

## 1. Greetings

2. I will go quickly through the slide presentation for the Tradition starting with a summary of Bill's essay (from the 12 & 12.) Don't worry... if I go too fast, it will be available on my website at [www.onwhatslenderthreads.com](http://www.onwhatslenderthreads.com). My objective will be to hit the highpoints, so that we have plenty of time for discussion.
3. Discussions and questions. Everyone is invited to share anything that they have learned about that Tradition. I get so much knowledge from participants!

# Disclaimers about this workshop

*On What Slender Threads: A.A.'s Twelve Traditions from a Historical Perspective.*  
No need to purchase the book.

Audios and slides are posted on [www.onwhatslenderthreads.com](http://www.onwhatslenderthreads.com) under  
“Workshop Resources”

Made possible by General Service Office literature, published research of historians, and wonderful friends in A.A. world-wide.

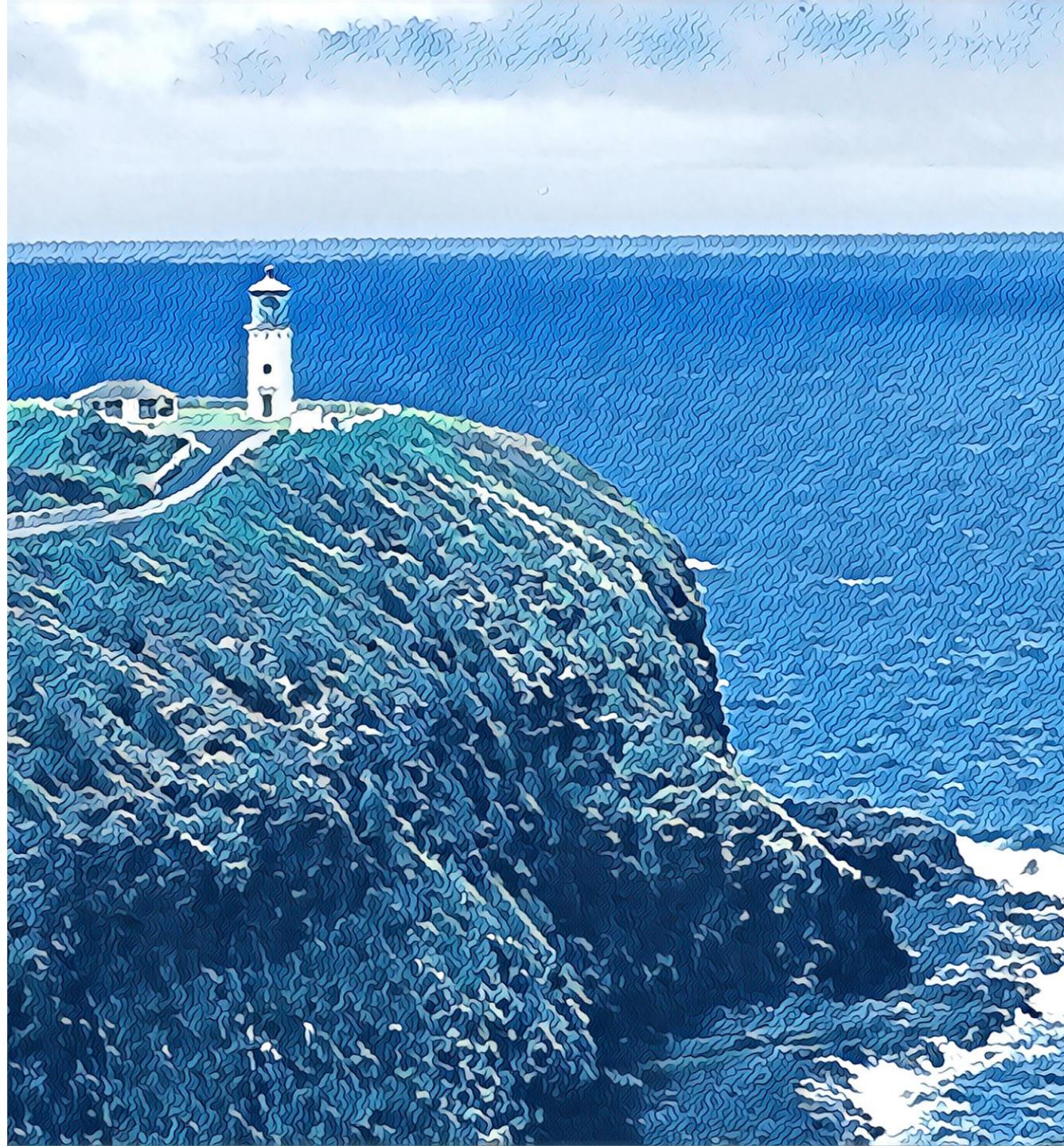
Any inferences in this study are strictly my own and in no way reflect the opinion of Alcoholics Anonymous

In keeping with the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions, I try to avoid using the last names of any alcoholics including Bill W. and Dr. Bob.

