

July 23, 1946

A Statement by Leonard V. Harrison on Future  
Organization and Responsibility of the Board of  
Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation

This statement is in the nature of a response to Bill Wilson's communication of July 10, 1946, to the Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation.

I am in entire accord with Bill's ultimate aims. I cherish the spirit and tradition of the A.A. movement and desire to aid in the preservation of its integrity and effectiveness. Yet, I find that I completely disagree with the proposals which Bill makes regarding organizational structure and function, which are the proximate ends and means for reaching our ultimate objective. What he thinks would work better than do our present arrangements, I think would not work at all.

Quite aside from my interest in possible research of educational activities which might be regarded as collateral or supplementary to the A.A. movement and within the scope of our Charter, I believe that integration of the trustee function with the Group operating and periodical publishing function would deprive the Foundation of its present opportunity of exercising a sort of remote control on an advisory basis, would engulf us in every current question and passing storm, would place us in situations where we are not truly qualified to act, and would ultimately destroy such usefulness as we are now able to bring to A.A.

It is a little difficult to reply to some of Bill's points without appearing to be negatively captious and critical, which appearance would not reflect the real spirit of my comments.

Yet, in the interest of brevity I shall set down certain observations and comments without elaboration, and summarize my views at the end.

"Some of us think the Alcoholic Foundation ought to be at the exact center of the A.A. movement, serving A.A. only."

Comment: We are not qualified. to be at the exact center of the A.A. movement.

"And so, of course, fully committed to the policies and Traditions of the A.A. Groups."

Comment: We are fully committed to the policies and traditions which the Groups develop but we do not determine Group policies or traditions.

"... our A.A. Headquarters... should be informally democratic in feeling and. democratic in structure;"

Comment: This would involve the Board of Trustees in all of the problems, "politics", and pressures, arising among the groups.

"... both the Central Office and Grapevine were each going concerns, and completely committed to A.A. for a considerable period before they ever became linked to the Alcoholic Foundation."

Comment: Exactly. And they should continue as going concerns, exclusively responsible for matters directly affecting the Group movement.

“If, for example, the Foundation began to endorse or finance other projects, if it began to accept large gifts with which to actively enter other fields, the Croups would almost surely hold the Trustees to be departing from well established Tradition. If the Trustees persisted, the Groups would, after a time, no doubt short circuit the Foundation, and send their funds direct to their Central Office. It

Comment: They do so now in reality. We merely put the money in the bank in a segregated account and disburse it for expenses of the Central Office.

“If Smith and I were then both gone, they would probably ask the Grapevine Editor and the General A.A. Secretary to suggest names for a new Foundation Board. Or they might convoke a convention of A.A. leaders for that purpose. Let us never say these things couldn't happen.”

Comment: These are the things that will happen, if we become a Board of Directors of the A.A. Group Movement and the Grapevine Publication.

“Group experience is often turbulent..., Our nonalcoholic Trustees can have no possible conception of the terrific emotional storms that sometimes sweep the Groups.”

Comment: We are now outside the path of these storms. If we assume the responsibilities proposed, we would be right in the direct path of every storm and I venture the prediction that a Democratic Board, responsible to 900 Groups, would undergo reorganization after reorganization.

“Here at Headquarters we cannot afford to make even one grave policy blunder. A single major mistake could touch off such an emotional chain explosion among the groups that it might make the Alcoholic Foundation look like Hiroshima, the day after.”

Comment: That is exactly what would happen, in my opinion, in the event that we enter the arena to participate in all of the future group struggles and difficulties.

“That... is the underlying reason why we have insisted on so many non-alcoholics at the Foundation. We shall always need them to counsel with us. Sometimes they will have to protect us from ourselves.”

Comment: Yet we cannot offer the protective service unless we are removed to an off-center position.

“So, on behalf of the A.A. Groups, I am ardently hoping the Foundation will soon "join A.A."; that irrevocably commit itself to our A.A policy tradition; thus truly qualifying its Trustees to be the chief custodians of these, our very cherished possessions.”

Comment: We can be custodians, as a sort of appellate body, but not as an Executive Authority responsive to 900 Groups.

"Yet I cannot believe that such a structure could possibly meet our need for the future. I believe that it would prove gravely defective; that it would always tend to drift away from vital A.A. Tradition because neither the Foundation nor the

Headquarters' structure as a whole would be truly democratic."

Comment: How can non-alcoholic Trustees ever be truly democratic representatives of the membership of A.A. Groups?

"It may still be within our ability to forestall such calamities. We can now publicly commit the Alcoholic Foundation to the Alcoholics Anonymous movement."

Comment: To do so would deprive the Foundation of its separate identity and cause the loss of some advantages.

