changes should we consider regarding: a) structure b) composition c) effectiveness?

- There is not enough time at the Conference. More communication throughout the year between the trustees' committees and the corresponding Conference committees could help ease the time crunch. Perhaps it's necessary to add more days to the Conference schedule?
- Make the agenda item deadline earlier to allow for greater input from the Fellowship.
- It is important to trust the informed group conscience and not get bogged down in microscopic analysis and wordsmithing.
- Give delegate chairs a larger role in the agenda selection process.
- Consider giving trustees and staff a voice and vote at the committee level.
- Utilize technology (conference calls, Skype, etc.) to allow committees to meet before the Conference.
- Allow a broader segment of the Fellowship to view proposed materials before the Conference (i.e., PSAs) to gain a wider conscience.
- Since trustees get to express a preference about the Conference committees they are assigned to, why not let delegates also rank their committee preferences? This might bring more relevant experience to committees.

What is the right balance of participation among committee members (delegates, staff) and how can we best achieve that balance?

- It could be helpful for new delegates to develop a document that explains the role of staff in committee to give clear expectations ahead of time, or have the secretary remind the committee of staff's role within the committee.

Could the committee process be improved to more effectively introduce change in the Fellowship, and if so, how?

- Review the scope of all Conference committees — new committees may be needed.
- Sharing between committees throughout the year can help facilitate better understanding of the issues and help introduce change; cross-pollination between committees could ease workloads.

D: YEARLONG PROCESS EFFECTIVENESS

What improvements could be considered to make sure the agenda selection is more effective?

- Increased communication throughout the Fellowship is necessary for an informed Conference; create/dis-

tribute a simple “how to” description or FAQ outlining the process of getting agenda items submitted.

- Agenda selection should be emphasized as a yearlong process, with more involvement from the Conference Agenda Committee.

How well is the message of the Conference theme being carried out throughout the year?

- Long themes can be unwieldy — short themes are more easily utilized.
- Keep theme for two years for a better and more complete discussion by the Fellowship.
- Utilize present technology to inform members of the theme.
- Develop Conference theme material to come from G.S.O. — one *Box 4-5-9* article is not enough: put Conference theme on letterhead (like International Convention logo), add Conference theme as home page banner on G.S.O.'s A.A. website, use theme as a header on office e-correspondence throughout the year.
- Delegates can make sure to mention next year's Conference theme in delegate's report and suggest districts do workshops on it; put Conference theme and logo on area communications throughout the year; put theme on newsletter banners.
- Grapevine could assist with series of articles on the theme and how it relates to the Fellowship.
- Develop special literature packets related to the theme.
- Regional trustee reports could focus on Conference theme in addition to raw data and business information.

How well do all Conference members communicate to the Fellowship about why we have a Conference and how the committee system works? How could we improve in this communication?

- While we encourage areas to come up with agenda items, if they're not “selected” it can be very discouraging for those at the local level. Perhaps agenda items that don't make it to the Conference should go to the appropriate Conference Committee anyway, for discussion at a time outside the week-long duration of the Conference.
- Make Conference agenda information and background material available to the Fellowship and continually update throughout the year.
- Develop/distribute guidelines that explain exactly how a Conference committee operates and what their options are when they meet.

How can we better communicate that the Conference process is more than one spring week in New York?

- Things that G.S.O. can do: use the A.A. website homepage to carry information about the Conference throughout the year; place GSC banners across all com-

munication pieces (newsletters, contribution acknowledgments, etc.); have a brief Conference Planning update in *Box 4-5-9* at regular intervals throughout the year or communicate the progress of Advisory Actions throughout the year; utilize Grapevine and La Viña to share information from past delegates and past trustees about the Conference; communicate information to GSRs about new agenda items as soon as they are approved by the trustees; use dashboard to post final trustee committee reports; have Conference committees meet via conference call prior to the Conference to discuss their agendas.

- Things that delegates can do: use Conference workshop topics for local roundtables; hold pre- and post-Conference assemblies; highlight the ownership of the Conference by the groups; explain the process — connect the group with the Conference through examples; use local events to share about the Conference and underline matters of relevance or importance to the local groups; use the Conference theme throughout the year to generate and maintain interest; track ideas or items from the area and show their progress and development through the Conference process; explain what the words “Conference-approved” mean on our literature and how they get there; throw out a hot topic occasionally to get people involved and point out that participating in the process is the only way to effect change; share your area highlights with groups; utilize the essay by Bernard Smith, “Why Do We Need a Conference?” as a way to reach members emotionally and spiritually.