## Concept I and Concept IX

**The final responsibility and the ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.** *A.A. Service Manual, p. C-3*

**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.**  
*The A.A. Service Manual, p. C-27*



**Tradition 1** *Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.*

***the structure of our Society was hammered out – so that A.A.s can live and work together as groups***

That structure is the **General Service Structure** that relies on a **General Service Conference** of representatives from A.A. groups to solve problems and shape policy for A.A. world-wide.

**The Traditions were Bill's pathway to creating the General Service Conference.**

So at the very least, I believe that Bill wrote the Twelve Points to facilitate selling the idea of the Conference to the groups.

The Fellowship had to have been reassured that those points were the guidelines that the Conference would have to follow.

The standards set for the Conference seemed reasonable for individual groups.

So now, its time to explore decision-making by the group (whether the group is the Conference, Intergroups, individual groups)

## Tradition 2

*For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.*

**The Original Point (Long Form):** Our A.A. experience has taught us that:

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience

*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions., 132 - 138*

## Tradition 2 – Bill’s Essay pp. 132 - 138

Where does A.A. get its direction? Who runs it?

When told that our **Society** has **no president** having authority to govern it, **no treasurer** who can compel the payment of dues, **no board of directors**

**no A.A. can give another a directive and enforce obedience,**

**our friends gasp and exclaim, “This simply can’t be.”**

These practical folk then read Tradition Two, and learn that the **sole authority in A.A. is a loving God as He may express Himself in the group conscience.**

The friends mutter that **this looks vague, nebulous, pretty naïve to them.**

**Then they commence to watch us with speculative eyes . . .**

## Tradition 2 – Bill’s Essay pp. 132 - 138

John Doe, a good A.A., moves—let us say—to Middletown, U.S.A.

With the result that **Middletown now has a group**, and **he is the founder**.

Being the founder, **he is the boss**.

At this moment, **the benign dictator** becomes the chairman of a committee composed of his friends.

Perhaps it would be a good idea if **we continue to keep a firm hand** on A.A. in this town.

**Growing pains - “Do these oldtimers think they can run this group forever? Let’s have an election!”** The revolution is on. **The group conscience** is about to take over.

## Tradition 2 – Bill’s Essay pp. 132 – 138

The group now has a so-called **rotating committee**, very sharply limited in its authority.

Headed by the **chairman**,

**public relations**

**Treasurer ...takes money...pays ...bills, and makes a regular report  
secretary**

**Literature phone-answering service... mail, ...sends out notices**

Such are the **simple services that enable the group to function**.

**The committee gives no spiritual advice, judges no one’s conduct, issues no orders.**

Thus throughout A.A. does the **group conscience decree the terms upon which its leaders will serve**.

## Tradition 2 – Bill’s Essay pp. 132 - 138

**The elder statesman** is the one who sees **the wisdom of the group's decision**, who holds no resentment over his reduced status, **whose judgment, fortified by considerable experience, is sound**, and who is willing to sit quietly on the sidelines **patiently awaiting developments**.

**The bleeding deacon** is one who is just as surely **convinced that the group cannot get along without him**, who constantly **connives for reelection** to office, and who continues to be **consumed with self-pity**.

**[The elder statesmen] become the real and permanent leadership of A.A.**  
Theirs is the quiet opinion, the sure knowledge and humble example that resolve a crisis.

**They do not drive by mandate. They lead by example.**

## Tradition 2 – Bill’s Essay pp. 132 – 138

There were a **few twinges of conscience** until I saw how really ethical Charlie’s proposal was. I had a seeming **flash of divine guidance**. ... a voice kept saying to me, ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire.’

Don’t you realize... **that you can never become a professional? As generous as Charlie had been to us, don’t you see that we can’t tie this thing up with his hospital or any other?**

Sure, it’s ethical, but **what we’ve got won’t run on ethics only; it has to be better.**

**Sometimes the good is the enemy of the best**

So spoke the **group conscience**. - **Here was the true voice, welling up out of my friends.**



Who's in charge  
around here?



