

The Conference Agenda Item Process

With a Focus on Conference Agenda Items Pertaining to Literature

Background

When and how did the General Service Conference begin?

A.A. service structure began in 1937 when the New York and Akron groups gave authority to Bill W. and Dr. Bob to create services to spread the A.A. message worldwide. Bill and Bob knew they couldn't do it alone, so they recruited trusted servants to assist them. They established the Alcoholic Foundation in 1938 in New York City as the headquarters.

It became clear that the trustees of the Foundation alone should not hold ultimate authority for A.A. services. Bill and Bob were acting in an advisory capacity. They felt authority needed to belong to A.A. groups. Then, Dr. Bob became ill in 1948, and there was the question of what would happen after Bill and Bob died. The trustees of the General Service Board relied on them for advice. They were the link between the trustees and the groups. It was out of the need for the groups to delegate service authority and responsibility that the General Service Conference and charter was born.

Concept 2 states: *"Therefore the General Service Conference of A.A. – plus any later formed sections – has become for nearly every practical purpose the active voice and the effective consciousness of our whole Society in its world affairs."*

The first General Service Conference was held in April 1951 in New York City. There were 35 delegates on the first panel. The trustees decided to try this out for a five-year probationary period. A charter was drafted. The Alcoholic Foundation was renamed the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1954. The permanent Conference charter was confirmed at St. Louis at the second International Convention in 1955. It was at the final meeting on July 3 that Bill handed over leadership of A.A. to the General Service Conference and gave A.A. responsibility over its own affairs.

Before I explain where agenda items come from and what happens to them after they're submitted, I'd like to give you an idea of the timeframe, since now, in

January, we're already at the beginning stages of it. Those of you who participated in the process last year will recall that we'll be on a very tight deadline between now and the April assembly, when we'll be delivering our committee's group conscience on items pertaining to Literature at this meeting. That's because GSO's policy is to allow individuals and groups as much time as possible to submit items, which limits our time for review and discussion of those items that are selected for the agenda.

Mid December: Deadline for submission of Conference agenda items for the following Conference.

Late January: The Preliminary Conference agenda items are released. Our delegate receives the items and then shares them with district chairs and area standing committee chairs. Our area Literature Committee chairs shares them with district Literature Committee chairs.

Mid-February: The final Conference agenda items are released to our delegate, who provides them, along with the background material district chairs and area standing committee chairs. Our Area Literature Committee chair shares that information with district Literature Committee chairs.

- 1) Each district Literature Committee has the responsibility of thoroughly reviewing each item on the Literature agenda, as well as the all the background material provided on each item.
- 2) District Literature Committees additionally can review past advisory actions and prior conference reports on items pertaining to Literature.
- 3) District Literature Committees determine a group conscience on each item as well as comments and/or questions.

March: District Literature Committees may be asked by their district chairs to present their findings to the district body, specifically with GSRs, to assist them in sharing the information with their home groups. (Keep in mind that other district standing committee chairs – those who work in Corrections, Treatment, Public Information, etc. – are responsible for doing the same thing with the agenda items for their committees.) The idea is not to get a group conscience of the district, only to share the information.

Early April: Attend the Area General Service Assembly and be prepared to bring your committee's group conscience on each item to the Literature Committee meeting. The area Literature Committee chair will report the overall group conscience of the area Literature to our delegate and to the Area body following the Sunday morning business meeting.

Mid to late April: Our delegate attends the General Service Conference and reports on the group conscience of the area Literature Committee along with the group conscience of other standing committees.

June-September: Our delegate reports to the districts on the outcome of the Conference.

September: The final Conference Report is printed.

October: The delegate makes printed copies of the Conference Report available to district chairs.

So where do the agenda items come from that are presented at the Conference? As explained on Page S57 of the Service Manual, items can come from any number of places. They may be suggestions of individual A.A. members. They could also come from groups, delegates, trustees, area assemblies or committee members, as well as directors and staff of A.A.W.S. and the Grapevine.

