



With a little help from our friends:
AA's nonalcoholic trustees and you

Rebellion Dogs Blog February 2016



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Building a more barrier-free AA has been part of a larger discussion about AA's future. AAs practice what we preach; we admit when we are wrong, we see where we can't progress without direction and we are willing to make changes. Case in point: The results of AA's own inventory are published and we have a list of deficiencies that we are motivated to change.

Our General Service structure depends on the time and energy of trustees and staff, both alcoholics and nonalcoholics. In this blog, let's look at the role of our nonalcoholic friends of AA and ask what professional help we need most to see our way to AA's 100th anniversary.

What if...? Join me in a little thought experiment.

Engagement: Imagine an AA where every member felt connected with, and well served by, the General Service Conference and our service structure in general.

Diversity: Imagine an AA whereby there are no underrepresented populations.

Change: Imagine encouraging change from the fellowship, not rolled out to the fellowship. Imagine a more accommodating, barrier free AA.

Please stay with me a moment as we visualize an engaged, diverse and changing Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm not peddling some liberal mythology about AA being of the people for the people. Engagement, diversity and change are right out of *A.A. General Service Conference Inventory Compendium 2013 – 2015*. It is not a secret document. If you are a member or a regular at an AA meeting, tell your General Service Rep you'd like to read it.

The General Service Conference is asking, "What can we alter or improve? How could we better ready the hand of AA to reach out whenever and wherever the need presents itself?" The report includes ideas about how to involve marginalized members in the Inventory and how to involve rank and file members in the agenda. Wholesome words like transparency, accommodation, equality and trust are found through the 32 pages.

This blog focuses on one specific question and one specific idea regarding one specific AA deficiency, which the *Inventory Compendium* addresses on page 23. It's about seeking outside help for the fellowship as a whole. It's about recruiting nonalcoholic trustees.

AA provides help for those in need, but what help does AA need in order to be more efficient and effective? Nonalcoholic trustees offer our fellowship help with issues above and beyond the generous time and experience that our own membership can provide.

Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees bring professional and business expertise—finance, healthcare, legal, communications—that come with new eyeglasses to view and help with our challenges, objectives and management. So this month, Rebellion Dogs asks: what's missing? What professions or skills are lacking and who ought we be looking to for help with our deficiencies?

First we admit that there's a problem, then accept that help is needed, then we follow through with the guidance given. Sound familiar? So if we're standing at a turning point who can be our guide?

Class A Trustees - background of nonalcoholic friends of AA:

A.A.'s General Service Board is comprised of 14 alcoholics who represent our Class B trustees and seven nonalcoholic, Class A trustees. Our current chair is a **healthcare executive**. Terrance M. Bedient, non-alcoholic, has been a General Service Board trustee and/or treasurer since 2008.

Former chairs have included **clergyman** Reverend Ward Ewing. From the **treatment profession**, Leonard Blumenthal spent decades with the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) before receiving the General Service Board chair gavel from Elaine

McDowell, Ph.D., who worked with the U.S. **Federal Government** as deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and as director of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP). [Dr. McDowell and Mr. Blumenthal are pictured]



Other notable nonalcoholic friends of AA include Dr. George Vaillant, **psychiatrist and Harvard teacher** and Gordon Patrick, a specialist in **occupational alcoholism** from the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario (Now the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health). Concerned about money and AA? In 2013, a new Class A trustee was chosen and AA's media release announced, "David M. Morris, a prominent member of the New York **financial community**, has been elected a Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee and new treasurer of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous."

Friends of AA have been offering guidance and expertise since the **lawyer** and early right-hand to Bill W., Bern Smith, generously helped create what we know today as the General

Service Board. He drafted bylaws and other important documents that AA could hardly have afforded to pay market prices for.

At Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, Bill Wilson infamously said, "Newcomers are approaching A.A. at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. Let us not pressure anyone with our individual or collective views. Let us, instead, accord each other with respect and love." But Bernard Smith also addressed what was the largest gathering of AA at the time—10,000 members—with these words:

"You have something great and awesome going for you. Treat it tenderly, respect what it has done for you and what it can do for others. ... As long as one man dwells in the darkness you once knew, you cannot rest; you must try to find him and help him become one of you. ...[M]ay Alcoholics Anonymous last for all time."