For our group  
purpose

*For our group purpose* ensures  
A.A.'s unity and protects the  
common welfare of its members

Every Tradition is *for our group  
purpose*

The word *group* is the Fellowship  
of A.A.

But if inclusivity was Bill's intent  
...

## A loving God? Why not a loving Higher Power?

Bill's "hot flash" or "white light" experience

Hank P. and Jim B. tried to moderate Bill's zeal for Biblical references.

According to Jim B., "...disaster nearly overtook us, for it threw Bill into a terrific mental uproar to have his baby pulled apart by an outside screwball psychiatrist, who in his opinion knew nothing about alcoholism." (Schaberg, 563)

The undesirable prospect of a **group conscience** forced Bill to relent 17 days before the prepublication manuscript went to press.

He frantically started replacing the mandate-oriented text with prose that was more suggestive and he counter-balanced some of his Christian-based language with allowances for other spiritual pathways.

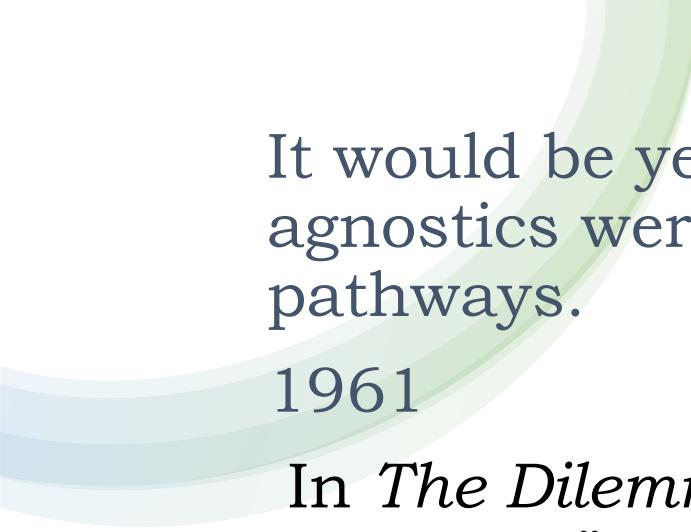
Some but not all.

## 1953 - *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

Second Step: “Relieved of the alcohol obsession, their lives unaccountably transformed, they came to believe in a Higher Power, and *most of them began to talk of God* (emphasis added).” (12 & 12, 28)

Twelfth Step: the “doubter . . . who still considered his well-loved A.A. group the higher power, *would presently love God and call Him by name* (emphasis added).” (12 & 12, 109)

The Second Tradition invoked the ultimate authority as a loving God rather the more generic loving *Higher Power*.



It would be years before Bill would concede that atheists and agnostics were staying sober through their own spiritual pathways.

1961

In *The Dilemma of No Faith*, he wrote about the “unconscious arrogance”

1965

“We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In A.A. we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering.

Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views.”

(*The "God" Word: Agnostic and Atheist Members in A.A.*, Introduction.)

Ironically, Bill was frustrated by the Fellowship's enshrinement of the Big Book, which was the primary reason he wrote the 1953 *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

He desperately wanted to write more about the Steps, but he could not overcome the members' objections to making even the smallest edits to the Big Book.

Eight years later

“As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen—a tendency for conversion into something like dogma.” (Schaberg, 604)

## When we speak of God we mean your own conception of God

“When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book. Do not let any prejudice you may have against spiritual terms deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 47)

“He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. . . . With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 567)

**The Group Conscience ought to be  
a  
*Group Spiritual Experience***

## How It Does Not Work

Practicing the First Tradition's principles of unity and common welfare, all members of the group should take a moment to acknowledge the authority that is derived from their *combined spiritual understanding as they begin the group conscience*.

This works very well if no one is trying to dominate the discussion.

What is a group's best defense from those who would be leaders rather than trusted servants?

