

About AA

Class A (nonalcoholic) Trustees: Who Are They and What Do They Do?

Alcoholics Anonymous is a widely known and respected organization with more than 2 million members. It is hard to believe that nearly 70 years ago drunkenness was considered a moral weakness and alcoholics were viewed as sinners to be scorned or hidden away in mental institutions. Founded in 1935, A.A. might never have survived without the help of nonalcoholic doctors, nurses, clergy, journalists, businessmen and others who risked their professional reputations to support the young fellowship. A.A. owes an unimaginable debt to these nonalcoholic friends whose vision and faith not only helped A.A. struggle through its often painful early years, but were instrumental in shaping the principles that continue to guide it today.

Most A.A. activity takes place on the personal level: in A.A. meetings, at coffee shops, over the phone, via e-mail, in members' homes—anywhere members share with each other. As the Foreword to the Third Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (A.A.'s basic text, called the Big Book) says, "In spite of the great increase in the size and the span of this Fellowship, at its core it remains simple and personal. Each day, somewhere in the world, recovery begins when one alcoholic talks with another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength, and hope." (p. xxii)

As A.A. grew, so did its service needs—such as the need to safeguard tested A.A. principles, handle inquiries from all over the world at one central location, standardize literature, and Fellowship-wide representation on public relations matters. A.A.'s General Service Board is responsible for these operations, overseeing A.A.'s General Service Office for the U.S. and Canada, and insuring the integrity of the A.A. Grapevine magazine, a monthly "meeting in print." The Board is responsible for safeguarding A.A. tradition and A.A.'s service funds. Of the 21 trustees of the board seven are known as Class A (nonalcoholic). They are men and women from a variety of disciplines who through the years have willingly shared our problems without sharing our disease.

Early Friends of the Fellowship

The story of A.A. began in 1934, when co-founder Bill W., a New York City stockbroker with a long history of hopeless drinking, landed in Towns Hospital for one of many stays under the care of William Duncan Silkworth, M.D. Finally Bill did sober up, and he began to look for other alcoholics to work with in order to stay sober. Years later he would write in the 1957 issue of A.A.'s magazine the Grapevine about "the benign little doctor who loved drunks . . . the man who we now realize was very much a founder of A.A. From him we learned the nature of our illness. And he supplied us with the tools with which to puncture the toughest alcoholic ego . . . the *obsession of the mind* that compels us to drink and the *allergy of the body* that condemns us to

go mad or die." In 1938 Dr. Silkworth put his professional standing on the line when he publicly endorsed the fledgling movement of A.A. in his essay "The Doctor's Opinion" that to this day is part of the Fellowship's basic text, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (p. xxv), affectionately called the Big Book.

Some months after Bill's last alcoholic drink, he traveled to Akron, Ohio, on business. There another nonalcoholic, Henrietta Sieberling, a member of the Oxford Group (an evangelical movement begun in the 19th century), introduced Bill to a prominent local doctor and notorious drunk, Dr. Bob S. A.A.'s birthday is observed on June 10, the day in 1935 that Dr. Bob took his last drink. Realizing they needed to help others in order to stay sober, the pair went looking for other alcoholics to help.

Many of their "prospects" needed hospitalization, but there were no local hospitals with alcoholic wards at the time. Enter Sister Ignatia, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. From the first time Dr. Bob arrived at St. Thomas Hospital requesting a private room for a very sick alcoholic, Sister Ignatia went out of her way to help.

A.A.'s development is peopled with nonalcoholics like Sister Ignatia. They are men and women who, believing the new fellowship would work, opened their hearts and held out their hands. In both Akron and New York the early A.A.s attended meetings of the Oxford Group and were greatly influenced by Episcopal clergyman Samuel Shoemaker. "It was from him," Bill said, "that Dr. Bob and I in the beginning had absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the Twelve Steps. . . . Dr. Silkworth gave us the needed knowledge of our illness, but Sam Shoemaker had given us the concrete knowledge of what we could do about it." (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 39)

Harry Tiebout, M.D., a prominent psychiatrist, became interested in A.A. when two of his patients joined and sobered up; the doctor became a staunch supporter and was instrumental in arranging for Bill to speak before medical societies. Friends in the media got the word out, notably editor Fulton Oursler in *Liberty* magazine and writer Jack Alexander in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Alexander's landmark article in March 1941 sparked a phenomenal surge of growth; A.A.'s membership quadrupled from 2,000 to 8,000 by the year's end.

Businessmen like John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his associates sowed the seeds of A.A.'s Tradition of self-support, a principle that has enabled the Fellowship to avoid dependence on other organizations and to steer clear of the danger that "he who pays the piper calls the tune"—this, through its Seventh Tradition of rigorous self-support. And later A.A. welcomed to its board such friends as Dr. John (Dr. Jack) L. Norris, longtime trustee and board chair; prison administrator Austin MacCormick; and sociologist Dr. Milton Maxwell, among others.

Nonalcoholics Save Board from Itself

The first board consisted of five trustees. The nonalcoholic members were Willard Richardson, a Rockefeller associate; Frank Amos, from the field of advertising; and Bill's brother-in-law, Dr. Leonard Strong Jr. The alcoholic trustees were Dr. Bob and a New York A.A. "The New York member soon got drunk," Bill recounts, "but this possibility had been foreseen. Drunkenness on the part of an alcoholic trustee meant immediate resignation. Another alcoholic was named in the drunken brother's place and we proceeded to business." (ibid., p. 152)

That scenario occurred in 1938, just three years after Bill and Dr. Bob had their celebrated first meeting in Akron. There were no "oldtimers"—an A.A. with even four or five years of continuous sobriety under his belt was unknown. Most members were barely dry. Helping each other to keep the bottle corked was the tall order of the day, and dealing with matters pertaining to foundations, trusteeships and organizational procedures was heady, overwhelming stuff.