At the first ever International Conference for AA atheists/agnostics/freethinkers, held in Santa Monica in 2014, nonalcoholic trustee emeritus Rev. Ward Ewing held a prominent role.

These professionals share their expertise generously for the good of AA. Some of them are from the helping-drunks business. Some Class As, while not struggling with booze themselves, have been hurt by alcoholism; shake any family tree and a few drunks fall out of it. Some professionals, through observing AA's effectiveness on friends and family, were friends of AA long before we came asking for help. Having one foot in and one foot out, our nonalcoholic trustees bring objectivity to issues that we alcoholics have very strong feelings about but don't always agree on. Another great value Class As bring is that unlike AA members, nonalcoholics can face cameras and reporters, and be fully identified in the media.

Our current chair, Terry Bedient has had a distinguished career in the field of medical administration, beginning in the mid-1970s as Chief of Social Services for the U.S. Army and later, Health Care Administration at George Washington University. He held administrative posts at hospitals in Virginia; New York City; Michigan; and Rochester, N.Y. Terry Bedient has served on a dozen nonprofit boards, most recently with the Federation of State Physician Health Programs with membership in the U.S., Canada and the Netherlands. He is a regular lecturer at ten medical schools and 60 New York hospitals. He was appointed by New York's Chief Judge to the Commission on Alcoholism in the Legal Profession. Pretty busy, isn't he?

"I had always seen A.A. as a key component of a successful recovery program. My A.A. service has reinforced the value of A.A. not just to those in recovery but, to society as a whole. A.A. provides a crucial service to alcoholics in this country, in Canada, and in the world at large."ⁱ

We've noted in previous Rebellion Dogs blog posts that Mr. Bedient will, with the other trustees on the board, focus on providing leadership and to grow and engage the AA membership.

What's the next Steps for AA: Help with what and from what friends?

The General Service Conference aims to employ corrective measures. At the 2013 General Service Conference, outgoing Class B trustee George M. quoted Bill W. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* p. 231) in saying:

"Just as each A.A. must continue to take his moral inventory and act upon it, so must our whole society if we are to survive and if we are to serve usefully and well."

Self-assessment is a pervasive part of our A.A. program; fully half of our Steps are directly related to it. Inventory of the Conference and personal inventory in the Steps are not quite the same, however. At the Conference, the emphasis will be on effectiveness in carrying out the purpose of the Conference, not on 'character

defects.’ In his introduction of the Concepts, Bill was quite clear about the importance of making changes in order to maintain an effective service structure. He said, “Concern has been expressed lest the detailed portrayal of our internal structure might not later harden down into such a firm tradition or gospel that necessary changes would be impossible to make. Nothing could stray further from the intent of these Concepts.”ⁱⁱ

Page 23 of the *Conference Inventory Compendium* talks about getting more feedback from members when it comes to seeking out the best Class A trustees. Not that membership engagement, diversity and change are the only fish to fry, but who, out there in the professional world, knows about steering organizations through rapidly changing cultural environments? Our membership data shows underrepresented populations by age, race and gender. Barriers don’t fix themselves because we simply identify that we have a problem any more than acceptance is a cure for alcoholism.

Human Resources/Human Rights: our code of love and tolerance in action



Class A trustees come from Canada and the USA. I don’t know exactly where our next nonalcoholic steward will come from but he or she will bring with them a new language and a new way of looking at things. Taking our own inventory is noble. But counting the trees from inside the forest doesn’t give us an outsider’s perspective. The most successful companies hire consulting firms to relentlessly take stock of an operation’s strengths and weaknesses,

compare them to the competition and prognosticate on possible shifts in their specific industry and the marketplace as a whole.

So, let’s just assume the next professional AA added to our arsenal was from the Human Resources discipline. What would that look like? Let’s Google “human rights” and “human resources,” and see how people are talking in the rest of the world.