There are many paths that an item can take to arrive on the Conference Agenda. A G.S.R. can submit an idea for the group at their District or Area meeting. The District or Area could then forward it to GSO. The person at GSO responsible for receiving the item serves as the Conference coordinator. Because not all A.A. groups may have a G.S.R., individual members can also submit their idea directly to the Conference coordinator.

No matter the path taken, the item is studied by A.A. staff using past Conference action items. Staff members can send it to one of two places: the trustees' Conference Committee; or the appropriate Conference Committee. The trustees' committee will determine if there needs to be a workshop or presentation given on the subject or if presentation should come in the form of a proposal or committee concern.

Because A.A. Literature is close to the heart of nearly all members of the Fellowship, it's among a couple of categories that attract the most requests for agenda items. In 2018, the 68th General Service Conference agenda contained 19 items pertaining to Literature. Last year, the 69th General Service Conference agenda contained 16 items. We don't know yet how many items we'll be reviewing this year, but you can count on a similar number to what we've seen in recent years.

Can anyone remember or give an example of an Agenda item from last year and what the outcome was?

- 1) Item C, which originated from requests from three separate areas – Area 20 Northern Illinois; Area 46 New Mexico; and Area 03 Arizona – to develop a 5th edition of the Big Book: Failed
- 2) Item F, which originated from a request from the Literature Coordinator for Area 87 South-West Quebec to consider the development of a Literature Committee Workbook: passed.

So, what happens if an item is assigned to a standing committee by the Conference coordinator? First, let's define the Standing Committee.

At its first meeting in 1951, the Conference established committees, and new ones have been added when necessary. Currently, these committees are: Agenda, Cooperation with the Professional Community, Corrections, Finance, Grapevine, Literature, Policy and Admissions, Public Information, Report and Charter, Treatment and Accessibilities, and Trustees. Two additional committees have been formed to consider matters of importance that do not require the length of time devoted to standing committee agenda items: International Conventions/Regional Forums and Archives.

A delegate serves on each committee. There are currently 93 delegates. There are approximately 10 delegates per standing committee. They serve on the committee for their full two-year term. An A.A. staff member serves as a nonvoting secretary on the committee. A chair and alternate chair are elected within and by their committee members.

Because those of us here today are primarily focused on Literature, I wanted to take a moment to explain the function of the Conference Committee on Literature. Its primary concern is with recovery literature as opposed to service literature. The Literature Committee reviews new literature and audiovisual needs, existing pamphlets and new pamphlet drafts, and recommends special action to the trustees' Literature Committee. Over the years, the Literature Committee has played a vital role in the development of A.A. pamphlets and books and also has served as a caution if it feels A.A.'s literature is expanding too rapidly.

Now, they are assigned an item by the Conference coordinator. The committee members will be emailed background materials for their review of the item. Background materials may include letters from A.A. members, past advisory actions or recommendations. The Conference committee works closely with the corresponding delegate committee throughout the year. They will discuss the item(s) in their committee before bringing it to the Conference for discussion.

Last year, background material on the 16 items pertaining to Literature amounted to 140 pages.

When is the Conference and what happens there?

The annual Conference usually happens every April in New York. Delegates from the 93 areas gather at this week-long meeting. They attend sessions that include committee meetings, presentations, workshops and trustee elections.

The standing committees also meet twice at the annual Conference meeting where they discuss and review everything on their agenda. They deliberate and reach a conclusion or group conscience for the committee. The outcome can be any number of things. They can choose to make no recommendation, make a suggestion or defer an item to the next year's Conference. The committee also can decide to seek further information or input from the fellowship or trustees before reaching a decision for the following Conference.

The committee then prepares a report to present to the full Conference body. The Conference culminates in a final business meeting where the agenda items are discussed and voted on to possibly become an advisory action. As stated in the Service Manual on page S58, "In order to become an advisory action item, a

recommendation must be approved by “substantial unanimity – defined as a two-thirds majority.” Once an agenda item is passed and it becomes an advisory action item.

