

Our Third Legacy: The Twelve Concepts for World Service

Our Third Legacy in A.A. is “Service.” While the term “service” in Alcoholics Anonymous can refer to everything ranging from making a twelfth step call to sponsorship to chairing meetings or making coffee, the Twelve Concepts deal more specifically with our General Service Structure and AA’s World Services provided by GSO and our two Corporate Boards.

The Twelve Concepts for World Service written by Bill W. in 1962, are an interpretation of our World Service Structure and serve as guideposts for our various service entities, much the same as our Twelve Traditions serve as guideposts for the groups. By following them we can avoid the many pitfalls and mistakes made by previous servants in their effort to carry the message of A.A. to the still suffering alcoholic. Bill felt that Concepts 3, 5, 9 & 12 dealt primarily with spiritual principles, while the remaining concepts addressed the relationship of the service entities and how they could function together most effectively.

The Birth of the Conference:

As A.A. grew by leaps and bounds in the late 30’s and early 40’s, an Alcoholic Foundation was formed in 1938 in order to provide services to the fellowship which individual members and groups could no longer manage alone. This five-member board consisted of three non-alcoholic and two alcoholic trustees, and was renamed the General Service Board in 1954. While a service office was formed under the board’s direction to handle the day-to-day operations of the fellowship and answer correspondence, the board and office still looked primarily to Bill and Dr. Bob for guidance and leadership in matters of policy.

When Dr. Bob’s health began to fail, Bill felt an increasing urgency to devise a service structure which would pass on the leadership of AA to its members. After Dr. Bob’s death in 1950, Bill’s vision of a General Service Conference comprised of elected delegates from the fellowship became a reality, and the first General Service Conference was held in New York City in the spring of 1951. In 1955, at the 20th Anniversary Convention held in St. Louis, the groups confirmed the original Conference Charter, an informal agreement whereby Bill and Dr. Bob effectively passed on their leadership roles to the fellowship itself, thereby entrusting the General Service Conference with the final authority and responsibility for AA’s World Services, taking special care that it guard against “hazardous deviations from A.A. Traditions.” ([The A.A. Service Manual, pg. S95](#))

The Twelve Concepts

Thus **Concept One** states: “The final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. World Services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole fellowship.” What is the spiritual principle here? Is it responsibility? How well we alcoholics know the price we paid when shirking responsibility in just about every area of our lives. And as Bill himself stated, “With great freedom comes great responsibility.” Certainly accepting responsibility for our recovery, at every level, is an arduous journey for most of us in spiritual growth and maturity. So, accepting final responsibility for our fellowship as a whole seems the ultimate expression of that principle in action.

But how is this collective conscience expressed with a worldwide fellowship of over two million members in 184 countries?*

The answer lies in **Concept II**: “The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.” The key principle in this concept is “delegation.” The groups delegate their authority to the conference by electing GSR’s, District Committee members, and Area Officers, who in turn elect a delegate every two years to attend the annual conference in New York. In this way the voice of the groups is heard through its elected delegate. There is only one exception to this rule: the Twelve Traditions and the Six Warranties of Article XII cannot be changed without the consent of $\frac{3}{4}$ of all registered groups worldwide responding to a written ballot.

The elected delegate may seem to be in a precarious position. How can they know the conscience of every AA member in every group they represent? Are they to serve as mere puppets, doing their area’s bidding as instructed, or should they be entirely independent, deciding exactly for themselves what they shall think and how they shall vote? We find the solution to this dilemma in **Concept III**: “To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A.—the Conference, the General Service Board and its corporations, staffs, committees and executives—with a traditional “Right of Decision.”

The spiritual principle embodied here is “Trust.” This is a commodity which comes hard to us alcoholics; if we can’t trust ourselves, how can we possibly trust others, who so often let us down—even our comrades in arms? This becomes even more difficult when our egos come into play. However, when the light of trust enters the scene, we willingly endow our trusted servants and service entities with the right to decide how they will apply their authority, choosing which matters they will dispose of themselves and which matters they will bring to those they serve for consultation, direction or advice. Our servants are to be informed, but not instructed. Ultimately, we allow them to vote their conscience based on their best judgment and knowledge at the time, trusting they will act in the best interest of A.A. As Bill W. states, “Conference Delegates are primarily world servants of A.A. as a whole, [and] only in a secondary sense do they represent their respective areas.” (Service Manual, Concepts, pg. 15)