How do the delegates and regional trustees support the yearlong process effectiveness?

- Engage the Fellowship, don’t just “report” data.
- Creative presentation of the delegate’s report and *Final Conference Report* can generate interest: one delegate distributes the *Final Conference Report* along with a mock “stock certificate” and emphasizes that each member is a shareholder in A.A. and that the *Final Report* will give them all the details they need. Another gives the analogy: the *Final Conference Report* is to the area what the group business meeting minutes are to the members.
- Increased communication from trustees’ committees throughout the year will help support effectiveness in the areas.
- Expand use of the dashboard to allow sharing and posting by delegates throughout the year; allow constant access to board reports, agenda items and background material as they are approved by the trustees.
- Share A.A.W.S. Highlights throughout the year with Intergroup/Central Offices.
- Continue the discussion on how to attract more agenda input from our French and Hispanic members.

What other suggestions do we have for how to improve the effectiveness of the yearlong process?

- General Service Board should get board reports out as quickly as possible.
- Send out background material — in English, French and Spanish — throughout the year.
- Use the Dashboard year ‘round; post information as it comes in.
- Trustees’ committee chairs can correspond regularly with Conference committee chairs to keep current on board meeting topics and discussions.
- Reorganize committee structure to focus on areas of interest to the Fellowship, like anonymity or how to carry the message, to keep group members interested in the work of the Conference.
- Consider moving back the deadline for agenda items to avoid huge crunch in the beginning of the year.
- Consider a two-year process, with a Conference every other year.

**E: CONFERENCE PREPARATION
(background, content, delivery, etc.)**

How can we improve the manner in which Conference background material is developed and distributed?

- Translate all background material into Spanish and French and distribute simultaneously with English.
- Consider expanding the agenda development process to a full year. For example, the 2016 agenda would be proposed at the January 2015 board meeting. This would create time for the Fellowship to discuss topics in advance, time to develop more balanced and complete background material, and time to have that background material translated into Spanish and French.
- Dashboard could be more user-friendly with updated technology.
- Take proposed Conference agenda items that the trustees’ committees and/or boards declined to move forward and pass them through the Conference Committee on Agenda for further review and possible consideration.

How well do the delegates balance their preparation for the Conference, especially in keeping with Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter? How could we improve in the practice of our rights and responsibilities under Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter?

- Use technology to develop a secure electronic location where delegates could share and store pertinent Conference information online, clustering information more effectively.
- Have a brief delegate orientation at the start of the

Conference, similar to the new trustees orientation; might be helpful in generating a more even level of preparedness for delegates (delegate luncheons do not necessarily fulfill this purpose, as they are not uniform and may all cover different topics).

What more could be done to prepare delegates for the Conference?

- Are the Area Highlights and the preparation they require the best use of our time? Could they be submitted as a written report and then allow the delegate to speak extemporaneously on three burning issues in their area?
- Rather than asking delegates to read opening and closing fragments from our literature, would it be more beneficial instead to ask delegates to prepare a minipresentation on topics important to A.A., forcing them to learn more about a particular issue?
- Encourage areas to hold mock or mini-Conferences to help prepare the delegate.
- Have a more systematic buddy/mentoring system at the Conference.
- Have agenda items and background material posted on the dashboard as soon as they are approved, better utilizing the yearlong Conference process.
- Present delegates with more information regarding what to expect at the Conference — schedule, process, logistics, personal details (travel, dress, accommodations, etc.), and more information on what is expected during committee meetings.
- Have more time for delegates to ask for additional information.
- Utilize past delegates for pre-Conference mentoring and information.
- Provide delegates access to all proposed agenda items submitted, with a full explanation of why a proposed item did not make the final agenda.

F: CONFERENCE WEEK SCHEDULE

How can we improve the way time is allotted during the Conference for reports, presentation/discussion/workshop topics, and thorough discussion of agenda items?

- If a floor action doesn't pass, wait at least one year to resubmit.
- Reevaluate the comparative value of area service highlights and consider fewer presentation/discussions or regional lunches, which would allow for more Conference business; perhaps have area highlights recorded throughout the year and made available electronically, or have them available in a separate room at the Conference or presented at the Delegates Only Meeting.
- Set aside time at each Conference to look at future

agenda items so that post-Conference reports could be forward-looking to generate yearlong sharing.

