

# A Readable Twelve Concepts

A Detailed Summary of AA's *Twelve Concepts for World Service*

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# Introduction

Bill W. published his 1962 [\*Twelve Concepts for World Service\*](#), not just as a list of principles for the AA service structure, but also as a record of the thought and experience behind them. The Concepts are hard to read. But if we change the text to make it easier, we'll lose the detailed history as well as Bill's unique thoughts and language. So this little summary book provides a lot of the same information, but in a more readable way, and includes modern, practical discussion and tips.

If you don't take breaks, you could read this summary in about an hour. But it covers a lot, so it's good to take breaks. It may contain all you ever want to know about the Concepts, or it may prepare you to read Bill's original writings on the subject. If you do read the original, consider reading it in a small study group, as described in a later chapter.

The current version of this book is always at [12concepts.org](http://12concepts.org). Send corrections or suggestions to [readableconcepts@gmail.com](mailto:readableconcepts@gmail.com).

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# An Overview of the 12 Concepts

## The Concepts

AA has several corporations in New York, including AA World Services and The AA Grapevine. Those companies do a lot. They take calls; preserve our experience; translate, publish, and distribute our literature; help AA in other countries; maintain our Internet presence; and handle legal and public-relations work as needed.

AA also has tens of thousands of members who volunteer as "general service" workers in its groups, districts, areas, and regions. One main function of that "general service structure" is to ensure that those corporations are guided by the collective conscience of the AA groups, and hopefully a Higher Power.

You probably know that the Twelve Steps are principles for individual recovery, and the Twelve Traditions are principles for the unity and survival of AA as a whole. In a similar way, the Twelve Concepts for World Service are principles for the General Service structure. That's it. That's what they are.

## Learning the Concepts

If you've looked at the short form of the Twelve Concepts, some of them probably didn't make sense. A lawyer or accountant might understand boards, trustees, directors, staff, bylaws, and charter. But five Concepts mention a "Conference" that's not defined in the short form, so even a corporate genius would be stumped.

To understand the Concepts, you'll need those words, so watch for them: conference, board, trustee, director, staff, bylaws, charter. And you'll need to notice the big ideas as they come up: who's in charge, how we make decisions, who carries them out, etc. Most are not hard, though the trustee stuff can be murky.

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp is the big picture. How do the Concepts help us carry our collective conscience, the voice of a Higher Power, from 70,000 groups in the US and Canada to our New York corporations? Watch how things flow in stages from the groups to the corporations. And notice the natural groupings: three Concepts about "traditional rights", three about trustees (this is where we lose people), three about leaders and workers. The [afterthought](#) and [cheat sheet](#) at the end will help pull it all together.

Here are two tricks you can use with both the Traditions and the Concepts. First, memorize a mental bullet for each one, just a word or short phrase such as: "the groups are in charge", "the groups delegate to the Conference", "Right of Decision", "Warranties", etc. The bullets will help you recall the right one when needed. Second, don't be too proud to use tricks to help remember things. For instance, to remember the sequence of the Traditional Rights — Decision, Participation, and Appeal — remember something like "DPA" or "darn pretty arrangement". Sometimes the dumbest mnemonic is the most memorable!

## The Third Legacy

We often say that the Twelve Step program is our First Legacy, the groups and Traditions are our Second Legacy, and the General Service structure and Twelve Concepts are our Third Legacy. A legacy in this sense is something left by a previous generation – something inherited or gifted, not earned. Learning the Concepts can be part of how we pay it back and pass it forward. So, here you go, and thank you.

# Concept 1: Them and Us

Perhaps the least exciting footnote in all of AA literature is the one that appears in the Twelve & Twelve in the chapters on Tradition Seven and Tradition Eight. It reads: "In 1954, the name of the Alcoholic Foundation, Inc., was changed to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and the Foundation office is now the General Service Office." Not very exciting. But that unimpressive little footnote has an important story behind it.

In 1938, before the Big Book was finished or AA had a name, we created the non-profit Alcoholic Foundation to manage our publishing, outreach, and New York office. It would also pay Bill and Bob a little money to keep them afloat. All of this required a sizable donation from the world's first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller (which we later paid back). In those days, no one knew if AAs could be trusted with real responsibility or authority, so the Alcoholic Foundation board was always made up of mostly non-alcoholics. Thus AA's literature and service office rested in the hands of a benevolent foundation, run by a mostly non-alcoholic board. Mere alcoholics had little say in things. In fact, most AAs back then lived in blissful ignorance of the Foundation that entirely controlled our literature and assets.

Over the next dozen years, Bill began to argue against top-down management by a board controlled by non-alcoholics. Instead, he wanted a board of mostly alcoholics, who would gather in a conference once a year to talk business with elected delegates sent by the AA groups. Tradition Two, in particular, suggested that the best way to steer our ship would be a Higher Power speaking through the groups. But the Board doubted that alcoholics could work together successfully. Even Dr. Bob was uncertain. Bill's nagging failed to convince anyone.

Things changed in the summer of 1950. Our first International Convention in Cleveland, where the Twelve Traditions were formally approved by the AA members, gave people a new sense of AA as a maturing fellowship. In the fall, with that new spirit in the air, Bill talked with

Dr. Bob for the last time. They met at Bob's home in Akron, where his long fight with cancer was nearly over. Bill was worried that the mostly non-alcoholic Alcoholic Foundation, after he and Bob were gone, might lose touch with the AA groups. In that conversation, Bob finally gave his approval to try the "General Service Conference" idea for five years as an experiment. With Bob's support, and the new confidence created by the successful International Convention, Bill was able to sell the plan to the Foundation. They tried it for a few years, as Bob had suggested, and it worked so well that it was permanently adopted in a resolution passed at the next International Convention in 1955.

"...many A.A.'s thought that our future was completely guaranteed. Nothing, they believed, could possibly happen to our Society as a whole, because God was protecting A.A. This attitude was in strange contrast to the extreme vigilance with which our members and groups had been looking after themselves. They had quite prudently declined to charge Providence with the entire responsibility for their own effectiveness, happiness, and sobriety." - Bill W., Twelve Concepts for World Service, p. 5

As part of this transition from "them" to "us", in 1954 the Alcoholic Foundation became the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Foundation office was renamed the General Service Office, or GSO. (Thus we have the footnote in the Twelve & Twelve!) And in 1966, the Conference approved changing the Board to a 2/3 majority of alcoholics, which is still the rule all these years later.

Just like the old Foundation board, the General Service Board is responsible for our office, our literature, and our world service efforts. But now our delegates, who are chosen by the AA groups, help select the Board members and have a strong voice in Board business. Because this plan was formally approved at the International Convention in 1955, right after the fifth annual Conference, we often say that 1955 was the year AA "came of age". In other words, that's the year we grew up and took responsibility for ourselves.

The Twelve Concepts for World Service, written by Bill and published in 1962, are the working principles of this arrangement. In the introduction, Bill says he wrote the Concepts not only to explain the service structure and its principles, but also as a record of how it evolved, so that future

generations would not change the system without first understanding the reasons behind it.

Concept One is the first of these principles, and sums up the story behind that obscure little footnote about a minor change in an old company name. It's a simple, spiritual idea that, strangely to us now, was difficult for many AAs and Foundation members to believe.

The long form of it goes like this:

Concept I: *"The final responsibility and the ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship."*

## Concept 2: Be It Therefore Resolved

There are a couple of small treasures buried in the middle of the AA Service Manual (available at aa.org.) One is the Resolution, passed at our 1955 International Convention, which approved the General Service structure that guides our corporations in New York. The other is the Conference Charter, which actually defines that structure. By "treasures", I mean that reading them will probably change you. And by "small", I mean you can read them in about fifteen minutes.