Concept IV insures that all persons throughout the conference structure have a voice through a traditional “Right of Participation,” stating that “each classification or group of our world servants shall be allowed a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.” This concept harkens back to the early days of the Foundation trustees, who had virtually all legal and financial power and authority over AA’s services, including literature, funding, public relations and the General Service Office. However, it was Bill, his assistant and her staff who had the responsibility of running the office and conducting daily business for the fellowship. The trustees used their power to micromanage operations through policy and administration committees, upon which Bill and the staff had no membership and no real participation. Obviously this created problems and resentments among the staff, and Bill eventually learned that to grant any individual or group absolute authority over our services could only invite disaster. A balance had to be struck by allowing all participants in the service structure a right to participate and to vote. In this manner all members of the Conference are treated equally.

*Statistics taken from “The AA Fact File” posted on the www.aa.org website.

The manuals we were given the first day of the Conference in New York explained that “Every conference member has not only a vote but a voice; not only a right but a responsibility to express his or her views.”

In **Concept V** we are granted a traditional “Right of Appeal,” emphasizing A.A.’s insistence that the minority opinion be heard throughout the service structure. As Bill points out, this right “is our chief protection against an uninformed, misinformed, hasty or angry majority.” ([The Twelve Concepts Illustrated](#)) Throughout the conference I witnessed the Right of Appeal in action, as all views were expressed and heard, with special care to hear the minority opinion and re-open debate if necessary. I was truly assured that once we voted on a recommendation, the conference had indeed reached an informed group conscience, and our actions reflected substantial unanimity for the good of AA. One of our Advisory Actions this year was to approve the first written procedure for the submission of Concept V minority appeals to the General Service Conference by GSO staff, committees, corporate boards or trustees.

Concepts VI, VII & VIII have to do with the balance of power and the relationship between the General Service Board, the Corporations, and the Conference. The Trustees are invested with full legal and practical responsibility for the management and oversight of our two Corporate Boards—AAWS and the Grapevine, Inc.--in addition to GSO. In this they are responsible for carrying our message around the world to other countries, for our Public Information activities and for overseeing our budget and operating funds. While the groups have final responsibility and ultimate authority through the conference, they delegate the day-to-day operations and oversight of our World Services to their elected trustees. Bill likens this relationship to a large, publicly-held corporation, in which the Trustees are the directors of a “holding company” (the General Service Board) with the groups acting as “stockholders” and the delegates as “proxy holders” who represent the groups at its annual meeting. Bill purposely chose this corporate model for our entire service structure over an institutional or government model because in his words, “it is a far superior vehicle when it comes to the administration of policy and business.” ([Service Manual](#), pg. 28)

The conference exerts its authority by issuing “directives” to the trustees in the form of committee recommendations. Once passed, these become Advisory Actions, so called because we are advising the trustees to carry out the agreed-upon actions of the conference. The General Service Board, via Concept VIII, has the legal right to “veto” these advisory actions, but in the spiritual objective of unity built into our concepts, has never done so.

Concept VIII, which states that, with respect to our two corporate boards, the trustees have “full stock ownership” and “custodial oversight which they exercise through their ability to elect all directors of these entities. This came into full play at the 61st General Service Conference with regards to the trustees’ reduced slate of Grapevine Board Directors.

Concept IX addresses the ever vital need for good service leadership, appointing the trustees to carry the torch for World Service leadership that our founders once held. **Concept X** states that “Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.” And **Concept XI** exerts that “The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs and consultants” in order

to help them actively perform AA's world services. Since the goal of any AA service is to effectively Carry the Message, we must continually seek out qualified servants and personnel to help us achieve this primary objective.

This brings us finally to **Concept XII**, which among all the others is unique. Taken from Article 12 of the Conference Charter, it has been referred to as AA's "Bill of Rights", and is considered by many to be the Spiritual Foundation of AA's World Services. It essentially summarizes and embodies all of the previous concepts, much the same as Step 12 embodies all previous steps.

Here we are encouraged, above all, to practice prudence in its broadest sense: taking care to keep the conference from becoming the seat of perilous wealth, power or unqualified authority; to examine our attitude towards money and its necessity to carry the message; that all decisions be reached by substantial unanimity; that no conference action ever be personally punitive or an incitement to public controversy; and that the conference always remain democratic in thought and action.

By following the Twelve Concepts personally in our various service positions and collectively in our World Service affairs, our fellowship is assured that we can effectively carry AA's message of hope to the still-suffering alcoholic throughout our service structure—from top to bottom—while maintaining a spirit of love, trust, cooperation and unity.

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