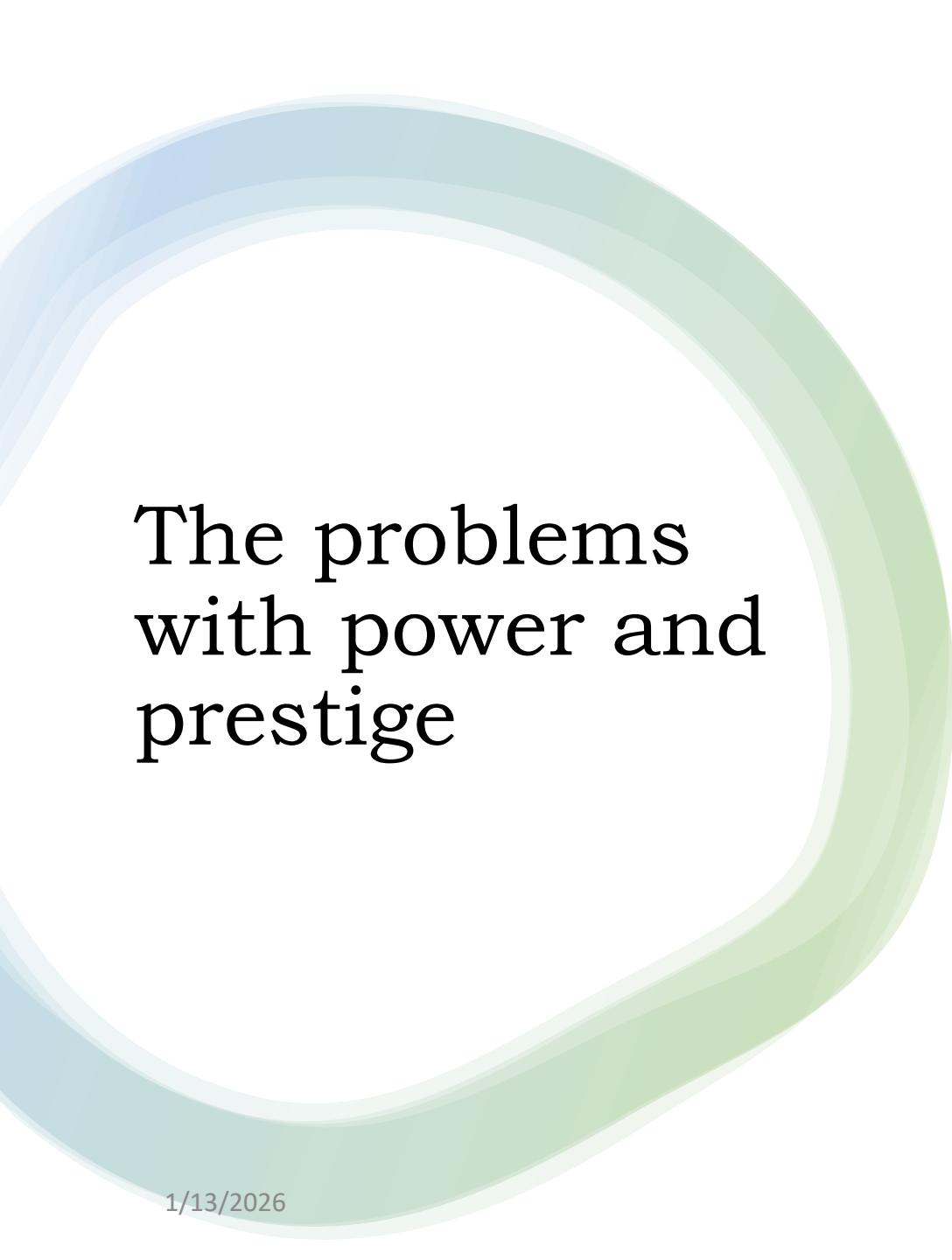
## Alcoholics' problems with authorities and rules

Bill wisely avoided 'laws,' 'rules,' 'by-laws,' or 'regulations,' knowing the Fellowship would reject any code that reflected a heavy authoritarian hand. Thus, he chose *Traditions*. ('Pass It On', 306)

However, as much as alcoholics abhor authoritarians, no one loves being an 'authority' more than alcoholics.

*Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.* (12&12, 132)

The intoxicating allure of "leader" tempted many in the Fellowship.



# The problems with power and prestige

Bill was clearly A.A.'s founder

Co-founder implies co-leader

The B.W. Movement

Akron was where Bill met Dr. Bob and where the third alcoholic got sober

Henrietta Seiberling and Clarence S.

Co-founders who drank: Ebby T. and Hank P.

Dr. Bob never tried to jockey for recognition

## Shedding the leadership mantle

A “hundred men and women”

Purposefully amplified early members’ role in writing the basic text and diminished his leadership role to one of being a trusted servant. (Schaberg, 1 – 3)

In an indirect way, one hundred men and women writing the Big Book was a vehicle for encouraging groups to rely on group consciences, rather than individuals, for their decisions.