"It cannot be denied that the Alcoholic Foundation of today is quite undemocratic, and not enough responsible to the A.A. movement which supports it and depends upon it.\*"

Comment: Is it correct to say that the Alcoholic Foundation is being supported? We are in a true sense Trustees. All moneys derived from alcoholics, directly or indirectly, are expended for the A.A. movement or held in trust for such expenditures without a single penny's deduction.

"Therefore, the observations of this letter are not upon persons but rather upon possible latent and grave defects..."

Comment: Is it reasonable to prejudge the future adversely, by assuming that latent defects may become potent evils?

"Make the Grapevine Editor and the A.A. General Secretary voting members of the General Policy Committee. Invite the Assistant General Secretary to Policy Committee

meetings to record its minutes and to train her in policy matters.”

Comment: We should distinguish between general policy as applicable to the A.A. Groups, and policy governing the actions of the Trustees of the Foundation.

“Such simple arrangements, if they became traditional, could furnish a permanent soil in which the spirit of democracy and partnership might best survive and grow.”

Comment: Presumably, the suggestions relate to giving the Secretary and Editor status. In my opinion, their status derives from the A.A. movement, which is superior to anything the Trustees can give.

"There is a further reason for attempting democratic informality."

Comment: I see no need to employ “democratic informality” in signing leases for office space, setting salary schedules, authorizing audits, controlling funds, making contracts, and so on.

"Of course the Trustees must see to it that these two people (General Secretary and Grapevine Editor) never stray off on serious tangents. Yet it is bound to be true, in the long run, that the Trustees will not be able to treat them as subordinates or employees."

Comment: There appears to be a degree of sensitivity embedded in the statement about the employer-employee relationship which must be straightened out. The Trustees have not elevated themselves to a position of superiority. I

think that all of us very genuinely feel a sense of humility in comparing our simple and lusterless role to the “broad leadership” exercised by the principals at the Headquarters and Grapevine offices. Nevertheless, our trusteeship imposes a clear-cut responsibility and we must exercise specific authority commensurate with our responsibility in order to perform specific duties.

It happens that our authority lies in a relatively unimportant zone and that the General Secretary, for example, exercises her discretion and authority in an important zone when she deals with individuals and *groups* of alcoholics. There is no issue of subordination or superiority, no question of being trusted or distrusted, that I can discover.

The Board of Trustees of Columbia University and the Board of Overseers of Harvard (it is the same with many others) appoint the President and heads of faculties, fix salary scales, authorize contracts for the construction of buildings and manage the Universities’ fiscal affairs. The exercise of those functions does not derogate from the scholastic and executive status of the Deans of the Medical and Law Schools. They have a standing in their respective worlds far above that of the Trustees and Overseers who have an authoritative relation to phases of their worlds. The University Council at Columbia, for example, is composed of Deans and Professors - employees and subordinates if you wish to so label them. But as to the primary matters of the University’s educational affairs, they are not subordinates in the ordinary meaning of that term. So it is with the General Secretary, the Grapevine Editor, and with the Trustees, whose anonymity can scarcely

be matched by any of the A.A. leaders of the smallest Groups in the land.

I quite realize that one can work behind the scenes in splendid anonymity and yet exercise formidable power. We have not wielded power. We have entered into the sphere of administrative matters only when urged to do so. Who knows what future members of the Board will do? Let us hope that they will be flexible enough to do their work consistently with their trust. Let us not try now to forge any organizational bonds to guarantee that they will act in the future as we now would wish them to act.

In summary I would say that Bill is hoping for too much when he envisages the Foundations as a protecting, stabilizing authority standing Gibraltarlike, yet directly involved in guiding A. A. Group affairs. Organized as we are at present and responsible as trustee-custodians of funds and not responsive to the democratic processes of the Groups, we find that we can, indeed, serve as a stabilizing force. If we were established as a tripartite head of the A.A. movement we would be pitched into the arena of controversy and would become the shining target of any group disagreeing with our governance. We non-alcoholics would be immediately disqualified by the easy retort, "Who are they to represent us anyway."

The trustees may become a target in any case, but at least we are not thrusting ourselves forward into a vulnerable position where we would be expected to "enforce" the spirit, tradition and purity of the early A.A. movement. Structure and

organization cannot do that. Nor do I believe that a small group of individual trustees can do it.

The more humble role which I have in mind for the trustees does not, I think you will agree, foreshadow any inclination for us to enlarge the orbit of our power.

It is my solid conviction that Bill's plan of organization would lead to the very confusion and disintegration against which he seeks to safeguard the A.A. movement. My personal preference against which he seeks to safeguard the A.A. movement. My personal preference is to see Bill put his thought on creating the safeguards democratically arrived at, perhaps the organization of a General Council, within the A.A. Group movement itself, and to let us serve the CAUSE by standing to one side and looking after the chores of the sort which have heretofore occupied -us.

Bill has looked to the weaker bulwark as a Preserver of the Faith.