- Consider distributing minutes of all trustee meetings to all delegates.
- Consider moving the first “sharing session/what’s on your mind” slot to later in the week, where it might be more valuable.
- Utilize technology for electronic voting/tabulation at the Conference.
- Consider moving the 2014 and 2015 inventory to a time slot after the Conference to allow for full discussion of current agenda items.
- Regional trustees might consider ways to standardize their reports to allow for equally informed delegates, perhaps holding more Q&A sessions at the regional level throughout the year.

What Conference activities give participants the most opportunities to be leaders?

- Listening and waiting for our opinion to form before speaking can be an aspect of leadership.
- A good leader learns patience and tolerance by asking questions.

At the Conference, what is the difference between being a leader or being a reporter? Can a person be both at the same time?

- “As members of the Conference, if we have a solution or something we can bring to the Conference, as leaders we have a responsibility to go to the microphone and say it. We also have a responsibility as reporters to bring our local conscience to the Conference and to bring back the conscience of the Conference.”
- “Listen like you have no opinion.”

Does the time allotted and the manner in which information is communicated from the trustees and board members allow delegates to adequately understand and/or question their reports? How could this be improved?

- Provide one-page executive summaries along with the A.A.W.S., Grapevine and Finance presentations.
- Post the A.A.W.S, Grapevine and Finance reports on the dashboard at least one week before the Conference to allow for more time to assimilate the information and ask questions.
- What if the Conference process was on a two-year cycle? It would allow more time for all our activities, including board reports, and would provide a chance for our most important topics to be more broadly discussed among the Fellowship.

How are leadership and participation affected by late night work sessions?

- Implement a time limit for different sessions and close them when the time is up.

**G: GENERAL SERVICE BOARD/CORPORATE BOARDS
(A.A.W.S. & A.A. GRAPEVINE)**

Reflecting on Concept Six, how can the Conference ensure that the authority we delegate to the General Service Board is commensurate with the responsibility we have entrusted to them?

- The problem is not that the GSB has too much authority, it is that the focus is and should be on balance between the Conference and the board.
- Conference committees should be more proactive in asking trustees for more information in order to gain a clearer understanding of specific issues or concerns.
- More continuity and clarity regarding communication from the trustees to the delegates would be appreciated. When an item has been discussed by the trustees and reported out as simply “no action taken,” it can create uncertainty. Perhaps a fuller explanation of why no action was taken would help develop greater understanding.
- The flow of information between all three boards, delegates and groups needs to continue so that the A.A. shareholders are aware of what happens at the Conference and throughout the year.
- More diversity on the board would assist with establishing more trust throughout the Fellowship as our population changes in the future.
- Is the decline in contributions to G.S.O. and the drop in Grapevine subscriptions the “power of the purse” in action?

Reflecting on Concept Eight: (a) How well is the General Service Board exercising custodial oversight and how effectively are they serving as the principle planners and administrators of policy and finance? (b) What are the boundaries between oversight vs. delegation? When is each practiced?

- Trustees might benefit from service on both corporate boards rather than just one.
- Continued oversight from the board is needed in matters involving significant monetary investment or major changes in policy.
- Some concerns have been raised that A.A.W.S. and the Grapevine are being pushed closer together by the board and are losing some of their corporate boundaries, which raises the long-term question of how they can maintain two distinct corporate identities.
- Grapevine and A.A.W.S. oversight is impossible without the support of the Fellowship.
- More time could be spent on the board regarding strategic planning.
- Are the services we are providing the ones the Fellowship wants?

Reflecting on Concept Eleven, does the General Service Board exercise serious care in having the best possible assistance in carrying out their duties? How can this process be improved?

- The board should encourage balance and trade-offs in utilizing consultants, staff and ACMs to insure that we stay current in both functional expertise and being up-to-date in utilizing the latest technology.
- Consider allowing nonalcoholics to serve as nontrustee directors.
- Discussion about the selection of executive editor/publisher and general manager positions must be very transparent and open. To do otherwise will deepen mistrust/suspicion.
- Continue to encourage new initiatives for better communication between boards.
- Involve Class As more deeply at the area level to help them learn more about us and how we function — “It’s up to us to get our Class As up to speed.”
- Expand the distribution of announcements for open positions — being limited to the advertisement of positions to *Box 4-5-9* may be restricting who we recruit.
- Consider having a more extensive trustees’ orientation program.
- The board might want to look at developing a communications position at G.S.O.