If you're considering it, here are two tips. First, the Service Manual includes both the original Charter and the current Charter, which has been significantly modified since 1955. I'd suggest reading the current version, which describes the system we have today.

Second, don't read all four pages of the Charter in order! There's no overview, so it would just be a flood of words, hard to absorb. Instead, first read the headings a few times, until you see that the Charter is just a definition of the General Service structure, and you understand the structure of the text. *Then* read the "articles" (short sections), and they'll make perfect sense. They talk about area assemblies, delegates, the Conference, the Board, and so on.

Now, here's a warning: In our service literature, the important word *Conference* has several meanings. It can mean the annual week-long business meeting in New York... or the roughly 136 participants... or the entire service structure, from New York to the participating groups. So wherever you see "Conference", ask yourself which meaning makes the most sense, or if it means all three.

When you get to the 12th article of the Charter (yes, there are 12 articles, easy to remember!), it may look familiar. It's just Concept Twelve, which contains the Six Warranties that guarantee certain organizational safeguards. This is protected text, just like the Traditions and (since 1976) the Steps. The rest of the Charter has been amended multiple times, but this 12th Article, like the Steps and Traditions, can only be changed by...

well, you'll see when you read Article 3 of the Charter. Changing our protected text is something the groups don't delegate.

After the somewhat dry Conference Charter, you may enjoy reading the much more lively seven-paragraph Resolution that made the Charter official. The longest of those paragraphs may be familiar, because it's also the text of Concept 12! The Resolution is a quick read. It starts with these stirring words: "We, the members of the Twentieth Anniversary Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous, here assembled at St. Louis in July of 1955, declare our belief...".

All this may seem like a long way of getting around to Concept Two, which at its core is very simple. It says that since tens of thousands of groups can't manage AA's daily business in any practical sense, they delegate that responsibility and authority to the Conference (which is described in the Conference Charter). Whether you're talking about the annual business meeting or the entire service structure, the "Conference" guides our corporate board of trustees, much like Bill and Bob did in the early days. In effect, the Conference is our Fellowship's group conscience.

So Concept Two says that the groups delegate to the Conference. Simple! Now, if you feel that all this detail has been unnecessary, then please forget all that and just read the Concept itself, shown in its long form here:

*Concept Two: "When, in 1955, the AA groups confirmed the permanent charter for their General Service Conference, they thereby delegated to the Conference complete authority for the active maintenance of our world services and thereby made the Conference — excepting for any change in the Twelve Traditions or in Article 12 of the Conference Charter — the actual voice and the effective conscience for our whole Society."*

## Concept 3: Let Us Know What You Decide

Bill W. was usually working on something new. In 1956, only a year after the General Service structure was officially approved, he gave a talk at the General Service Conference containing the seeds of what we now call the Twelve Concepts for World Service.

"So I now offer you four principles," he said, "that might someday permeate all of AA's services, principles which express tolerance, patience and love of each other; principles which could do much to avert friction, indecision and power-driving.

"These are not really new principles; unconsciously we have been making use of them right along. I simply propose to name them, and if you like them, their scope and application can, over coming years, be fully defined. Here are the words for them: petition, appeal, participation and decision."

These principles became the "Traditional Rights" laid out in three of the Concepts. They help define how we vote, who gets to vote, and what we vote on. In Concept Five we strive for a clear majority on big issues, and listen carefully to minority voices. In Concept Four we offer a vote to those who have a relevant responsibility at that level.

And in Concept Three, having delegated responsibility and authority to our workers, we "trust our trusted servants" to ask for group guidance when needed. Bill says that once they have a job description, "it should be the traditional right of all world service boards, committees, and executives to decide which problems they will dispose of themselves and upon which matters they will report, consult, or ask specific directions." In short, they don't have to consult us and hold a vote on every issue. Bill goes on to clearly extend this same right to delegates, and some would say even to GSRs.



If this sounds dangerous, imagine the opposite. What if no servant or group of servants could make decisions on their own? Then 70,000 groups would have to weigh in on every decision, from what color to paint the walls to the wording of every pamphlet. It would bring all work to a halt. We'd be in business meetings every day, debating things we may know little about. And we'd lose the magic that happens when a small group of well-informed AAs, who know we are counting on them, work through a difficult issue together to reach a spiritual solution.

So we really have no choice but to prepare and elect the best people we can (Concept Nine), give them clear job descriptions and limits (Concept Ten), and trust and support them, offering guidance when asked (Concept Three).

Of course, the servant can't just run wild with this freedom. Bill writes: "This 'Right of Decision' should never be made an excuse for failure to render proper reports of all significant actions taken; it ought never be used as a reason for constantly exceeding a clearly defined authority, nor as an excuse for persistently failing to consult those who are entitled to be consulted before an important decision or action is taken." The servant must stay within defined limits, ask for guidance when appropriate, and report their decisions and actions. And the groups don't get to abandon all responsibility; they should listen to the reports, provide any needed input, and in rare cases use their ultimate authority to replace a servant who misuses their trust.

It's worth noting two themes that often come up when discussing the Concepts. First, the Concepts sometimes create uncomfortable push-pull situations that force us to decide whether to stand fast, give in, or even ask someone who loves AA as much as we do to resign their service role. This Concept is an example of that creative tension. As Bill says, "we must continuously balance the right relation between ultimate authority and delegated responsibility." And second, as suggested in Bill's comment about "tolerance, patience, and love of each other", the good news is that we may attain considerable spiritual growth by applying the 12 Concepts in our service life, starting at the group level.

With that said, here's Concept Three: *"To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of AA — the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives — with a traditional 'Right of Decision'".*

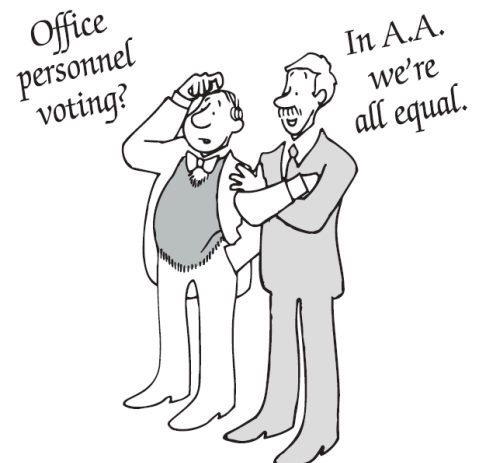
## Concept 4: Who Asked You

People are sometimes surprised by certain facts about AA service. For instance, they might not know that we have three corporations working for us in New York, or that a third of the Trustees responsible for those corporations are non-alcoholics (who serve long hours for no pay), or that we pay our professional staff at those corporations a competitive wage.

And when you tell people about the General Service Conference held in New York every spring, where AA's biggest policy decisions are made, two things often surprise them. One is that the 93 elected delegates, sent by the groups, do not have to vote the way the groups tell them to. (See Concept Three.) Another is that up to a third of the people talking and voting at the Conference are not elected delegates, but instead are from the corporations: the Trustees, Directors, and even a few of those paid staff members. (If they don't believe you, show them the list of "Conference Members" in the back of the annual Conference report. Your GSR should have a copy.)

These two things — that delegates can vote as they think best, and that 1/3 of the Conference members are not delegates — seem to conflict with Tradition Two. If a Higher Power speaks through the groups, shouldn't the groups elect delegates who vote exactly as the groups tell them? And if someone like a trustee or staff worker doesn't represent a group conscience, why do we let them vote?

