

■ Singleness of Purpose

News and Notes from the General Service Office of A.A.®
Vol. 50, No.2 / April-May 2004

“Our Singleness of Purpose – The Cornerstone of A.A.,” theme of this year’s General Service Conference, highlights one of the principal reasons the Fellowship has endured for nearly 70 years as a safe haven for the suffering alcoholic. Since that afternoon in 1935 when Bill W. and Dr. Bob first met and talked for hours, drunks have been sharing their experience, strength and hope with one purpose alone: to help themselves and other alcoholics recover through A.A.’s Twelve Steps. During the week of April 18-24, 2004, Conference members will reexamine our singleness of purpose – its spiritual foundation and the challenges the Fellowship faces today.

They will hear presentations on such topics as responsibility to the newcomer, safeguarding our unity, and the role of the home group, and will participate in a workshop on the importance of singleness of purpose to the individual, group, district, area, and G.S.O. and Grapevine offices. On the face of it, the idea is simplicity itself. Traditions Three and Five state it clearly: “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” A.A. is for alcoholics and people who think they might have a drinking problem, and as a Fellowship we do one thing only – share our program of recovery. Yet time and again, members, groups, and A.A. as a whole have encountered roadblocks as they sought to live out these most basic and essential of our traditional principles.

All Twelve Traditions were hammered out over years of trial and error, and for the most part, they were shaped less by the founders’ inherent wisdom than by the recognition that they, as well as future generations, needed safeguards against their own character defects. In the formative years, power drivers among the early members would have diverted A.A.’s energies into hospitals, alcohol education, and other grandiose projects. Yet in tandem with their grandiosity ran a constant fear of losing their newfound sobriety. In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill wrote that the early members, “scared witless that something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink,” devised membership rules to protect themselves. “Our Foundation office asked each group to send in its list of ‘protective’ regulations. The total list was a mile long. If all those rules had been in effect everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined A.A. at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear.

“We were resolved to admit nobody to A.A. but that hypothetical class of people we termed ‘pure alcoholics.’ . . . Maybe this sounds comical now. . . . Well, we were frightened. . . . After all, isn’t fear the true basis of intolerance? . . . How could we then guess that all those fears were to prove groundless?” More than half a century later, those words still do not sound comical. With the influx of prospective members who suffer from other problems, our faith that those fears are groundless is tested daily. As A.A. has become increasingly well known and respected in the eyes of the public, many other organizations have adapted our Twelve Steps to recovery for a wide variety of addictions and problems. One result has been a blurring of the distinction between A.A. and other fellowships – “a drug is a drug,” we hear from newcomers who are not alcoholics but believe (often because well-meaning friends of A.A. have told them so) that A.A. meetings are the place for those with any addiction.

The guidelines for that situation are clear. In a 1958 Grapevine article, “Problems Other Than Alcohol,” Bill W. wrote: “Our first duty, as a Society, is to insure our own survival. Therefore we have to avoid distractions and multipurpose activities. . . . Sobriety – freedom from alcohol – through the teaching and practice of the Twelve Steps, is the sole purpose of an A.A. group. . . . We have to confine our membership to alcoholics and we have to confine our A.A. groups to a single purpose. If we don’t stick to these principles, we shall almost surely collapse. And if we collapse, we cannot help anyone.” How to handle dually addicted alcoholics who persist in talking about other problems in meetings is a murkier issue. In that same article, Bill writes about “one of the best A.A.s I know” – a man who had been doing drugs for years before joining A.A., “but prior to that he had been a terrific alcoholic. . . . Therefore he could qualify for A.A. and this he certainly did.”

Should groups today insist that dually addicted newcomers confine their discussion to alcoholism alone? Should we require prospective members to identify their “primary addiction” before participating in a group? Or can we simply welcome these men and women and trust that they will come, listen, and find their own way? In a presentation at the 1983 Conference entitled “Are we helping the dually addicted?” delegate Dyanne G. described the way her group welcomed her. “I will continue to thank God that I came into an A.A. group spiritually fit enough that its members

did not find it necessary to censor my conversation or actions in order to protect themselves. I did talk about drugs, and I used a lot of four-letter words to do it! My group allowed me the dignity to choose to change these things and the freedom to do it when I *could*, not when *they* thought I *should*. . . . My group seems to have no trouble sticking to our single purpose, which is to carry the message to still-suffering alcoholics, however damaged and confused they are in the beginning There is a fine line between upholding our singleness-of-purpose Tradition and limiting or restricting our membership. The day A.A. appears to be rejecting people who may be alcoholic, we will begin to die. What good will it do us if, while we are defending our ‘rights,’ A.A. is destroyed?” Singleness of purpose has been the theme of several previous Conferences, and virtually every year discussion of related Advisory Actions has taken up long hours.

The 1987 Conference debated for nearly a full day a recommendation for Conference approval of a statement differentiating open and closed meetings and suggesting that “when discussing our problems, we confine ourselves to those problems as they relate to alcoholism.” Some argued that no group has the right to tell anyone what to say; others pleaded for help in dealing with people with other addictions who were dominating meetings. Normal voting rules were suspended, and several times votes for and against were reconsidered, until everyone was satisfied they had reached a true group conscience. In the end, the Conference compromised by voting with substantial unanimity against Conference approval, but it made a service piece (known as the “Blue Card”) available for groups that needed to use it. The “druggies” and other disruptive influences will not go away – they are one of the consequences of our own success.

Ironically, some of our good friends in the field of alcoholism compound the problem because they believe our program works better than anything else for a variety of addictions. Good public information work and cooperation with professionals is part of the answer, but ultimately we cannot control what others do – only how we ourselves react. If we respond with a defensive flurry of restrictions, will we actually depart from our singleness of purpose by turning away alcoholics who have not yet recognized their problem? In 1986, retiring G.S.O. general manager Bob P. gave the Conference closing talk. He said in part: “I echo those who feel that if this Fellowship ever falters or fails, it will not be because of any outside cause. . . . it will be simply because of us. . . . It will be because we have too much fear and rigidity and not enough trust and common sense. . . . “If you were to ask me what is the greatest danger facing Alcoholics Anonymous today, I would have to answer: the growing rigidity that is so apparent to me and many others. The increasing demand for absolute answers to nit-picking questions. Pressure for G.S.O. to ‘enforce’ our Traditions. Screening alcoholics at closed meetings. . . . And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting further and further away from our co-founders. Bill, in particular, must be spinning in his grave, for I remind you that he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met. One of his favorite sayings was, ‘Every group has the right to be wrong;’ he was maddeningly tolerant of his critics; and he had absolute faith that faults in A.A. were self-correcting.”