Bill wanted the leadership to belong to the Fellowship – not to an individual or individuals – and this rested on the effectiveness of the group conscience.

## Decision-makers: the earliest group consciences

Bill could have been a paid lay-therapist at Towns Hospital.  
It was a trial-by-fire moment for the group conscience.

Wasn't selling the Big Book professionalizing Twelfth Step work?

“... selective, using only those experiences that went to the heart of A.A. problems. Since his desire was always the best interest of A.A., his so-called manipulations always worked for the good of the Fellowship.” (‘Pass It On’, 322)

His own maneuverings notwithstanding, Bill kept his eye on the prize -- A.A.'s common welfare and unity were possible only by reliance on the group rather than reliance on an individual, especially himself.

However, Bill demonstrated an inordinate faith in his own judgement when he said,

“My personal life may not be exemplary, but I have never made a mistake about A.A.” (*Pass It On*, 322)

In fact, he did occasionally make mistakes. At heart, he must have known this given his desire to take decision-making out of his hands or of the hands of a few and into the hands of the groups.

Bill's dream was for *all A.A. groups* to have an A.A. group conscience

Bill was promoting his dream for A.A to have a structure of elected trusted servants who would steer A.A.'s course. ('Pass It On,' 324)

The conundrum was that these overly reliant groups were, at the same time, resistant to the suggestions given by the Foundation and Headquarters;

Given groups had no say in crafting those suggestions, Bill feared groups would lose interest and become disenfranchised from the Trustees, Headquarters, and A.A.

Nonetheless, early members and Trustees were unimpressed.

## The first conference that almost wasn't

Why should groups in other states care about decisions made by an unknown and remote group of non-alcoholic Trustees in New York?  
Still, the Trustees resisted.

“When I was in law school, the largest book I studied was the one on Trusts. I must say, gentlemen, that it was mostly a long and melancholy account of the malfeasances and misfeasances (sic) of boards of trustees.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 211)

Clearly, this was a solid demonstration of an immature alcoholic not getting his way.

“I had written this to a group of the best friends I had in the world, people who had devoted themselves to A.A. and to me without stint. Obviously, I was on a dry bender of the worst possible sort.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 211)

Trustees Leonard Harrison and Bernard Smith

April 1951, the first General Service Conference met in New York City.

The theme: *Not to Govern, but to Serve.*

About a third of the delegates were real old-timers, and the rest were active members sober four to eight years.

We all sensed that something momentous was happening; that this was a historic moment. ". . . The delegates inspected A.A.'s finances and listened to reports from the board of trustees and from all of the services. There was warm but cordial debate on many questions of A.A. policy. ('Pass It On', 349)

Thus, began transparency in A.A. affairs. Bill continued:

The trustees submitted several of their own serious problems for the opinion of the Conference. With real dispatch the delegates handled several tough puzzlers about which we at headquarters were in doubt.

Though their advice was sometimes contrary to our own views, we saw they were frequently right. (*'Pass It On'*, 349)

The first Delegates laid the groundwork for an informed group conscience; one that included background research and allowed all views including the minority opinion. Bill concluded:

They were proving as never before that A.A.'s Tradition Two was correct. Our group conscience could safely act as the sole authority and sure guide for Alcoholics Anonymous. As the delegates returned home, they carried this deep conviction with them. (*'Pass It On'*, 349)

For our group purpose, the General Service Conference is  
A.A.'s group conscience

So began a seismic shift in how A.A. shaped policy through the  
five-year test run of its annual General Service Conference.

In keeping with the Second Tradition, Delegates are not leaders,  
but trusted servants of their respective Areas' A.A. groups.

Furthermore, the Conference continues to rely on a loving  
Higher Power as expressed by the Delegates' group conscience.