Thus, the nonalcoholic trustees were greatly needed in the early days to keep the new Fellowship afloat, and they are still needed. Today A.A. has oldtimers with years of sobriety and service behind them; but, as the alcoholic trustees themselves are first to point out, they are, like everybody else in A.A., "sober one day at a time."

For years the nonalcoholic trustees continued to outnumber the alcoholics by a majority of one. Then, in 1966, when the Fellowship felt it had the experience to chart its own course, the ratio changed dramatically. The board was reorganized to include seven Class A and 14 Class B trustees. But the custom of electing a nonalcoholic trustee to serve as chairperson has remained unchanged.

Through the years our Class A trustees have acted as unique guardians of Tradition Eleven, which states in part that "we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, films, radio and TV." Experience has shown that for A.A.s, being in the public eye is hazardous to their personal sobriety—and to the collective survival if they break their anonymity at the public level, then get drunk. Yet "A.A. had to be publicized somehow," as Bill noted, "so we resorted to the idea that it would be far better to let our friends do this for us"—our nonalcoholic trustees among them. They can face the camera head on or use their last names without compromising the anonymity Tradition of A.A. In the process they reach many a suffering alcoholic with the A.A. message, along with the professionals who treat and guide them.

Board Welcomes New Trustees

This year A.A. welcomes two new Class A trustees—the Very Rev. Ward Ewing, D.D., dean and president of the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in Manhattan; and William (Bill) Dexter Clark, M.D., medical director of the Addiction Resource Center, Mid Coast Hospital, in Brunswick, Maine.

Before Dr. Ewing assumed his present position in 1998, he spent 13 years as rector of Trinity Church in Buffalo, New York. He also has served congregations in Tennessee, Florida and Kentucky. He became involved in A.A. and alcoholism, he says, while serving as vicar of St. Peter's-in-the-Valley, Louisville, Kentucky, in 1975: "First I became aware of alcoholism as a disease, then I began attending seminars on alcoholism and took a full-semester course on alcoholism. In my congregation we developed a group of persons with at least five years of sobriety who met weekly to deal with religious and spiritual issues in their lives. Consequently, I began to incorporate the Twelve Steps into my own life and my own spirituality in a real way. Today I feel privileged to be a trustee of A.A. and hope that I can be of some help."

Dr. Clark, a cum laude graduate of both Harvard University and Harvard Medical School, has been medical director of the Addiction Resource Center at Mid Coast since 1987. He also is an attending physician at the hospital. He steps into the shoes of rotating trustee George Vaillant, M.D. Bill says, "I am very excited at the prospect of being of service to a fellowship that has meant so much to my patients through the years. I look forward to helping spread information about A.A. through the medical community."

What's It Like to Be a Class A Trustee?

How does it feel to be one of a handful of nonalcoholic trustees in Alcoholics Anonymous? When asked, past Class A trustees expressed myriad emotions. Some said they had been able to steer family members or close friends to A.A., others spoke of the spirituality of the A.A. program and the new dimensions it had added to their lives. All said that association with the Fellowship had enhanced their lives.

Gary A. Glynn, an investment analyst and former trustee chairman of the board, originally became familiar with the Fellowship because a close family member had joined and stayed sober. "My debt to A.A. is immeasurable," he said. "Originally I got involved in service to try to repay that debt, but my reasons for wanting to serve have gone well beyond just that. A.A. is the most remarkable group of people I know."

Past trustee Linda L. Chezem, J.D., says, "When I became a trial judge, I began to see the same defendants, hung-over and miserable and charged with public intoxication or disorderly conduct. Then I began to realize that alcohol was a major factor in a large part of the criminal justice caseload. I have learned that the hand of A.A. is there for any alcoholic who will accept it, and that the Twelve Steps are there for any of us to use."

Former trustee Peter Roach, an educator who considers his trusteeship "one of the most rewarding experiences of my life," numbers several alcoholics in his family. He said he used to be highly critical of them as "stupid" and "irresponsible"—but then "A.A. helped me understand the disease of alcoholism."

Michael Alexander, an attorney and former trustee chairman, first came across A.A. years ago when he was a young associate working for Bernard B. Smith, who had assisted A.A. co-founder Bill W. in setting up the young fellowship's service structure. "Bill was the first alcoholic I ever met," Mike related. "But he and Bernard Smith believed in A.A. and were giving their lives to it. That was good enough for me."

Looking back at his 17 years as trustee, Mike said in his farewell talk to the board, "My term as chairman has been deeply rewarding to me spiritually. I will sorely miss the excitement, challenge and satisfaction that come with the office, and the boundless opportunity to share views with members of A.A. at all levels of service. I am a different person because of A.A. and, I believe, a better one. I am not an alcoholic. No member of my family is an alcoholic. Until I came to A.A., I had no friends who were alcoholics. It has seemed to me that destiny had to work very hard to bring A.A. and me together. But it happened, and because of it I am a lucky man."

This newsletter may be duplicated for distribution without obtaining permission from A.A. World Services, Inc.

This and other issues of About A.A. may be downloaded at www.aa.org