In his writing on Concept Four, Bill answered these questions with an imaginary scenario. Let's say that the groups elect delegates who are meek messengers, voting exactly as they are instructed by their Areas, and only these obedient robots can speak or vote at the Conference. Everyone else, from the corporate trustees and directors, to executives from Grapevine and AA World Services, to the dozen alcoholic staffers who handle tens of thousands of AA calls and emails



every year, would be "called into committee meetings only to make suggestions and reports, answer questions, and receive orders." It's a strange image, of people not allowed to speak their minds, remotely controlled by the groups.

Instead, in Concept Four Bill essentially says that everyone who works at a given level of service should have a vote at that level, including people who do front-line work such as publishing a magazine, managing a corporation, or taking calls about group issues, public information, treatment centers, etc. Some of his reasons are simple and practical: because we need their knowledge, because they must do the actual work, and because we value them and want them to feel included.

Two other reasons come from loftier principles that appear frequently in the Concepts. One is that responsibility and authority should always go together; we never give anybody one without the other. So we "trust our trusted servants" with a real voice and a vote. And the final reason is that to do otherwise is tyranny, a sort of government by forceful authority. That's just not who we are. And by encouraging our workers to speak up, we reduce the chance that we'll ever become that way. There should rarely be any use of forceful or "ultimate" authority anywhere in our service structure, even while we delegate responsibility and authority from the groups... to the delegates... to the trustees and directors... to our corporate managers and staff.

Which brings us to Concept Four: *"Throughout our Conference structure, we ought to maintain at all responsible levels a traditional 'Right of Participation,' taking care 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."*

# Concept 5: We're Listening

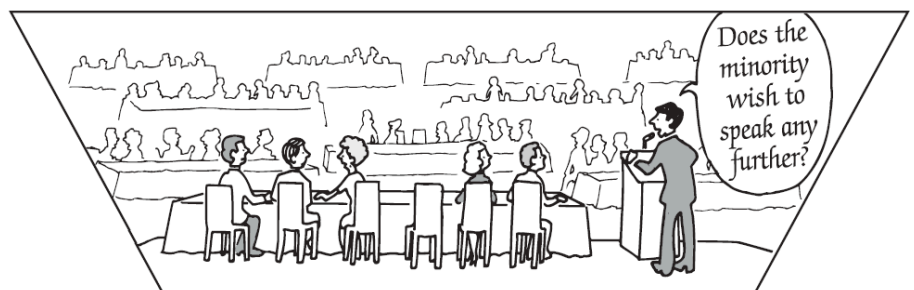
In the introduction to Twelve Concepts for World Service, Bill W. says that "each Concept is really a group of related principles". Concept Five is a good example. It describes two related, practical principles: *petition* and *appeal*.

Everyone in the service structure, Bill says, has the right to petition for the redress of a personal grievance and even be heard, if necessary, by the Board of Trustees. "Though in practice this will be a seldom exercised right," he writes here, "its very existence will always restrain those in authority from unjust uses of their power."

He was right. In fact, the right of petition is so seldom exercised that it wasn't until 2009, almost 50 years after the Concepts were published, that some members tried to file a grievance against the Board, learned that no procedure existed, and set out to change that. Over the next few years, this led to the creation of a formal petition process and helped inspire a Conference inventory process.

So petition is a rare occurrence. But *appeal*, the other half of Concept Five, is actually in constant use. You'll see it at the General Service Conference as well as the business meetings of many areas, districts, and groups. In those meetings, after taking a vote, the chair offers the folks who voted in the minority a chance to speak again. It's a second chance to be heard, and perhaps prevent the majority from making an error.

Only those who voted in the minority are invited to speak. Those in the majority don't talk, they just listen. For the majority, it's a chance to



exercise humility and open-mindedness; for the minority, it's a way to be included and respected despite differences of opinion. When the minority has finished speaking, the chair asks if anyone in the majority would like to make a motion to reconsider. If a motion is made, seconded, and passed by a simple majority, discussion of the issue resumes and eventually a second and final vote is taken. (Some groups skip the motion and simply ask if anyone in the majority would like to change their vote. If so, discussion resumes and a second vote is taken.) Most service workers who've been around for a few years have seen at least one decision reversed by the minority opinion in this way.

Bill writes: "The Rights of 'Appeal' and 'Petition' of course both aim at the problem of protecting and making the best possible use of minority feeling and opinion." He also repeatedly brings up the idea of protecting against tyranny or abuses of power, which might be committed by an individual, a small privileged group, or by a majority that mistreats a minority.

In his chapter on Concept Five, Bill mentions other practices that follow the same principles. For instance, when voting on important issues, if time allows, we strive for "substantial unanimity", which is a majority of at least two thirds. (It's a good practice for chairs to announce before a vote whether they're looking for a simple majority or two thirds, to avoid argument after the vote is finished. If people disagree, they can dispute it before the vote is taken.) And the "Third Legacy Procedure" for election, explained in the Service Manual, is a way of electing officers by written ballot that helps create a two-thirds majority. It tends to elect good officers, and it feels fair and inclusive to all parties, protecting AA unity. Bill says that these practices strengthen the spirit of democracy in AA.

As usual, responsibility goes along with these rights. Concept Five requires that we sometimes listen to people we disagree with. Likewise, it requires us to sometimes be that lonely voice of disagreement. In fact, AA is counting on us to do so, when the issue is

"The well-heard minority, therefore, is our chief protection against an uninformed, misinformed, hasty or angry majority." - Bill W., Twelve Concepts for World Service

important enough. In the first paragraph of Concept Five, Bill emphasized that minorities should be "encouraged" to speak, and that if members feel strongly that an error is being made in an important matter, they not only have the right to speak up, they are charged with an actual "duty".

Without further introduction, here's Concept Five: *"Throughout our world service structure, a traditional 'Right of Appeal' ought to prevail, thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered."*

## Concept 6: Who Steers The Ship

Go to the website of a publicly held corporation such as Apple, GM, or Starbucks, and you're likely to find a page called "Governance", "Investor Info", or "Leadership" that lists the members of the company's board of directors. The job of that board is literally to *direct*, which means to set *direction and high-level policy* for the company, not to manage operations. From their credentials you may see that the directors are often top executives of other companies, or experts in related fields, or sometimes well-known figures who can open doors and provide a public face for the company.

Roughly the same can be said of AA's corporations in New York. They're headed by a board of 21 trustees who set high-level policy and direction. This board meets quarterly in New York and stays in touch all year by phone and email. There's a lot of reading and other traveling as well, and all this work is done for no pay. Fourteen of the trustees are AA members, chosen for their knowledge of AA and their service experience or specific professional experience. The other seven are non-alcoholic "Class A" trustees, selected for their past work with AA and their experience and standing in a relevant field, such as medicine, religion, treatment, criminal justice, or finance. These Class A trustees are valued not only for their participation in board discussions, but also because they can speak publicly on AA's behalf when needed.

The idea of Concepts One and Two, that the groups must delegate to the Conference to get things done, goes one step further in Concept Six. The roughly 135 Conference members, who live all over the US and Canada and meet only once a year, must delegate authority and responsibility to the Board of Trustees, also known as the General Service Board.



In his chapter on Concept Six, Bill writes that he designed our service structure like a corporation. In that model the groups are like shareholders, the Conference delegates are like proxies who vote annually on the shareholders' behalf, and the General Service Board is literally the corporate board. The Board's job is to set high-level policy and direction, and in effect to have a vision for AA, but also to operate our corporations in the real world.

"The conduct of our world services is primarily a matter of policy and business. Of course our objective is always a spiritual one, but this service aim can only be achieved by means of an effective business operation. Our Trustees must function almost exactly like the directors of any large business corporation."