Does the current role of the board most effectively address the needs of the Fellowship? If not, how should their role be changed?

- The board is responsible for vision for the future, but sometimes seems to get bogged down in details — perhaps even minutia — and may not be looking at some of the critical issues.
- Strategic planning for communicating with the Fellowship about self-support and the Seventh Tradition is vitally important.
- Forums could be more interactive and responsive regarding questions and concerns brought up by the Fellowship — a patronizing/pandering tone that sounds like agreement with the assurance that action will occur (when the idea is later forgotten or ignored) isn’t helpful, nor are short answers from the board such as “we don’t have the time” or “we don’t have the money.” If a question isn’t answerable at the Forum, someone could follow up later with pertinent information.
- The board should encourage more participation from Conference committee chairs during the January board weekend.
- Develop a mechanism for greater involvement of the delegates in the yearlong process of the Conference,

allowing for more active participation, especially as it relates to developing the agenda.

Is the current makeup of the board (numbers and proportions) still the most effective? If not, what changes should we consider?

- Trustees need to focus on bigger issues and concerns for the Fellowship and not get caught up in administrative details better handled by staff.
- Consider increasing the role of nontrustee directors and better describe their purpose to the Fellowship.
- Are there still too many Grapevine board members?

Should the Fellowship have more direct influence in the selection of Class A trustees, corporate directors, and general service trustees? If yes, how might that be accomplished?

- Openings for board members and directors need to be widely announced and well in advance in order to provide for timely and appropriate submission of candidates from the Fellowship.
- The Conference Committee on Trustees should have greater involvement in the actual selection process.
- The selection of nontrustee directors should extend more often beyond past delegates and emphasize candidates with solid professional experience.
- What if the Fellowship were asked what skill sets they think are needed on the boards, not just a one-way communication from the boards themselves?
- Limiting terms and condensing the amount of time trustees and directors are required to commit to might help to enlarge the pool of available candidates.
- Consider including nonalcoholics as appointed committee members. This might provide a pathway for Class A trustees.

How could we improve the methods used to solicit trustees and directors to get the most appropriate people interested in the positions?

- When soliciting for new trustees and directors, send a mailing to all GSRs regarding openings, don't just rely on delegates.
- Focus on the social sciences, technology, finance, publishing, journalism and media worlds for new Class A candidates, with lesser emphasis on the medical and religious fields.
- Consider the trustee-at-large positions for inclusion on the corporate boards.
- More nonalcoholics could serve as appointed committee members to increase the pool of Class A candidates.
- Seek younger candidates for trustee positions, and focus on language/cultural diversity.
- Consider shorter terms of service for trustees.

Is the selection/election process for trustees and directors effective and impartial/fair? How would you change it?

- Widen the pool of candidates for Class A trustees to encourage diversity; utilize *About A.A.* to announce openings and solicit applications; have potential Class As serve on trustees' committees; find more grass-roots Class A candidates instead of high-level professionals.
- Consideration needs to be given to the impact of large regions vs. small regions in the selection of trustees-at-large.
- Consider persons outside the service structure for board positions, A.A.s who may have a different and refreshing perspective.

What more could be done to insure the General Service Board remains transparent and thorough in their reporting to the Fellowship?

- Create continuity on how and what board minutes and reports are distributed to delegates.
- A graphic presentation on how the GSB does its work could be prepared/distributed to help the Fellowship better understand what goes on at the GSB level of service.
- More articles by trustees in the Grapevine to help familiarize the Fellowship with the board's vision.
- Consider regional teleconferences with delegates/regional trustees after board meetings to increase communication and help with transparency issues.
- Utilize technology to disseminate information through the G.S.O. website or perhaps provide an interactive live webinar to connect members with G.S.O. staff or trustees.

H: LEADERSHIP

Reflecting on Concept Nine, are the qualities of leadership, as identified in the leadership essay in the A.A. Service Manual, still the qualities that we should try to encourage in Conference members? If so, how successful are we in encouraging those qualities? If not, what changes should we consider?

