

Why Do We Have A Declaration of Unity?

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In July, 1970, eleven thousand members of Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Miami Beach, Florida, made the following pledge in eleven different languages:

A Declaration of Unity

This we owe to A.A.'s future:
To place our common welfare first;
To keep our fellowship united.
For on A.A. unity depend our lives;
And the lives of those to come.

The acceptance of this declaration at the 1970 International Convention of A.A. put a final seal of approval on a decades-long campaign by co-founder Bill W. to establish the preservation of unity as a priority to assure A.A.'s future. Twenty years earlier, at the first International Convention, in Cleveland, several thousand members had voted to accept the Twelve Traditions, which Bill had written and advanced for the express purpose of assuring that A.A. would survive as a society. The formal Declaration of Unity at the Miami Convention gave this added force.

Why was such a statement necessary? Almost from the very beginning of A.A., Bill had focused on the importance of maintaining Unity in the Fellowship. By working together, we could achieve and maintain sobriety that had eluded us when we were alone. Even when A.A. had less than a hundred members, most of them concentrated in New York and Akron, Bill and Dr. Bob had a vision of a unified fellowship that could reach out to alcoholics throughout North America and even the world. In Bill's own talks and writings, he always emphasized the need to preserve unity in order to maintain sobriety for ourselves and preserve A.A. for "the millions who still do not know." In introducing the Traditions, Bill had written, "So long as the ties which bind us together prove far stronger than those forces which would divide us if they could, all will be well.... We shall be secure as a movement; our essential unity will remain a certainty."

What were the forces that could divide A.A.? Bill often mentioned such issues as the struggle for property, power and prestige.

He felt it absolutely necessary that A.A. as a society should avoid controversies over politics and religion. He believed anonymity was also a factor in maintaining unity, and that A.A.'s assistance should be available to everybody without favor or prejudice. Bill had first described the Twelve Traditions as "Twelve points to assure our future." He viewed these as being essential for the preservation of the society, just as the Twelve Steps are essential for the recovery of the individual member. A.A.'s most challenging concern, he had written, "was to preserve among A.A.'s such a powerful unity that neither weakness of persons nor the strife and strain of these troubled times can harm our common cause.

We know that Alcoholics Anonymous must continue to live. Else, save few exceptions, we and our brother alcoholics throughout the world will surely resume the hopeless journey to oblivion." Bill was ailing and had less than a year to live when the formal Declaration of Unity was adopted. Though attending the Convention in a wheelchair and appearing briefly on the platform, he was unable to make a major address as he had at past Conventions. But it surely must have given him a surge of pride to have this declaration endorsed by the Convention; just as the 1965 International Convention in Toronto had formally issued the Declaration of Responsibility.

According to information in the A.A. Archives, the declaration was probably authored by Al S., the same A.A. member and consultant who had composed the Responsibility Declaration. It also reflects the efforts

of the committee that worked on the 1970 International Convention (which was A.A.'s 35th Anniversary). The theme for the Convention was, appropriately, "Unity Within Our Fellowship." At the Convention's Saturday night ceremony, Bob H. (who was G.S.O. general manager at the time) summoned several ex-delegates and overseas members to be on stage to participate in adopting the declaration.

"A.A. unity is the special quality that makes our Fellowship unique," Bob said. "It is the cement that holds our society together, the platform which makes A.A. 'Service' possible. It is more than an agreement on basic principles, more than freedom from destructive strife. It is a bond fashioned of shared experience, such as this one we share tonight. Unity is our most precious possession, our best guarantee of A.A.'s future. May we all value and preserve it, today and all the tomorrows to come." Bob H. then asked all participants on stage to recite the Unity Declaration, which was led by Dr. Jack Norris, the nonalcoholic trustee and chairman of the General Service Board. Bill's deteriorating health kept him from attending the Saturday night meeting, but he made it to the stage the next morning for a four-minute talk that brought a standing ovation. This, in Bill's final months, was poignantly reminiscent of Dr. Bob's brief talk at the 1950 Cleveland Convention, when he urged us to remember that the Twelve Steps resolve themselves into love and service, his last message before he died that fall.