Like any of the corporate boards you might see online, our General Service Board is guided by a set of bylaws, and its members serve on various committees that research issues and present recommendations to the Board for decisions. You'll find the full text of the Bylaws, plus descriptions of the committees (such as Treatment, Public Information, and Literature), in the AA Service Manual. You can read a summary of the business conducted at each Board meeting in the "Quarterly Report". And in the back of the annual Conference Report, if you're curious, you'll see short background notes about our Trustees. All of these publications are available through your group's GSR!

"Why should our Trustees be given this very wide latitude of judgment and action? The answer is that we A.A.'s are holding them mainly responsible for all our service activities: A.A. World Services, Inc. (including A.A. Publishing) and The A.A. Grapevine, Inc." - Twelve Concepts for World Service, p. 25

And now, here's the short form of Concept Six: *"The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board."*

# Concept 7: The Balance of Power

You may remember that, originally, AA's office in New York was run by a small non-profit foundation, and AA members had little influence over it. This bothered Bill, who felt that the AA groups, guided by a Higher Power, should have the final say on how our business affairs are managed. So every year since 1951 we've held a General Service Conference, a week-long event where the groups send elected delegates to meet and advise our corporate trustees, directors, and staff. Any measure approved in the Conference by a 2/3 majority is considered binding upon the Trustees. We expect them to carry it out. And that, right there, is where you notice an elephant in the room.

To talk about that, a little background is needed. At the back of the AA Service Manual are two important documents: the 4-page "Conference Charter", which describes the General Service Conference, and the 11-page "Bylaws of the General Service Board, Inc." Those Bylaws are a legal document, filed with the State of New York. They empower the General Service Board (or "Board of Trustees") to control our office, publishing company, and magazines, and to elect their own successors. Legally speaking, the groups have no say over any of it. And that seems to be the same problem that bothered Bill in the first place. So what power do we have?

That's where Concept Seven comes in. It points out that while the Board has the legal power, the Conference has two powers of its own. One is what Bill calls "the force of tradition". He doesn't define it, but you can infer that he means our common love of AA and the bonds of duty, mutual affection, and respect between service workers. The force of tradition would make it hard to ignore the clear will of the Conference.



The second is "the power of the purse strings". If we really disagree with the Board, and they won't listen, we could just stop sending money. It would take a while to really hurt, since they usually have enough reserve to last at least nine months. And much of their income is from book sales, not group contributions. But those two forces — tradition and the purse strings — are the powers held by the Conference over the Board.

"We believe this balance can be maintained indefinitely, because the one is protected by tradition and the other by law." - Twelve Concepts for World Service

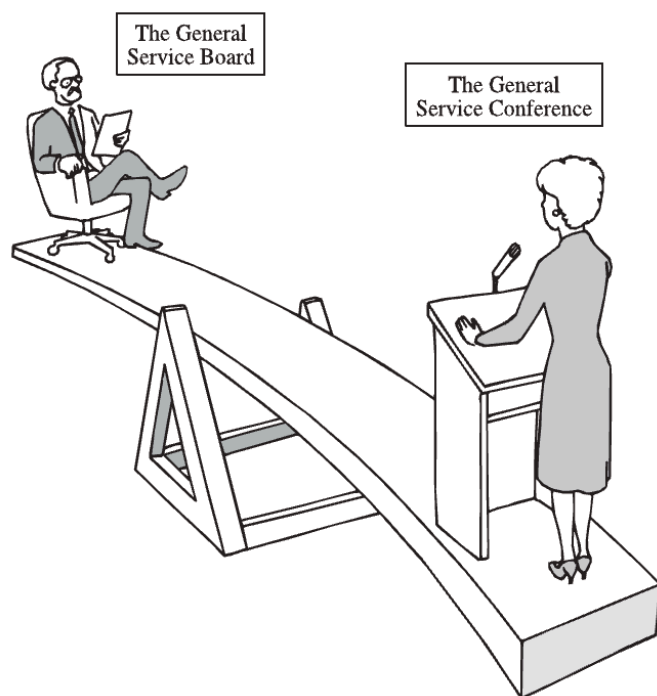
What would happen if the Board or any Trustee continued to act against the conscience of the Conference? In that extreme case, according to the Charter and the corporate Bylaws (but not mentioned in Concept Seven), the Trustees "are expected, subject only to the laws of the state of New York and to these bylaws, at the request of the Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous, to resign their trusteeships and memberships."

So ultimately the groups really are in control. But as he did in other Concepts, Bill cautioned us not to micromanage our workers, saying that the Conference shouldn't use "all of their authority all of the time". "Trusted servants at all A.A. levels," he wrote, "are expected to exercise leadership, and leadership is not simply a matter of submissive housekeeping." He offered 3 reasons why Trustees might deliberately ignore a Conference directive: a) a plan turns out to be unworkable, b) they can't financially afford it, or c) a measure violates the Conference Charter or would do serious harm to AA. (These are consistent with their legal duties as a corporate board.) In those cases, "it would then be the duty of the Trustees to ask for a Conference reconsideration. In the event of a Conference refusal to reconsider, the Trustees could then use their legal right of veto. And, if desirable, they could appeal the issue directly to the A.A. groups themselves."

Does this sort of division ever happen? Here's one example: In a recent Conference the majority of the room, unhappy about some issues, refused to approve the proposed group of Trustees for the coming year. This had no legal force, but symbolically denied the legitimacy of the Board.

It was a withdrawal of approval and support. After a few tense and painful hours of conflict, friend against friend, sometimes with angry words said at the microphone, several Trustees stepped up to acknowledge that a message had been received. Then the slate of Trustees was finally approved. That's the force of tradition.

So Concept Seven is about balance within the service structure, between the "bosses" (the groups) and the "leaders" (the trusted servants), either of which may sometimes need to stand against the other. All Concept Seven does is state the difference between the Conference Charter and the Board's Bylaws. It feels strangely open-ended, because it does not provide a clear, easy path to conflict resolution. As he does in several other Concepts, Bill describes a creative tension that can sometimes be quite painful, but is good for AA as a whole. Using AA principles to work through this type of conflict leads to good decisions for AA and great personal growth for our individual workers.



Speaking of which, it was mentioned earlier that the Concepts about the trustees (6, 7, & 8) are where people start to lose understanding or interest. So if you're still reading, thanks and congratulations! And here's the actual Concept.

Concept Seven: *"The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal instrument; it relies upon tradition and the AA purse for final effectiveness."*

## Concept 8: A Division of Labor

Many AAs are familiar with the "upside-down triangle" of our service structure. More than 60,000 AA groups<sup>1</sup>, up at the top part of the triangle, may elect General Service Representatives (GSRs)... who elect the 93 Area Delegates... who attend the Conference to meet with the 21 Trustees of the General Service Board (GSB) — who reside at the narrow bottom of the triangle.

Concept Eight is about what happens between the General Service Board and the AA service corporations at the tip of the triangle.

The Board has no paid workers, and no president or manager. The 21 Trustees, all part-time unpaid volunteers, serve as members of a non-profit holding company that owns our two service corporations and chooses their boards of Directors. One of those companies is the AA Grapevine, Inc., which publishes the Grapevine, La Viña, and collections of stories. The other, AA World Services, Inc., (AAWS), handles everything else: running our office in New York, printing and translating our literature, helping to solve group problems, keeping an archive, handling PR and legal work, and helping AA in other countries. AAWS also handles special tasks for the GSB.

Bill thought of these two companies as providing three services: publishing, the office, and the magazine. He writes in another Concept that we might someday incorporate more services, all reporting to the GSB. For instance, a few years ago we considered forming a third service corporation that would provide shared services to AAWS and Grapevine, such as printing, shipping, and websites.