- To avoid "reading between the lines" by members, it would be helpful for trustees' committees to include more of the motivation behind their proposals, the reasons why they might make a particular suggestion or recommendation.
- More awareness of the Concepts throughout the Fellowship will benefit individuals, groups, districts, areas, regions, the Conference and our boards. Consider ways to make these principles more widely understood and available.

How can we improve the methods of selecting effective leaders and nurturing leadership qualities in our trusted servants?

- Continue explaining the broader picture of our service structure at Forums and throughout the Fellowship.
- Consider the possibility of A.A.W.S. and Grapevine chairs serving for two years instead of automatic rotation after one.
- Utilize our service pamphlets such as “Circles of Love and Service” to help explain the service structure throughout the Fellowship and develop literature specifically on the topic of service sponsorship.

What more could be done to ensure broad diversity of representation in our A.A. leaders?

- Include and encourage more diverse members, including special needs members, into leadership roles

throughout the Fellowship.

- Continue addressing the language needs of members throughout the service structure.
- Consider having a military or ICYPAA service desk at the General Service Office.

How well is the Third Legacy Procedure serving us?

How could it be improved?

- When voting on trustees at the Conference, people often don't know all the candidates. When submitting resumes, perhaps candidates could all be asked to answer the same 5 or 6 uniform questions in writing. That would provide voters with a better comparative basis for all candidates.
- Perhaps we should consider pulling the name of the next chairman of the GSB out of the hat?

2013 Keynote Address — George M., General Service Trustee

2013 GENERAL SERVICE CONFERENCE

I thank the organizers of the 63rd General Service Conference for according me the privilege of speaking to you today. I extend a special welcome to our Panel 63 delegates. I remember well my arrival here for my first Conference. People who we have met after our sobriety date find it hard to imagine what we were like when we were drinking; but all of us remember how it was, back in the day. So, after I had checked into the hotel, I came to this room to take a peek. The room had already been prepared, and the banner was up behind the dais. It was an emotional moment. Here I stood, about to become a part, albeit a very small part, of the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was overcome with a sense of gratitude for the Fellowship that had somehow managed to guide me on a journey from “completely untrustworthy” to “trusted servant.”

A.A. service is about communication. We are charged with carrying our lifesaving message to those who have not yet found us. When someone hears that message and arrives at one of our meetings, we simply talk to him or her. We share our stories and our program, and explain our Steps and Traditions. We tell them “You’re a member of A.A. if you say you are.” And when we’re done talking, it’s up to the newcomer to decide whether to take the plunge.

The primary service goal of our founding generation was to let people know that A.A. was available and offering a working solution to a seemingly intractable problem, an alcoholic’s inability to stop drinking. We were a voice crying in the wilderness. It seems hard to believe, but as recently as 2006 there were no iPhones, iPads, Kindle readers, Twitter, or YouTube; and FaceBook was a little known service limited exclusively to college students. Today, anyone can, at the drop of a hat and at virtually no cost, post a message or a video on the Internet, and have it read or seen by potentially millions of people, all with a simple mouse click or a tap on a smart phone. Our mission today is no longer simply to deliver our message of hope; we must also make sure we are a clear, effective and authoritative voice which can be sorted out and heard in the midst of a cacophony of misinformation and uninformed personal opinion about A.A.

This new environment is also affecting the way that people consume information. We have, since the earliest days of A.A., relied on our publishing operations to supplement the financial support provided by our membership, allowing us to maintain our world services and to have a reserve fund adequate to assure our financial health and stability. Although we continue to sell many printed Big Books each year, and have entered the world of digital publishing, the hard reality appears to be that, going forward, we are going to be relying more and more on our Seventh Tradition contributions to meet our financial needs.

The challenge we face in adjusting to this changed environment is daunting. It is thus fitting that we begin at this

Conference an inventory of the Conference to be completed in 2015. Bill Wilson, in *A.A. Comes of Age* (page 231), said “Just as each A.A. must continue to take his moral inventory and act upon it, so must our whole society if we are to survive and if we are to serve usefully and well.”

Self-assessment is a pervasive part of our A.A. program; fully half of our Steps are directly related to it. Inventory of the Conference and personal inventory in the Steps are not quite the same, however. At the Conference, the emphasis will be on effectiveness in carrying out the purposes of the Conference, not on “character defects.” In his introduction to the Concepts, Bill was quite clear about the importance of making changes in order to maintain an effective service structure. He said, “Concern has been expressed lest the detailed portrayal of our internal structure might not later harden down into such a firm tradition or gospel that necessary changes would be impossible to make. Nothing could stray further from the intent of these Concepts.”