Here’s what I see from my screen: My first hit, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) from the USA and they apply “three key principles to its work on human rights:

- First, DRL strives to learn the truth and state the facts in all of its human rights investigations...
- Second, DRL takes consistent positions concerning past, present, and future abuses.
- Third, DRL forges and maintains partnerships with organizations, government, and multilateral institutions committed to human rights.ⁱⁱⁱ

There's nothing there—taking inventory, being honest, making amends, changing for the better—that is un-AA. If we click on something on the North side of the USA/Canada border, we might land someone from one of the Provincial Human Rights Commissions. Like the USA counterparts, Canadians like the three bullet point system, too. From the Ontario Human Rights Commission, we find the following:

1. Numerical Data: Numerical data such as statistics may show that marginalized persons are not being equally treated by or within an organization. In some instances, numerical data will suggest that there may be systemic discrimination because too few racialized people are represented, for example in positions of leadership. ...

2. Policies, Practices and Decision-Making Processes: Formal and informal policies, practices and decision-making processes can result in barriers for and exclusion of racialized persons. The use of informal or highly discretionary approaches are particularly problematic as there is more room for subjective considerations, differing standards and biases to come into play. It is also important not to design policies, practices and decision-making processes in a way that does not account for individual differences or that uses the dominant culture as the norm.

3. Organizational Culture: Organizations can have their own internal cultures which, if not inclusive, can marginalize or alienate ... an organization that values a particular communication style based on how people from the dominant culture tend to communicate may undervalue a different, but equally effective, communication style ... Organizations must ensure that they are not unconsciously engaging in systemic discrimination. This takes vigilance and a willingness to monitor and review numerical data, policies, practices and decision-making processes and organizational culture.^{iv}

Again, while this three-part assessment has some sobering language, I can see by our own report that our Conference is already looking for ways to do better. The Conference sees that there are voices in AA that aren't heard. Ideas about how to engage young people, members of the armed forces and persons with special needs are being discussed. Not

only are we looking for ways in which marginalized populations can be part of the conversation, but we're looking for ways to better involve them in leadership.

There's also talk about being more flexible about how to engage Class A trustees. Currently the four to eight-year demand upon these trustees limits the pool of available candidates; it's reasonable to think that the best people are the busiest people.

Nonalcoholics with special skills in human resources might help us reach out to the public—especially in our underrepresented communities. We have gotten good at broadcasting AA's message. Perhaps we need be more skilled about asking how we can empathize and accommodate cultural characteristics that aren't well served by our current rituals and language.

We might be able to get some pointers on knowing who we are, too. Our triennial survey has asked about a lot of quasi-outside issues such as mental health, marital status, age, race and relationships with our family doctors. Here is something I think would be great to find out about our ever-changing fellowship – what do we believe?

AA holds us out to the public as being a group of people that wouldn't usually mix in "A Newcomer Asks..."^v

Q: "There is a lot of talk about God, though, isn't there?"

A: The majority of A.A. members believe that we have found the solution to our drinking problem not through individual willpower, but through a power greater than ourselves. However, everyone defines this power as he or she wishes.

1. Many people call it God,
2. Others think it is the A.A. group,
3. Still others don't believe in it at all.

There is room in A.A. for people of all shades of belief and non-belief.

We know—because we ask—what percentage of us are female/male, under 21 and over 71-years-old, working, retired and how many of us are sober less than one year, one to five years, etc. To quantify what our "A Newcomer Asks..." pamphlet states so boldly, why don't we find out? How many of us "don't believe in (a power greater than ourselves) at all"? How many see other alcoholics (the group) as being this power? How many AAs have a personal *deity* (because many faithful North Americans don't call it *god*)? Is there a forth option, "none of the above" maybe? I don't know the answers to these questions but it is no more controversial to ask than any of the other questions we've been asking through the years.

Not only would a snapshot tell us about us, but taking the pulse of the AA memberships worldview every few years would tell us if there's a shift in member identity. Because with an evolving identity, we have evolving needs, both individual and collective.