Back in Concept Two, the groups delegated authority and responsibility to the Conference. And in Concept Six, the Conference delegated to the Trustees. Concept Eight is the next link between the groups and our service companies. It says the

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<sup>1</sup> Bear in mind that: 1) many AA groups do not participate in General many online groups, which are just starting to find ways to participate in the



Trustees must delegate to the service corporations. Specifically, it says that the Trustees on the General Service Board, who are part-time volunteers, should focus on policy and finance, and leave day-to-day operations to the "constantly active" corporations and their paid staff. The GSB maintains some control by approving the budgets of those companies, choosing their boards of directors, and putting some GSB members onto those boards. But as in several other Concepts, micromanagement is discouraged. Just like the rest of us, the Trustees must "trust their trusted servants" on the corporate boards.

For example: The General Service Board, after consulting with the Conference, might decide to publish a book, but it's the job of AAWS or the Grapevine to publish and sell it. Similarly, when the GSB heard reports a few years ago of predators in the Fellowship, it used AAWS staff to produce a paper on "vulnerable populations in AA", stating AA's policy and suggesting actions the groups can take. If you want a copy of it, don't call the Board, call the General Service Office (operated by AAWS) at 212-870-3400.

Likewise, when the Conference voted to change our policy on showing an actor's full face in videos, the General Service Board legally approved the policy, but it was put into action by a video team hired by AAWS. And when you want to watch those videos, you'll find them on the aa.org website which is operated by AAWS, not the GSB.

The Board's decisions may be communicated in memos or in meetings, or simply published in the "Quarterly Report" about the Board's quarterly meetings. (Your GSR gets a copy.)

Concept 8 is based on a simple idea: The work of setting policy and direction is different than the work of directly managing a company, and should be kept separate. Part-time unpaid Trustees, who may not have business backgrounds, can't possibly know the details of a company the way a full-time professional manager would. For these and other reasons, Bill spent 2/3 of his chapter on Concept 8 explaining why the service companies, which operate year-round, need their own boards and expert full-time managers, separate from the part-time GSB. As he does in

Concept Eleven, Bill predicted that future AA servants will want to merge the service corporations into one, or even have the workers report directly to the GSB. He argues against it.

Bill writes: "our Board as a whole must devote itself almost exclusively to the larger and more serious questions of policy, finance, group relations, public relations and leadership that constantly confront it... Each corporate service entity should possess its own charter, its own working capital, its own executive, its own

employees, its own offices and equipment. Except to mediate difficult situations and to see that the service corporations operate within their budgets and within the general framework of A.A. and Headquarters policy, the Board will seldom need to do more, so far as routine service operations are concerned. The General Service Board is in effect a holding company, charged with the custodial oversight of its wholly-owned and separately incorporated subsidiaries, of which each has, for operating purposes, a separate management."

Congratulations on understanding Concept Eight, the last of the three Concepts about Trustees! It reads: *"The Trustees of the General Service Board act in two primary capacities: (a) With respect to the larger matters of overall policy and finance, they are the principal planners and administrators. They and their primary committees directly manage these affairs. (b) But with respect to our separately incorporated and constantly active services, the relation of the Trustees is mainly that of full stock ownership and of custodial oversight which they exercise through their ability to elect all directors of these entities."*

"The close attention of the Board to such large matters cannot be subject to constant distraction and interference... the Board cannot possibly manage and conduct in detail; it must delegate its executive function." - Twelve Concepts for World Service, Bill W.

# Concept 9: Leadership Matters

Concept Nine discusses the topic of leadership in the General Service structure. We already know something about servant leadership from Tradition Two (group authority and trusted servants) and Tradition Nine (organization, leaders, and no power to direct), and from Concept Three (right of decision) and Concept Five (protect minorities). Bill's chapter on Concept Nine briefly discusses the leadership role of the Board and the need to continuously find good leaders at all levels. And then it reprints a popular Grapevine article by Bill on leadership principles. (At the end of the article, he notes that these principles apply to all AA leaders, including sponsors. It can be interesting to read it with that in mind.)

"Weak leadership can hardly function at all, even in the best of structures," Bill writes.

"Furnishing our service structure with able and willing workers has to be a continuous activity."

First he stressed the importance of the GSRs, who elect District and Area workers, and Delegates. "These are the direct agents of the AA groups; these are the indispensable linkage between our Fellowship and its world service; these are the primary representatives of A.A's group conscience... Hence great care needs to be taken by the groups as they choose these Representatives."

The GSRs in return will also need to show care as they elect DCMs, delegates, and others. "Personal ambitions will have to be cast aside, feuds and controversy forgotten. 'Who are the best qualified people that we can name?' This should be the thought of all." As in Concept Five, Bill emphasized the value of the Third Legacy voting procedure described in the Service Manual. "This system of choosing has greatly reduced political friction; it has made each Delegate feel that he or she is truly a world servant rather than just the winner of a contest. In Committee Members and Delegates alike, our Third Legacy methods have generally produced people of a high level of dedication and competence."

"Our future effectiveness must thus depend upon ever-new generations of leaders." - Twelve Concepts for World Service, Bill W.

In Concept Nine, the 66-year-old Bill discussed the eventual passing of his remaining leadership duties into the hands of the General Service Board. And he vaguely mentions his hopes of improving the composition of the Board. In those days, two-thirds of the Board members were Class A (non-alcoholic) Trustees, and some of them served in those roles for decades. Four years later, in 1966, the ratio was changed to one-third Class As, and much later the Board also set term limits for all trustees. Today, in keeping with Concept Nine, we continue to consider changes to the Board makeup. For instance, fifty years after the Concepts were published, we dropped the old rule that the Chair of the Board must be a Class A, and in 2024 we elected a Class B to serve as Chair.

The longest part of the chapter on Concept Nine is a reprint of Bill's 1959 Grapevine article, "Leadership in AA: Ever a Vital Need". This is some of Bill's best writing, but to understand it may require multiple readings, since he was trying to thread a very fine needle. Remember that the Traditions remove most forms of power from AA, including personal authority, membership requirements, money, property, prestige, politics, fame, and even seniority. So how is it possible to lead in that "benign anarchy"?

The answer is something like attraction. "Our leaders do not drive by mandate, they lead by example... A leader in AA service is therefore a man (or woman) who can personally put principles, plans and policies into such dedicated and effective action that the rest of us want to back him up and help him with his job."

This takes balance, as Bill showed in numerous examples of the "careful discrimination and soul-searching that true leadership must always try to exercise." For instance: "Good leadership originates plans, policies, and ideas.... But in new and important matters, it will nevertheless consult widely before taking decisions and actions... [and] often discard its own cherished plans for



others that are better." Leaders must know when to yield, since "progress is nearly always characterized by a series of improving compromises. We cannot, however, compromise always. Now and then it is truly necessary to stick flat-footed to one's conviction about an issue until it is settled." It may seem contradictory, but Bill is really saying "These are situations for keen timing and careful discrimination as to which course to take."

Another key trait is the ability to listen openly to criticism, discern whatever truth may be in it, and engage or move on appropriately. Then there's "the all-important attribute of vision... As individuals and as a fellowship, we shall surely suffer if we cast the whole job of planning for tomorrow onto a fatuous idea of Providence. God's real Providence has endowed us human beings with a considerable capacity for foresight, and He evidently expects us to use it." This is true at all levels, but Bill says that it's essential for Trustees. "Most of them, in my view, should be chosen on the basis that they have already demonstrated an aptness for foresight in their own business or professional careers."

In the end, Bill brought it home to where we all live: "We shall be in continual need of these same attributes — tolerance, responsibility, flexibility, and vision — among our leaders of AA services at all levels." This includes sponsors, he writes. "Every sponsor is necessarily a leader... What the sponsor does and says, how well he estimates the reactions of his prospects, how well he times and makes his presentation, how well he handles criticisms, and how well he leads his prospect on by personal spiritual example — these qualities of leadership can make all the difference."