Honesty, both with ourselves and with others, is a core value of A.A. Nonalcoholics can afford to entertain certain fantasies about themselves, and no harm is done. For us, our fantasies can kill us. We don’t take inventory simply because it is, in and of itself, a good thing (like kindness, or generosity), but rather because it is an important element of our continued sobriety. The same holds true for our service inventories, including the Conference inventory which we are now undertaking. We are not here to take pride in doing the responsible thing by taking an inventory. We are here to help assure the unity and effectiveness of A.A. in its mission to carry the great message of hope to anyone, anywhere, who has a desire to do something about his or her drinking problem. The vast majority of us in the room today will not be here when this inventory is completed. This week we will strive to make a strong start on the inventory, and trust that those who follow us will make the changes which the completed inventory reveals are needed.

The basic role of the Conference is to act as a group conscience for the entire Fellowship. Religions have dogma which describes what God’s will is; the faithful are expected to adhere to the dogma or face the consequences. In terms of A.A. service, we have no dogma; to determine God’s will for us in our service, we look to our second Tradition. Our authority figure is a loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience. If you want to know what God’s will is, you don’t call some exalted keeper of the truth; you have a group conscience meeting, talk about whatever the issue is, and then take a vote; the result of that vote is, by definition, the expression of God’s will. A group conscience of informed A.A. members, acting in good faith in what they believe to be in the best interest of A.A. and in accordance with our Traditions, thus never reaches a “wrong” result. It is by definition what is right at the time the vote is taken. We all know that different groups can reach different con-

clusions on the same issue, and the same group can reach different conclusions at different times. All of this is true of the Conference as well. I don't think our inventory needs to worry much about whether past Conferences have been making "good" or "bad" decisions. They were all good decisions at the time they were made.

It is axiomatic in my profession that a good lawyer knows the right answers to the questions; what makes a great lawyer is knowing the right questions to ask. The same can be said of our service structure. A.A. does not have unlimited resources; the setting of priorities and deciding what needs to be talked about often involve difficult decisions; it is a critical part of our service at all levels. Our many inventory subjects will ultimately boil down to two — first, are the most important questions facing the Fellowship being given the emphasis and appropriate time they deserve at the Conference; and second, are Conference members given the ability, through background material and Conference sharing sessions, to reach a good

faith informed decision on these important matters.

This week will be my eighth, and last, General Service Conference. It has been an honor to serve A.A. at the world service level, and an eye opener. Bill often spoke of the "vital services" being performed by the General Service Office. I live in a small town in Michigan, and from that vantage point, where the principal reference to our world service is the copyright notice in the literature, the idea of "vital world services" is a hard one to grasp. As members of the General Service Conference, we have a wonderful opportunity to see first hand how our service structure plays an indispensable role in the carrying of our message, and in the continuance of A.A. worldwide as a unified whole. We all have a duty to the Fellowship, and especially to the still-suffering alcoholic, to work together this week to make sure that our world service remains strong and continues to reflect our A.A. values.

So, let's have a productive Conference, and, of course, share a few laughs together along the way.

Conference Inventory Plan, 2011

The following Conference Inventory Plan formulated by the Conference Inventory Planning Committee was approved at the 2011 General Service Conference.

CONFERENCE INVENTORY PLANNING COMMITTEE 2010-2011

INVENTORY PLAN

I Logistics

A. Location and Calendar.

- The inventory be conducted at the General Service Conference.
- The inventory take place at three consecutive Conferences: 2013, 2014 and 2015 implementing a three-year plan.

B. Schedule:

- Inventory be conducted during the regular Conference week, using the time allotted for the Workshop for the group meetings.
- At least two of the topic presentation time slots be combined for groups to report back to the full Conference body followed by full Conference sharing.
- The total number of inventory questions be divided between the three inventory years, so only one third of the questions are addressed each of the three inventory years.
- The 2012 Conference Agenda Committee determine which inventory questions to address by the Conference each year so that following the 2012 Conference the Fellowship knows what questions will be discussed each of the three years.
- Conference members be divided into fifteen groups of nine members each.
- To maximize participation, the inventory questions

for each inventory year be divided into thirds, so each year three sets of five groups consider the same group of questions.

