

Still Coming Of Age: A Trusted Servant Looks At AA

Class A (nonalcoholic) Trustee Emeritus Jim Estelle served AA's General Service Board from 1977 to 1986 and was its chair from 1993 to 1997. He worked in the corrections field in California, Montana, and Texas, and served as director of the Texas Department of Corrections in the 1970s.

When you spoke to the AA World Services Conference in 1985, you had a vision of future possibilities for the Fellowship. Tell us about that vision and where you see AA today.

You know, when AA "came of age," I think too many people assumed that we had reached full adulthood in the process. We may have reached maturity and sobriety to some degree. But the movements that have had a real impact on the progress of mankind -- which our Fellowship certainly has -- are long-lived movements. And I'm not sure that the Fellowship as a whole has reached full maturity at this point. As a Fellowship we've still got a ways to go. Twenty years ago, you said that you thought we had "a ways to go." You haven't seen the growth you hoped for?

The last twenty years have been, in some respects, disappointing. Would you elaborate?

Well, in my discipline of corrections, for instance, I think I remarked then that we had about 450,000 people locked up in prisons, and at least that many in local jails. Now we have over 650,000 locked up in our prisons, and probably more than 650,000 in our jails. Anywhere from 75 to 85 percent of those in prison and jail are either alcoholic or addicted to some other substance. That has not changed in the last twenty years. Another major problem concerns me. We've made some inroads with our neighbors across the world in introducing the Steps and Traditions to still-suffering alcoholics, especially in third world countries. But, in the last twenty years, the same kind of growth has not occurred where the Fellowship was established originally, in the US and Canada. We find ourselves standing still. Right now, alcoholism is passing us up. The disease itself is passing us up?

Yes, absolutely. That's not entirely the Fellowship's fault. But this lack of growth tells me that, somewhere along the line, we've lost the energy and enthusiasm and maturity of sobriety to carry that message more effectively than we have.

Is there reason to be concerned about the lack of growth here in the US and Canada?

Yes. If you're not matching the competition you will be swallowed up. If you think you're standing still, you're not standing still, you're going downhill because the rest of the world is coming up. Our competition is the disease of alcoholism. Maybe I'm off on a wrong tack, but I have to express this. In the last twenty years, almost two generations of sober alcoholics have come in the program who do not have the experience and skills to work effectively with a wet drunk. It ain't fun and it ain't easy. And it's not what a lot of people get sober to do. I say this because people get sober in detox centers and jump into a group. They do well, and do service well, and achieve a degree of maturity in their sobriety. But they didn't have the experience of somebody puking all over their new car and then still having to carry the person to a meeting. They didn't have the experience of somebody picking them up on the street saying, "Come on, we're going to another meeting." They were carried to a meeting sober and clean, and I think we've lost the gift of that degree of love. Because it takes a tremendous amount of love for somebody to pick up a sorry, slobbering drunk and care for him or her.

How do we regain that?

Spot some old-timers who remember and choose them as sponsors. Tell them, "I want to do some Twelfth-Step calls with you."

You think some of the old-timers are still finding wet drunks?

Yeah. I think Gary K. talked about this in a recent Grapevine issue. Sometimes he articulates the problem in frontier language, but I think he does it rather well.

What can we do differently in the area of corrections? Are there some ways we could change how we're carrying the message?

We need to do corrections work with what I refer to as the youthful exuberance and excitement about carrying the message that got us sober when talking to still-suffering alcoholics. We've watched the

advent of detox centers, particularly when they came under the financing of the insurance industry a number of years ago. That popular concept became the answer to getting sober: We lost our energy and enthusiasm and exuberance for working with a wet drunk.

Most crimes, you said, are committed by males between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven. Are you disappointed about where we've come with that?

It's probably as true today as it was when I said it twenty years ago. We are not addressing the growth of prisons and our carrying the message into those prisons.

A significantly disproportionate number of our prisoners come from black and Hispanic neighborhoods in metropolitan areas.

They certainly do. This is a reflection of the makeup of our very communities. It's being reflected just as I said. There's still a highly disproportionate number of young men of color in the prison populations today. We're not addressing our youth before they become full-blown adult alcoholics.

Since the Fellowship was founded, the growth of drug use seems to have created more dually-addicted sufferers among young people. Could you speak a little about the singleness of purpose that serves us so well and anything we might be missing with youth.

If you have other twelve-step programs in prisons addressing specific substances other than alcohol, it's fine to adhere steadfastly to our singleness of purpose. But if you're the only twelve-step program in the house, you don't leave a bleeding body lying on the side of the road because they're there because of some other substance. If you're the only twelve-step program, you let them share in our program until they get to the street. Then you take them by the hand to Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, or whatever program they need. That was my position early on, and I still hold it.

I understand that racial lines are drawn and many inmates are quite self-segregated. Does this affect us when we try to carry the message inside?

There are some places that are sanctuaries. The classroom, the chapel, and Alcoholics Anonymous are generally recognized as neutral ground. We're there to talk about alcoholism and how we

got sober. If we carry the message honestly, openly, and with a great deal of tolerance and integrity inside the institutions, we don't have to worry about that. That's been my experience and observation.

You have said AA must establish a cooperative relationship with overworked probation officers who need help.

This is an overlooked area. The probation officers in today's world, all they do is push paper. That's not what they're trained to do, and it's not what they want to do. But it's what conditions dictate they do today. They don't have time to be counselors, or sponsors. They haven't got time to give people the emotional support that so many need. This is where we can be of some assistance.

In the 1985 speech, you said AA needs to test its collective maturity by examining attitudes about referrals from treatment centers and the lower courts. We need to receive them with the same loving discipline we were received with, you said.

Yes, this is an area where I've observed a lot of improvement. When the courts first understood that they could send someone to AA meetings as a condition of probation or the court's ruling instead of jail, there was a tremendous amount of resistance to this approach. Not universal resistance, but tremendous nonetheless. My counsel to those who had a problem was, Hey, I bet that you were not kicking the door down to get into your first meeting. Somebody put some heat on you; your wife, parents, employer, or a judge. People need to be reminded.

Are there any new models we need for transporting the message of recovery?

By now, the Fellowship should have learned about acceptance, tolerance, and love and care. That's part of the maturity of our emotional sobriety, in my opinion. The people I see who are most effective -- the sponsors I've had who have had the greatest impact -- were those who displayed those traits and skills. And they didn't always have them. They freely admitted, "This is something I learned in AA."

Although you're a nonalcoholic, you've had sponsors, Jim?

(Laughs) Anybody who is not an alcoholic and undertakes a role with Alcoholics Anonymous had better have a sponsor. I have always had at least one alcoholic sponsor and a nonalcoholic

sponsor. Sometimes I've needed two alcoholic sponsors to keep my bearings. I'm not always sure they were successful but I really appreciated their efforts.

As AA faces the next thirty years, do you have any closing thoughts?

Let me suggest that those of you who are in service assume the mantle and the legacy of the founders. Whether you thought about it, whether you're conscious of it or not, you did. You also have a responsibility to extend their vision to give other people what you got so freely. We can't afford to dilute the Steps and Traditions, singleness of purpose, or anonymity. But that doesn't mean that we can go without constant awareness of our own frailties. We must take our own inventory, our group inventory, our district inventory, and our area inventory, clear on up to the General Service Board. We must constantly be diligent in doing these housekeeping things, like taking inventory, going to meetings, and sponsorship. Take care of the basics and listen to what our founders have counseled us. Don't worry about the growth. It will come.

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