Here's Concept Nine: *"Good service leaders, together with sound and appropriate methods of choosing them, are at all levels indispensable for our future functioning and safety. The primary world service leadership once exercised by the founders of A.A. must necessarily be assumed by the Trustees of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous."*

# Concept 10: Trusted Servants

The General Service Structure was originally created to connect the AA groups to our world service leaders in New York. And that can be a good place to start explaining general service to someone. But the structure has grown to be more than just a communication channel. At each step along the way, we've usually developed other service roles and committees. These include officers (chair, secretary, treasurer, etc.), standard committees (PI, corrections, Grapevine, accessibilities, etc.), other committees (website, translation, literature, archive, finance, etc.), and individual workers.

In each of these cases, when we give someone a job we are delegating both responsibility and authority to them. The Refreshments Chair is bringing donuts (responsibility), and has an approved budget (authority). The Workshop Committee will host a Traditions workshop (responsibility), has a budget, and can choose the location and agenda (authority). The Delegate is expected to be well-informed and report regularly to the Area (responsibility) but is allowed to vote her own conscience (authority).

Concept Ten states the obvious, that when we give someone a responsibility, we should give them the clear authority to carry it out. Anything less leads to micromanagement — constantly interfering, advising, changing the rules, or forcing people to constantly ask for permission. Do that, and not only will you have unhappiness and inefficiency, but you will run out of good workers. We should always be clear where the *ultimate* authority lies, where the final "boss" is. But we should also give workers plenty of *delegated* authority, that is, clear job descriptions and boundaries, with enough room to do their work. And we



should almost never step in and use that ultimate authority, except in an emergency.

"When delegated authority is operating well," Bill writes, "it should not be constantly interfered with. Otherwise those charged with operating responsibility will be demoralized because their authority to do their work will be subject to arbitrary invasion, and because their actual responsibility will be made greater than their real authority."

Bill wanted this Concept to be more than just a good intention. He wanted to "to restrain the natural human tendency of those in ultimate authority to usurp and take over the needed operational or delegated authority". So he tried to "create at each level accurate definitions of authority and responsibility". Bill saw micromanagement as a sort of tyranny that needed checks and balances, and so he wove protections against it into the Conference Charter, the corporate Bylaws, and several of the Concepts.

Along with clearly delegating authority with responsibility, we should also watch out for cases where authorities might conflict or overlap. Bill says that good communication can solve many such problems. For instance, if two committees have overlapping interests, then each committee might invite a representative of the other committee to attend their meetings in order to stay mutually informed. And in such cases, he recommended that leadership always be clear which party has the "senior" or "primary" jurisdiction in the matter, so that people can plan accordingly and resolve issues without constantly appealing to a higher authority.

"Here we see the 'group conscience' as the *ultimate* authority and the 'trusted servant' as the *delegated* authority... We well know that only by means of careful definitions and mutual respect can we constantly maintain a right and harmonious working balance." - Bill W., Twelve Concepts for World Service, p. 45

This leads to a point that Bill also emphasized in Concept Eleven: "It should always be clear where the point of final decision is located. A condition to be avoided at all costs is double-headed business or policy management. Authority can never be divided into equal halves." So we

should always be clear who is responsible, and for what, and give them the authority they need to do the job.

That covers the principle and some practical applications of Concept Ten. It reads: *"Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority — the scope of such authority to be always well defined whether by tradition, by resolution, by specific job description or by appropriate charters and bylaws."*

# Concept 11: Corporate Affairs

You know that Tradition Nine says AA needs the least possible organization. Well, according to Concept Eleven, in our corporate operations we need the *best* possible organization. Specifically, it says that AA's board of trustees in New York, which is responsible for our two non-profit service corporations, should always have the best possible committees, corporate directors, executives, and staff. This much seems pretty obvious, but other parts of Concept Eleven may be surprising.

## Committees

Most of the Trustees' work is done by committees, which then report their progress or make recommendations that the trustees vote on. There are "standing" committees for ongoing things like finance, literature, and public information (there's a current list of these in your AA Service Manual), and "ad hoc" committees for temporary special issues that come up, such as the safety of members in AA. Committees may study tough issues, handle complex projects like creating literature or videos, or suggest policies on anything from finance to how we carry the message in remote parts of the world.

Committee members include Trustees, Directors (see below), and sometimes others, such as AA staff members, or AA members with special experience or abilities. For instance, a past delegate with prison experience served as an appointed committee member (ACM) on the Trustees' Literature Committee to help write the pamphlet "It Sure Beats Sitting In A Cell". Similarly, a teenage AA member served as an ACM on a Trustees' committee to represent the views of younger members.

## Boards of Directors

Separate boards of directors oversee our two service corporations — AA World Services, Inc. and The AA Grapevine, Inc. Like any other corporate

board, their jobs is to set direction and policy, and hire an executive to do the actual work. The Trustees fill some of these Director slots themselves, and for the other spots they select Directors who know business, finance, law, or just AA. Each year the selected board must be approved by a vote at the General Service Conference. As with the trustees, the director role is unpaid but quite demanding, involving many hours of reading, emailing, and conference calls, plus eight trips to New York every year.

## Executives

GSO's General Manager and Grapevine's Publisher implement the policies of the boards of directors, managing our active non-profit companies for our sometimes-difficult membership on tight budgets. The Concepts say that just one person (never two or more!) should always be clearly responsible for a thing, and that person should be given a clearly-defined authority. As long as they stay within that authority and report their actions, they should not be micromanaged by the people who delegated to them. Bill discussed four principles that relate to executives:

1. Execs must discern between executing an existing policy and forming a new one, and often seek guidance when forming a new one, as discussed in Concept Three. To succeed, executives must follow the various principles of leadership laid out in the chapter on Concept Nine.
2. We must give our paid workers a competitive salary. Members who contribute a few hundred dollars per year in the basket shouldn't ask other members to contribute tens of thousands by working at a salary that's below the market rate. Lives depend on their hard professional work, so we should hire the best and pay them reasonably well.
3. Staff members should rotate regularly, like service workers. This refers chiefly to the dozen-or-so alcoholic staffers who each work a specific "assignment" or "desk" (area of responsibility such as Treatment, Corrections, PI, etc.) and respond to information requests

from AA members and the general public. These staff members rotate to a different assignment every two years.

4. Workers should have a voice, and should be consulted in matters that affect them, as discussed in Concept Four. For this reason, about 16 executives and staff members get a voice and a vote at the annual General Service Conference, where our largest decisions are made. These people are listed among the Conference participants at the back of the annual Conference report.

## Other Notes

Near the end of Concept 11, just as he did in Concept 4, Bill shares some outdated thinking on female workers. In this case, he suggests that men are better at business and women are better at relating to people.

Obviously this does not represent current thinking in AA today. Remember, the Concepts articles were written in 1962, by a 66-year-old Bill W., as a historical record of the thinking of our early members. By decision of the Conference, this text has been removed from some editions of the Twelve Concepts book. If you do happen to see it, you'll understand why it's there.

While discussing our corporate structures, Bill predicts (as he also did in Concepts 4 & 8) that from time to time people will suggest changes to our corporate structure, such as merging the service corporations (AAWS and the Grapevine) into one unit. He lists some of the reasons they'll suggest this, and provides two pages of reasons why he thinks it's a bad idea. And in fact, people have repeatedly suggested merging AAWS and the Grapevine, for exactly the reasons Bill predicted, even in recent years.

For anyone who wonders why we should bother to read Bill's somewhat dated and difficult original Concepts articles, this repetitive debate suggests an answer. As Bill writes in his introduction, the Twelve Concepts "are an interpretation of AA'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. These Concepts therefore aim to record the 'why' of our service structure in such

a fashion that the highly available experience of the past, and the lessons we have drawn from that experience, can never be forgotten or lost." He believed AA needs to grow and change, but hoped that future change would always be informed by an understanding of the past.

If you've read this far in these Concepts summaries, maybe you'll go on to read Bill's original Concepts articles, and serve the Fellowship by remembering those lessons for us as we continue to work in and improve our unique Third Legacy.

Meanwhile, here's the short form of Concept Eleven: *"The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern."*

# Concept 12: A Spiritual Organization

If you've read this far, you've seen how we delegate responsibility and authority from the groups to the Conference, the trustees, the directors, and finally the trustee committees and paid corporate staff. That's as far as the delegation can go. What's left to talk about?

Well, Concept Twelve commits us to uphold six final principles, which are phrased as statements about the Conference and how it deals with money, power, and our internal and external relationships. These principles have common themes of prudence, spirituality, and keeping the Conference close to the Fellowship. Bill writes that "Prudence is a workable middle ground... between the obstacles of fear on the one side and of recklessness on the other."

Roughly stated, this Concept says that the Conference will: guard the Traditions, set limits on money and power, avoid punishment and public controversy, strive for substantial unanimity, respect diversity and personal freedom, never become a government, and always be democratic. The ideas look familiar because we've seen glimpses of them in our other principles and literature. In Concept Twelve, they're like guarantees to our Fellowship and our servants, made by our service organization. We refer to them as the Six Warranties.

These Warranties are so important that they are also the 12th and final article of the Conference Charter. Concept Twelve is Article 12, word for word. It has not changed since it was approved with the original Conference Charter at our 2nd International Convention in 1955. And Article 3, which describes the Conference's relation to AA, says that Article 12, like the Steps and Traditions, can only be changed with the written consent of 3/4 of the registered groups that vote on the issue.

To help you keep track of all six Warranties, one trick is to notice that the first three talk about money and power, and the last three talk about relationships.

**Warranty One** cautions us that "the Conference shall never become the seat of perilous wealth or power". But Bill was pretty sure the groups

would never send an excess of money to the Board. So here he says we can avoid having too much money by simply refusing outside donations and limiting the amount of individual member donations. Nor did he think anyone who makes a power grab would last long; the groups would put a stop to that by cutting off contributions. He writes that the Conference's real source of power is the spiritual power that flows through the actions of humble, unselfish, and dedicated AA servants.

**Warranty Two** says that "Sufficient operating funds, plus an ample Reserve, should be its prudent financial principle". The discussion of this one is long. Bill talked about the ups and downs of contributions, the need for leadership communication to "simply portray what the giver's service dollar brings" in services, and the need of roughly a year's reserve to carry us through lean times. And he shared his thoughts on the wisdom of selling our books at a price above cost.

**Warranty Three** says that "none of the Conference members shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others", meaning that there should be checks and balances on power. We've seen this throughout the Concepts. For instance, in Concept Ten Bill says that "ultimate authority" should be "carefully qualified by delegated authority". Now in Concept Twelve, Bill writes that "We of AA will not tolerate absolute human authority in any form", and mentions the Right of Participation and the Right of Appeal and Petition as practical ways to check authority. By mentioning Participation in the Warranties (and therefore in Article 12), he protected it from being easily changed. This is where he refers to the Warranties as "The AA Service Bill of Rights", calling them "an expression of deep and loving respect for the spiritual liberties" of our members. If you're keeping track, this is the shortest of the six Warranty writeups in this chapter.

**Warranty Four** says "that all decisions be reached by discussion, vote, and, wherever possible, by substantial unanimity". Echoing his thoughts from Concept Five (the Right of Appeal), Bill writes that this Warranty is a "safeguard against hasty or overbearing authority of a simple majority" as well as "notice of the rights and the frequent wisdom of minorities", while

ensuring extensive debate when possible. This is not always appropriate — for instance with time-sensitive or minor issues, or if someone is using it to obstruct the proceedings. The Conference sometimes needs to agree in advance how much of a majority is needed. Bill says here that this can be decided by a simple majority; he trusted that we will not misuse this power.

**Warranty Five** says "that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy". As in Tradition One, Bill writes here that when we "fail to follow sound spiritual principles, alcohol cuts us down. Therefore no humanly administered system of penalties is needed." If we resort to personal attacks, we risk resentments and conflicts that we can't afford. Similarly, if we enter public controversy and contention, no matter the short-term gain, we would damage both our unity and the worldwide goodwill that we now enjoy. So we need to maintain "a thoroughly nonaggressive and pacific attitude in all our public relations". Those good public relationships are based on the world's general happiness that we're getting sober and that we don't tell anyone else their business or get into politics or other causes. We would throw away that goodwill by getting into controversy. There's a clear connection to Traditions Five, Ten, and Eleven. The Conference has a "duty of setting the highest possible standard with respect to these attitudes of no punishments and no public controversy". So this Warranty has been mentioned, for example, when we've considered using a lawsuit to protect our copyrights.

Warranty Five gets the longest discussion of the six Warranties in Concept Twelve, because of Bill's detailed examples of how to handle conflicts and public relations issues. He explores:

- Public attacks or ridicule against AA
- Traditions violations such as anonymity breaks
- Cases of internal conflicts in AA becoming public
- Cases of "a deep rift running clear across AA", meaning an internal division that could cause part of the membership to withdraw and start a new fellowship
- Concerns over how to protect our rights to the AA name

Bill's thoughts on these show a clear pattern of moderation, tolerance, and spirituality.

Finally, **Warranty Six** says that the Conference will never become a government, and "will always remain democratic in thought and action". Here Bill mentions "the extraordinary liberties which the AA Traditions accord to the individual member" and group. These are possible because those who stray too far from the Steps & Traditions face "dissolution and death, both as individuals and as groups". Since we place such high value on our liberties, and "cannot conceive a time when they will need to be limited", the Conference should abstain from "all acts of authoritative government which could in any wise curtail AA's freedom under God". So the Conference should "always try to act in the spirit of mutual respect and love — one member for another". We need to protect our minorities, strive for substantial unanimity, and avoid hasty, angry, reckless, or punitive actions. This will guard against tyrannies of majorities or minorities, and protect our freedom to grow and serve a higher power. "The sum of these several attitudes and practices is, in our view, the very essence of democracy — in action and spirit."

It may surprise you that Bill uses a political term like *democracy* in Concepts Five and Twelve. Remember that he also uses it in the Big Book, on the first page of Chapter 2, "There Is a Solution", where he mentions the comradeship of rescued shipwreck survivors. He uses it again on page 160, near the end of "A Vision For You". That passage describes the relief of someone who has just stumbled into their first AA meeting. They see the expressions on the faces, the indefinable something in the eyes, the stimulating and electric atmosphere, the uncanny understanding, and the practical approach to problems. They see "the absence of intolerance of any kind, the informality, the genuine democracy", and know they've found a haven.

We know that Bill studied the book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James, which also mentions democracy. In that book, near the end of Lecture 13, James reports that a common effect of spiritual awakening is a sense of "democracy, or sentiment of the equality

before God of all his creatures". He says it is like a form of humility, one that is not interested in "dignities and honors, privileges and advantages... It is humanity, rather, refusing to enjoy anything that others do not share."

People often say that for the Warranties to be fulfilled, we must be practicing all 36 of our principles (Steps, Traditions, and Concepts). Democracy in our world service structure is an expression of that spiritual ideal, and also a practical way to do business.