II Participation

A. Every voting member of the Conference be included in the inventory process to ensure that the inventory reflects current experience and a broad range of opinions/experiences.

B. Each inventory group have the best possible proportionate representation from:

1. Trustees and Directors
2. Staff
3. 2nd year delegates
4. 1st year delegates
5. By region, where feasible

C. Members of each inventory group be selected by lot in December 2012 (first year) by one or two members of the trustees' Conference Committee and the Conference Coordinator.

D. Any outgoing member be replaced by their incoming Conference counterpart, (i.e. an incoming delegate automatically be put in the same group as an outgoing delegate. The same applies to trustees and staff as they rotate.)

III Reporting

A. Conference inventory reporting:

- A thorough report of each year's Conference inventory session be produced that includes discussion related to each inventory question addressed that year and be included in the *Final Conference Report*.
- The report may include suggestions for future Conference agenda items or other changes in how the Conference serves the Fellowship.

Inventory Estimated Costs				
	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE	TOTALS
Office Expense	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$15,000
Annual Reporting in Conference Report				
12 pages	\$ 6,832	\$ 6,832	\$ 6,832	\$20,496
20 pages	\$14,415	\$14,415	\$14,415	\$43,245
40 pages	\$22,535	\$22,535	\$22,535	\$90,260
Final Comprehensive Report (separate document)				
12 pages				\$17,625
20 pages				\$22,535
40 pages				\$41,580

- B. Venues and methods for final and intermediate reporting:
- The full report be forwarded to the General Service Board.
 - The full report be posted to the Conference dashboard.
 - The full report be included in the *Final Conference Report*.
 - Summary reports be included in the A. A. Grapevine, La Viña, and *Box 4-5-9*.
 - Summary reports be available at Regional, Local, and Additional Forums.
- C. Feedback from noninventory participants be referred to their local area delegate.
- D. A separate comprehensive report, including all three years' input, be produced after the inventory process is complete.

IV Finance

- A. Below are estimated costs associated with conducting and reporting the inventory:
- All cost estimates are based on 2010 prices, some increases may occur.
 - Office expense includes additional personnel for tasks associated with the inventory.
 - Costs for the annual and final reports include editorial, printing, translation, distribution and mailing expenses.
 - The Final Comprehensive Report costs are based on distribution and mailing in the same fashion as the annual *Final Conference Report*.
 - Annual and final report costs are dependent on the number of pages. Report costs could be lower than projected if the report(s) have less than twelve pages.
 - No additional facility costs would be incurred since the inventory would take place during the regular Conference week.

V Inventory Questions

- A. Effectiveness of the Conference/Conference Process Overall:
1. Reflecting on Concept One, how does the Conference ensure that it is the conscience of A.A. as a whole?
 2. Reflecting on Concept Two, how can we better serve as the actual voice and be an effective conscience for our whole society?
 3. Reflecting on Concept Three, how can we effectively balance the freedoms and responsibilities that come with the right of decision?
 4. Reflecting on Concept Four, how effective are we in treating all Conference members as equals (no one regarded as second class)?
 5. Reflecting on Concept Five, how well does the Conference facilitate the hearing and resolution of minority appeals/report? How could it be improved?
 6. Does the structure encourage each individual in the Fellowship to feel and act as a member of a "society of alcoholics in action"? If not, how could we improve?
 7. Does the yearlong Conference process effectively encourage all Conference members to lead (or serve) in the spirit of our upside-down service structure? If not. How can we encourage all Conference members to do so?
 8. How well is the use of floor actions serving us?
 9. Reflecting on Concept Ten, how well is the authority of the Conference defined?
 10. How well does the Conference fulfill the General Warranties of Concept Twelve?

The following outline is based on 44 inventory questions and is an example of how questions could be divided; any of the three inventory years could be the one year when there are fourteen questions rather than fifteen questions.