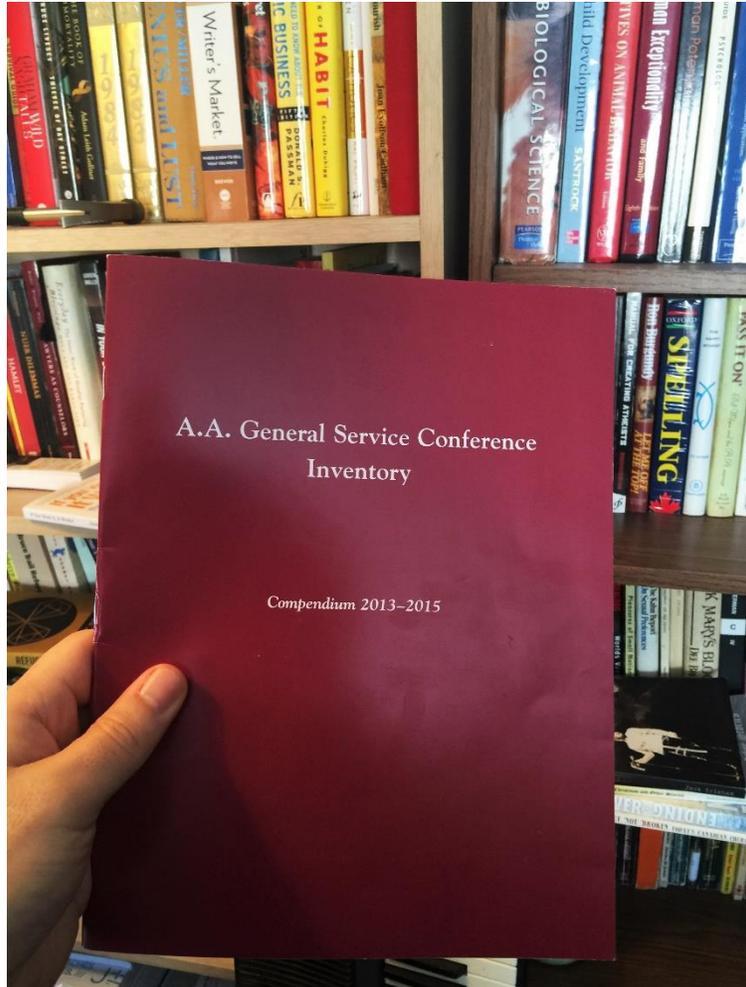
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I encourage anyone reading this blog to review A.A. *General Service Conference Inventory* (F-205). Ask your General Service Rep about it; these topics have been workshop items for Area Assemblies and Regional Forums for the last few years.

In the early 1940s, as our book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was becoming known, Bertrand Russell was writing his own book, *The Value of Free*

Thought: How to Become a Truth-Seeker and Break the Chains of Mental Slavery. In many ways, this title describes the process of recovery from addiction. We had to admit the truth and break the chains of (emotional and mental) slavery from alcohol. In a way, the AA movement was a free thought movement that broke free from the constraints of the Oxford Group.

In his book, Russell describes the process of vigilance, seeking and open-mindedness which is the spirit of AA's self-evaluation and willingness to do better. Russell talks about the discipline needed to be free. We don't bow to popular opinion; we don't cave to our impulses—neither of these reactions would be freedom. Rather, we obey the evidence.



“The freedom that the freethinker seeks is not the absolute freedom of anarchy; it is freedom within the intellectual law. He will not bow to the authority of others, and he will not bow to his own desires, but he will submit to evidence. Prove to him that he is mistaken and he will change...”

So I hope this is the start of discussion about a changing landscape, upcoming challenges for Alcoholics Anonymous and whom we might seek out to help us along the way. As we’ve discussed in previous Rebellion Dogs blogs and radio shows, the cultural landscape outside our doors is ever-widening and a trip from meeting to meeting will tell us what our data shows—our message isn’t resonating with everyone—racial minorities, non-theists & youth for example. The General Service Conference is looking to the fellowship for input and it’s not like any of us are short of opinions. Now’s the time for both talk and action.

Maybe you see a greater problem than our issues around diversity, engagement and change. Please speak up. We’re all in this together. Let’s keep the conversation going and look to small things we can all do to make a difference from the doors of our home group all the way down to the General Service Office.

ⁱ Viewed February 12, 2016 http://www.aa.org/press-releases/en_US/press-releases/class-a-trustee-terrance-m-bedient-named-new-chairperson-of-the-general-service-board

ⁱⁱ Alcoholics Anonymous, A.A. *General Service Conference Inventory: Compendium 2013 – 2015*, New York: AA World Services, Inc., 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/hr/>

^{iv} <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/es/node/2525>

^v http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-24_anewcomerask.pdf