Concept Twelve is a very readable chapter, but long, and it has *lots* of information, especially in Warranties Two and Five. That can make it hard to see the big picture. Remember that Concept Twelve starts from the Traditions, and emphasizes finding a middle ground (prudence), being spiritual, and keeping the Conference close to the Fellowship. The first three Warranties talk about money and power, and the last three talk about relationships with each other and the world. With that as a mental framework, it's not hard to remember all six and see what they have in common.

Concept Twelve: *"The Conference shall observe the spirit of AA tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government, and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action."*

# An Afterthought

As an experiment, imagine that an evil wizard is making off with our 12 Concepts for World Service, right before our eyes, and we can only save one of them before the thief escapes? Which Concept should we save, in order to save our world services from this dire threat?

Some would save Concept 1 — the groups are responsible for AA as a whole — because we'll soon be in trouble if we forget that. Or 2, because that's the Concept that creates the Conference, starting with the GSRs and Delegates who serve as our communication network and our agents.

But it would also be tempting to choose one of the "Traditional Rights" in Concepts 3, 4, & 5, because our business meetings at every level would descend into useless chaos without them. Concept Ten (authority should match responsibility) might go into that group as well. All good choices, though it would be hard to pick just one of them.

I don't think anyone would save 6, 7, or 8, the Concepts that cover trustees, because they're covered by the Conference Charter in our service manuals — and also, frankly, because they're kind of dry. There's not a lot of love lost on Concepts 6, 7, and 8. I might even throw 11 in with those. It covers our corporate management principles, and is arguably more interesting, but still it's very corporate and quite long.

Concept 9 would be a good one to keep, because it gives principles for good leadership. After all, without the leadership of Bill, Bob, and many other pioneers, none of this would have been created, much less lasted so long. Bill might agree with this choice. In Concept 9 he writes: "Good leadership cannot function well in a poorly designed structure. But weak leadership can hardly function at all, even in the best of structures." So, if you picked Concept 9, good choice.

But what about Concept 12? Some of us have heard rumors of a pattern in the Steps and Traditions, where the 1st item is a problem, the 2nd is a solution, 3 through 11 provide methods of implementing the solution, and the 12th is the result. It's not a perfect description, but you can see that there's something to it. And you can see the same pattern in the

12 Concepts for World Service. The groups are in charge, but they must delegate to the Conference to make that workable... so we have the Traditional Rights... a few trustee Concepts that transition from the Conference to the corporate offices... some discussion of leadership and organization... and voila! Together these all lead to Concept Twelve, the result. That result, according to Concept 12, is the Six Warranties — six promises of what AA's world service organization will be like if we follow the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts.

As you read Bill's writing on Concept 12, you hear traces of the Traditions, especially Tradition 2. (All the Concepts are an expression of Tradition 2.) Plus there are hints of Concepts 1 & 2, as well as Concepts 3, 4, & 5, the Traditional Rights. It's a remarkable vision of servant leadership. All of our other principles, carefully built on experience from day one, seem to roll up into the 12th chapter, which contains some of Bill's most graceful and principled prose.

Even the terse summary, the Short Form of Concept 12 that simply lists the Warranties, is bold and admirable. Think of all the movements and companies and governments in the history of the world. If this text described any of them, it would be an impressive claim, an amazing human achievement. But in fact it describes a service organization collectively managed by a million volunteers who were all, at one time, literally dying of ego and self-centeredness — a group of drunks. See for yourself:

Concept Twelve: *"The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and whenever possible, substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government; and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action."*

You are welcome to your own opinion, but as for me, I would save this.

# A Suggested Study Group Format

Bill W.'s original Concepts book is tough to read. It's a combination of Bill's writing style, his use of words with special meanings (such as *Conference*), and the need for readers to know legal terms like "trustee" as well as details of AA service and history. *Twelve Concepts for World Service* wasn't written for a general audience, like the Big Book or the 12 & 12. It's for a different purpose, which Bill describes in the introduction, and it's not designed for accessibility.

A great solution is to set up a weekly study meeting, lasting a few months, of a few committed people. Three months is enough time to read the Conference Charter and the 12 Concepts for World Service, both located in the Service Manual. You don't need experts to lecture you. Just a handful of committed, interested people with a little experience in General Service, such as GSRs and maybe a district or area officer. Six to twelve people is a good number. The group should be small, so that everyone can read and share, but big enough to survive when a few folks drop out.

Read a few paragraphs at a time, briefly summarize or discuss them, then move on. Keep it casual and fun. Encourage people to share their thoughts, but stay focused or you may not get through. Set an achievable goal, such as "We'll try to understand 80% of what we read, and not worry about the rest." If your study group has questions that seem worth pursuing, assign someone to find answers and report back the next week. They might ask a service sponsor or past delegate, or call GSO. But not every question needs an answer! Don't let the group get bogged down and grind to a halt over details.

Some of Bill's original Concepts articles are brief, and some are long (11 & 12). A 90-minute meeting is recommended so that you can get through at least one chapter each week and finish in about 9 weeks. If you split a chapter over two weeks, it's harder to understand. And by finishing in two months instead of three, you'll lose fewer people. Encourage people to come and go as they need to, and bring food if they like. It's a win if people

get some of the information, and build helpful relationships, even if they can't attend every minute or every meeting.

Warning: by the time you finish the Concepts, you may notice your group looking for other things to read together, such as *The AA Service Manual*, *AA Comes of Age* (or other history books), pamphlets, or service pieces, all available through aa.org. And you may have made some lifelong friends.

# An *Unofficial* 12 Concepts Cheat Sheet

<u>Breakdown*</u>	<u>Summary*</u>	<u>Conference-approved Short Form of the Twelve Concepts for World Service</u>
<i>The groups are "in charge", but this is not practical, so groups delegate to the Conference</i>	<p>1. The groups have ultimate authority &amp; responsibility.</p> <p>2. Active, effective authority &amp; responsibility delegated to the Conference.</p>	<p>1. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.</p> <p>2. 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.</p>
<i>"Three Traditional Rights"</i>	<p>3. Right of Decision: Trusted servants decide what to bring back to groups for guidance.</p> <p>4. Right of Participation: A proportionate vote given to workers at each level.</p> <p>5. Right of Appeal: Listen to minority opinion and appeals.</p>	<p>3. To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A. — the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives — with a traditional "Right of Decision."</p> <p>4. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional "Right of Participation," allowing a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.</p> <p>5. Throughout our structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard and personal grievances receive careful consideration.</p>
<p><i>Relation of the Conference to the Trustees</i></p> <p><i>and</i></p> <p><i>Relation of the Trustees to the corporate boards</i></p>	<p>6. The Conference delegates to the Trustees.</p> <p>7. The Trustees have legal authority; the Conference has tradition &amp; purse strings.</p> <p>8. The Trustees delegate to the corporate boards (AAWS &amp; Grapevine).</p>	<p>6. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board.</p> <p>7. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the A.A. purse for final effectiveness.</p> <p>8. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of over-all policy and finance. They have custodial oversight of the separately incorporated and constantly active services, exercising this through their ability to elect all the directors of these entities.</p>
<i>Leaders and workers</i>	<p>9. We need good leaders at all levels of service.</p> <p>10. Authority should match responsibility and be clearly defined.</p> <p>11. Corporate systems &amp; staff policies are important.</p>	<p>9. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service leadership, once exercised by the founders, must necessarily be assumed by the trustees.</p> <p>10. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.</p> <p>11. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern.</p>
<i>The "result"</i>	<p>12. The Six Warranties: no perilous power; prudent finances; no unqualified authority; substantial unanimity; no punishment or controversy; no government, always democratic.</p>	<p>12. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and whenever possible, substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government; that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action.</p>