			Inventory Groups	
	Inventory Year	Inventory Questions	Each year there will be 15 inventory groups (A-O). Each inventory group will have 9 members.	
YEAR 1	2013	15 Questions (#1-15)	Group A-O	Groups A-E discuss questions #1-5 Groups F-J discuss questions #6-10 Groups K-O discuss questions #11-14
YEAR 2	2014	15 Questions (#1-15)	Group A-O	Groups A-E discuss questions #1-5 Groups F-J discuss questions #6-10 Groups K-O discuss questions #11-14
YEAR 3	2015	14 Questions (#1-15)	Group A-O	Groups A-E discuss questions #1-5 Groups F-J discuss questions #6-10 Groups K-O discuss questions #11-14

11. How might any one of the Concepts be revised in essence or wording to more effectively and relevantly guide our leaders?

B. Composition of Conference

1. Should delegate areas be more consistently based on actual membership numbers?
2. Should regional divisions be based on membership numbers, the number of areas contained in each region or some other criteria? Please explain.
3. Is the size and structure (proportions of delegate/trustee/staff) of the Conference the most effective for conducting the work of the Fellowship? If not how could it be made more effective?

C. Committee System

1. Committee system (Structure, Composition, Effectiveness, etc.): Does the Conference committee system function in accordance with our principles? If not, what changes should we consider regarding: a) structure, b) composition, c) effectiveness?
2. What is the right balance of participation among committee members (delegates, staff) and how can we best achieve that balance?
3. Could the committee process be improved to more effectively introduce change in the Fellowship, and if so, how?

D. Yearlong Process Effectiveness

1. What improvements could be considered to make sure the agenda selection process is more effective?
2. How well is the message of the Conference theme being carried out throughout the year?
3. How well do all Conference members communicate to the Fellowship about why we have a Conference and how the committee system works? How could we improve in this communication?
4. How can we better communicate that the Conference process is more than one spring week in New York?
5. How do the delegates and regional trustees support the yearlong process effectiveness?
6. What other suggestions do we have for how to improve the effectiveness of the yearlong process?

E. Conference Preparation (background, content, delivery, etc.)

1. How can we improve the manner in which Conference background material is developed and distributed?
2. How well do the delegates balance their preparation for the Conference, especially in keeping with Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter? How could we improve in the practice of our rights and responsibilities under Concept Three and Article Three of the Conference Charter?

3. What more could be done to prepare delegates for the Conference?

F. Conference Week Schedule

1. How can we improve the way time is allotted during the Conference for reports, presentation/discussion/workshop topics, and thorough discussion of agenda items?
2. What Conference activities give participants the most opportunities to be leaders?
3. At the Conference, what is the difference between being a leader or being a reporter? Can a person be both at the same time?
4. Does the time allotted and the manner in which information is communicated from the trustees and board members allow delegates to adequately understand and/or question their reports? How could this be improved?
5. How are leadership and participation affected by late night work sessions?

G. General Service Board/Corporate Boards (A.A.W.S. & A.A. Grapevine)

1. Reflecting on Concept Six, how can the Conference ensure that the authority we delegate to the General Service Board is commensurate with the responsibility we have entrusted to them?
2. Reflecting on Concept Eight: (a) How well is the General Service Board exercising custodial oversight and how effectively are they serving as the principle planners and administrators of policy and finance? (b) What are the boundaries between oversight vs. delegation? When is each practiced?
3. Reflecting on Concept Eleven, does the General Service Board exercise serious care in having the best possible assistance in carrying out their duties? How can this process be improved?
4. Does the current role of the board most effectively address the needs of the Fellowship? If not, how should their role be changed?
5. Is the current makeup of the board (numbers and proportions) still the most effective? If not. What changes should we consider?
6. Should the Fellowship have more direct influence in the selection of Class A trustees, corporate directors, and general service trustees? If yes, how might that be accomplished?
7. How could we improve the methods used to solicit trustees and directors to get the most appropriate people interested in the positions?
8. Is the selection/election process for trustees and directors effective and impartial/fair? How would you change it?

9. What more could be done to insure the General Service Board remains transparent and thorough in their reporting to the Fellowship?

H. Leadership

1. Reflecting on Concept Nine, are the qualities of leadership, as identified in the leadership essay in the A.A. Service Manual, still the qualities that we should try to encourage in Conference members? If so, how successful are we in encouraging those qualities? If not what changes should we consider?
2. How can we improve the methods of selecting effective leaders and nurturing leadership qualities in our trusted servants?
3. What more could be done to ensure broad diversity of representation in our A. A. leaders?
4. How well is the Third Legacy Procedure serving us? How could it be improved?

