

What is the Purpose of the Masonic Fraternity Now and In the Future?

Bedwell Memorial 2018 Masonic Renewal Essay Competition

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The purpose of our Masonic Fraternity has always been, is, and hopefully will remain, "to make some good men, better". Freemasonry enables its members to improve themselves and establish strong links among each other. Thence, some of these better men feel a call to help improve their communities. Through them, Freemasonry has traditionally become a valuable asset for society. However, this important aspect of our Institution doesn't seem to be well understood by some. In this article we will try to examine this situation further.

Let's begin by considering several fundamental factors: (1) the state of our contemporary society, (2) the nature of our Institution, and (3) the different types of Freemasons.

Firstly, contemporary society has ceased to be as gregarious as it used to be. Computers, cell phones, and other such media devices foster individuality. As a result, most organizations – and not only Freemasonry- have lost membership during the past several decades. Professional societies, churches, unions and clubs, for example, have seen their membership decline. We should not panic, and feel that membership is dwindling because of how we do things (blame the Ritual, Degree work, etc.). This makes us fall into the trap of changing our most fundamental characteristics, to try to please everyone and to increase our numbers. This is dangerous.

We are who we are, and who we have been, for the past three centuries. Rituals contain our rules, and Degree Work, our values. We can, of course, modernize some of our procedures: improve the Ritual delivery by assigning different parts to different Brothers, use technology in administrative work (e.g. email, web, telecons). However, it is dangerous to water down Ritual

and Degree work, transforming who we are into something we have never intended to be. We won't get more members this way -and we may lose some good ones that we already have.

The second factor is the nature of our Institution. Any organization, no matter what function it develops, acquires with its members an unwritten contract: to make good use of their time and resources. We raise a Brother, and then what? Do we provide further masonic education beyond NorthStar or similar programs, substantial fellowship events, or further involvement in community work? All of these activities help Brothers grow and become better men. Attending Lodge meetings to discuss budget issues and listen to bickering among some members, does not raise most Brethren interest. But providing them with wide-ranging lectures or training, on useful topics (internet, computers, software, etc.) through their preparation as Lodge officers, will help Brethren become better prepared to succeed in the profane world. Personal growth constitutes an asset that many Brethren would gladly receive and appreciate.

The third factor is the type of individual members. Not everyone is the same, or likes the same things, or has joined our Craft for the same reasons –all valid, whatever they are. For example, some Brethren join us in search of fellowship; and they find it in our meetings and social activities. Others join to obtain esoteric experiences and knowledge; and they find it, for example, in our Observant and Research Lodges.

Still others join to improve themselves -and some of these, to help improve society at large. In this article we analyze some of the reasons of those who join our Fraternity to become part of an organization that is greater than ourselves. This is not unusual. I remember the poster our Lodge had at its front door, reminding the passer-by that George Washington was a Mason.

One way to increase our visibility is by developing community projects (Freemasonry is one of the oldest and widely spread member of Civil society). Our Craft has several national or regional projects (e.g. Masonic Medical Research Lab). But Freemasonry, like politics, is Local. Our community needs to know what we are doing for them: developing a food pantry providing Thanksgiving and Christmas meals; Breakfast with Santa; Easter egg-hunts; or career days for high school kids. For many such events we need the collaboration of our Eastern Star sisters.

These are a few examples of projects that give the Craft more visibility and recognition in our communities. Such projects do not cost much, but do require work from our Brethren. Such work will also help increase the strength and level of our Lodge fellowship and participation.

We can also open our Lodges for selected activities, allowing friends and neighbors to participate, and appreciate what we do. Some people have asked me why Brethren lie on the floor, with their arms tied, in our degree ceremonies. Where did they get this nonsense from? They saw it on TV, or read it in a book. Others ask: why are you so secretive? What do you hide? It is difficult to explain how we are not a secret, but a discrete organization. The best answer is to have people visit our Lodge, say during an Open Installation, and have the Master explain what they are seeing, and how some elements come from our 300-year old traditions.

Lodges can organize interesting public activities, such as documentaries about travel in warmer weathers and countries, especially during our long winters. Develop presentations about how to identify drug problems in youngsters, its potential health issues, and ways to confront such pressing community problems. We should have Brothers that can address them.

Open our Lodges to such social events in our multipurpose room, where everything will be prepared (projector, computer, sound system, graphs, photos etc.). Find an interesting speaker

(establish District-wide lists of lecturers). Present a visit to the Greek islands, or a case study in overcoming drug addiction. Offer coffee and donuts. Many topics have been already discussed or presented in TV. But our neighbors may prefer a person they know, and can relate to. After the presentation, invite the audience to visit our Lodge room, and place a Brother there to answer questions. Advertise your events in the local newspaper and radio stations.

Finally, youth represents the Future. It is very important to work with DeMolay, Rainbow Girls and other juvenile groups. Provide them interesting activities such as camping, canoeing, bowling, and training in useful academic material (computers, exam reviews, etc.). Recruit our own Brethren children, grandchildren, nephews, as well as their friends and neighbors.

From all this work we can expect to benefit in more than one area.

First, we will obtain an increased and stronger involvement with our Lodges, from those Members that we currently have. People usually respond positively to such types of activities, especially if done in groups. Project work will also create stronger bonds (and fellowship) among Brethren that participate in these activities, and will train them new and exciting skills.

Then, the Craft will attain higher visibility, which will create a stronger response from our own communities. Friends and neighbors will now have a different perspective of who we are and what we do. Community work will also be the best promotion of our Craft, and the most efficient recruiting tool. Some of these neighbors and friends, participating in these activities, may want to know more about us, and eventually even join the Craft.

Planning, preparing and carrying out of such activities and projects will certainly take extra time and energy, which will provide a healthy environment to our Lodge and its members. Such activities will also contribute to retain members. Some comments, from some Brethren that

have left us, include how they were unsatisfied with the often repetitive, bickering or lackluster lodge meetings they attended. And, this made them to stop attending –then, demit.

The present topic has been developed by other Masonic writers. But we still find Brothers that believe that our current problem lies elsewhere. And they propose drastic changes to our core values. The consequences of such changes, some of which remind me of throwing away the baby with the bath water, we may later resent.

I have a strong faith in the value of Freemasonry, and in the talent of its leaders. Often, a leaner organization turns out to be better prepared to retool itself and strengthen its ranks, than a larger one. I believe that, at present, we are living such a moment. Maybe, having lost members turns out to be a blessing in disguise.