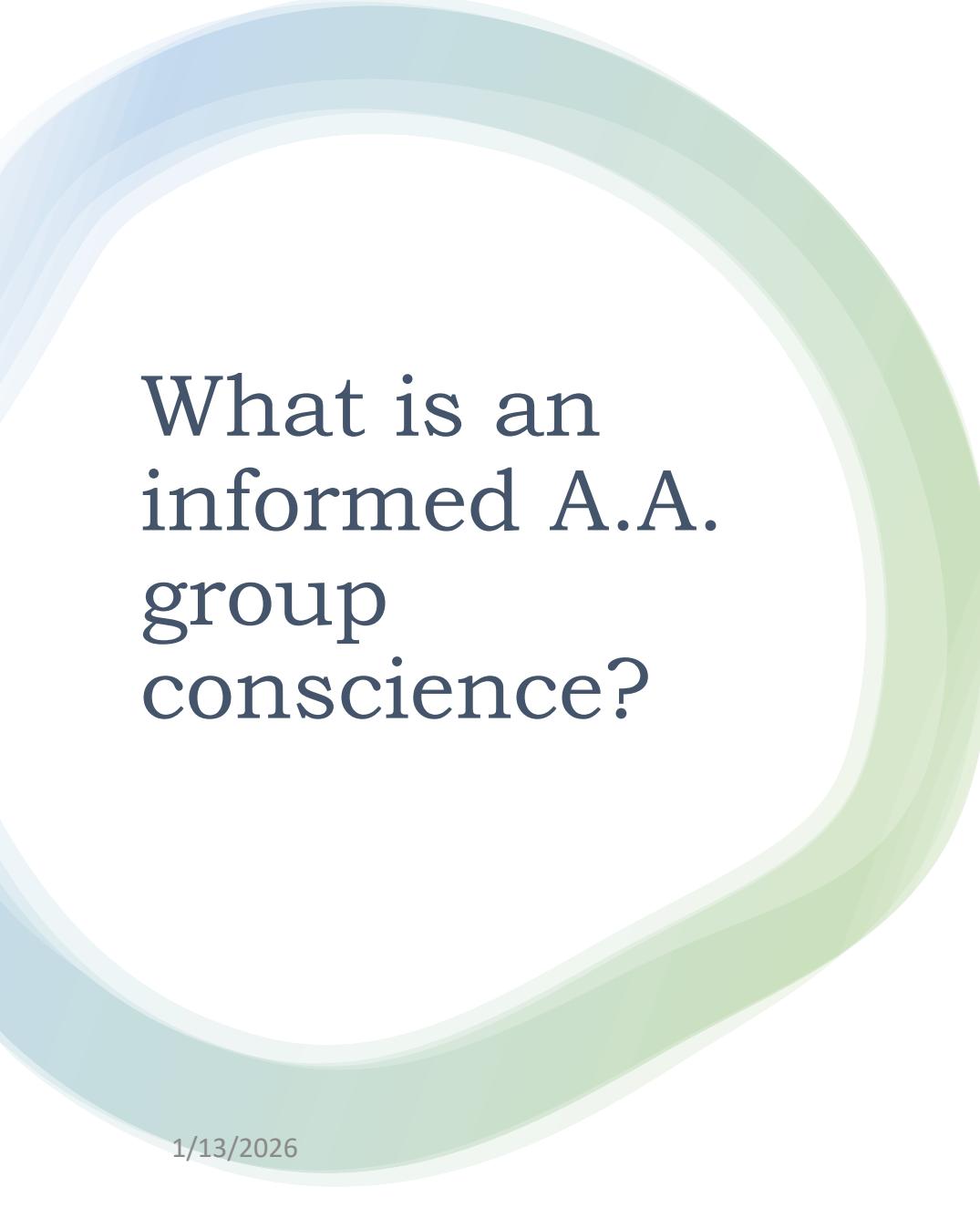
In short, the Conference is A.A. groups' group conscience for  
the United States and Canada.

## **The Conference recommends solutions to the “frozen” texts**

Pamphlets and literature that address evolving issues in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender differences, spiritual variances, age (whether younger or older), problems other than alcohol, and many others.

The timeliness and effectiveness of every pamphlet depends upon A.A. members' careful use and study.

Contact your General Service Representative!



# What is an informed A.A. group conscience?

What is a group's best defense from those who would be leaders rather than trusted servants?

Sharing of full information, individual points of view, and the practice of A.A. principles

Collective conscience of the group

Willingness to listen to minority opinions with open minds

To work slowly until a collective view emerges

Be wary of dominant opinions

Spiritual expression of the group

*(The A.A. Group, 28 - 29)*

## Coming up: The Third Tradition

The *AA Group* pamphlet provides the information needed to join an A.A. group:

“The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking” (Tradition Three). Thus, group membership requires no formal application. Just as we are members of A.A. if we say we are, so are we members of a group if we say we are.” (*A.A. Group*, 13)

We will learn in Tradition Three that the road to that very simple requirement was long and rocky.

Comments and questions?

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