What is a Conference advisory action?

These are actions that represent the recommendations of the Conference Committees or floor actions that have been approved by the Conference body. There must be substantial unanimity reached by the body. There can be any number and type of actions including:

- Approval of new Conference approved literature
- Approval of changes to existing literature such as new editions of the Big Book
- Recommendations on the development of new literature, films and other media

A complete list of Conference Advisory actions is available from G.S.O.

Does anyone recall the Advisory Actions pertaining to Literature that came out of the most recent Conference?

It was recommended that:

- The pamphlet “Questions and Answers on Sponsorship be revised to add text regarding anonymity
- That the trustees’ Literature Committee update the pamphlet “The Twelve Steps Illustrated” and bring aback a progress report or draft pamphlet to the 2020 Genera Service Conference
- That the trustees’ Literature Committee update the pamphlet The Twelve Concepts Illustrated” and bring back a progress report or draft pamphlet to the 2020 General Service Conference

What happens after an item becomes and advisory action?

The Conference advisory action moves on to the General Service Board, which must approve the action. Following Board approval, the advisory action is returned to the corresponding trustees’ committee for implementation or development as needed. The results of all agenda Items presented at the annual Conference are published in the Final Conference Report.

The Final Report lists the following items:

- **Advisory actions:** Represents recommendations made by standing committees and approved by the Conference body and/or recommendations discussed and voted on by all Conference members during general sessions.
- **Committee considerations:** Items discussed but no action is taken and/or no recommendation made, as well as committee recommendations which are not adopted but included in a separate section of the Final Report, listed by committee.
- **Trustees' committee and staff reports:** Summary of projects resulting from prior advisory action items and committee considerations; and additional items reviewed, discussed and forwarded to the next year's panel committee.

Conference Agenda Item Evolution and Process

EVOLUTION OF A CONFERENCE ADVISORY ACTION	
<p>1 An idea suggestion, question, concern or subject comes from A.A. members, G.S.R.s, D.C.M.s, Area Committee members, Delegates, Trustees or G.S.O./GV Staff, and may be shared or discussed at the group, district and Area Assembly and sent to the</p>	<p>Conference Coordinator G.S.O.</p>
<p>2 The idea is reviewed by the G.S.O./GV Staff and forwarded to</p>	<p>Appropriate Trustees' Committee</p>
<p>3 which then may refer the matter to the</p>	<p>Appropriate Conference Committee</p>
<p>4 which meets during the General Service Conference week and makes recommendations that are presented in the Committee Report to the</p>	<p>General Service Conference</p>
<p>5 if a Conference Committee recommendation is approved, after full floor discussion, it becomes a Conference Advisory Action, which becomes binding when approved by the</p> <p><i>"Were it not for Committees it is doubtful that any Conference could get over a fraction of the ground it now covers. As the Conference has grown in size and influence the Committees' importance has grown even more". . . from the A.A. Service Manual</i></p>	<p>General Service Board</p>

From "Preserving Our Fellowship — Our Challenge: The 46th Annual Meeting of the General Service Conference", 1996, Final Report , p. 9.

DEFINITIONS:

Review: Discuss item and record any suggestions the committee may have.

Consider: Review and discuss. Is the committee in favor or opposed to the item?

Discuss: Discuss within the committee and be ready to share thoughts or ideas within the area committee to be shared with the delegate.

In past years, it was recommended that groups and committees pay more attention to Conference agenda items that begin with the word "Discuss." More recently, it's recommended that we become familiar with ALL agenda items, including those that call for review or consideration. It's incumbent upon us to

share an informed group conscience with our delegate prior to his or her attendance at the General Service Conference.

Additional suggested reading:

- The AA Service Manual Combined with Twelve Concepts for World Service, 2018-2020 Edition, AAWS.
- Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of AA
- Pass It On, The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World
- Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers