

## SOLICITATION

Free Will and Accord:

Proper: Improper

by Harold J. Littleton, MPS

The petition which every one of us signed when we applied for admission into Freemasonry contained the phrase “uninfluenced by improper solicitation of friends.” It doesn’t say “uninfluenced by the solicitation of friends”, but by the “improper solicitation”; does the word “improper” then suggest that there is a “proper” solicitation?

In discussing solicitation the terms Free Will and Accord - Proper Solicitation - Improper Solicitation should be considered as a spectrum from white as Free will and accord to black as improper solicitation with proper solicitation as gray - many shades of gray.

How did the subject of solicitation get so much bad publicity or why was discussion on this subject relegated to small talk, almost in superstitious terms? Solicitation is nowhere mentioned in our Delaware Grand Lodge code. Furthermore, I’ve never heard of a Mason being reprimanded for solicitation although there have been suspicions raised about the number of petitions signed by one or two aggressive brothers.

Strict interpretation of the doctrine of “free will and accord” is fully defensible and would be in very strict agreement with Mackey who says, “This is a peculiar feature of the Masonic Institution that must commend it to the respect of every generous mind. In other associations, it is considered meritorious in a member to exert his influence in obtaining applications for admission, but it is wholly uncongenial with the spirit of our Order to persuade anyone to become a Freemason.” Mackey goes on to say that this unwritten law is sometimes violated “by young and heedless Brethren.” He ascribes their motives to the desire to imitate “modern fraternal orders” which resemble Masonry in nothing except some ritualistic secrets. “It is wholly in opposition to all our laws and principles to ask any man to become a Freemason...We must not seek - we must be sought.”

Strict interpretation of “free will and accord” may have delayed admission of good men to our lodges and the craft may thereby have lost many years of productive output. As PGM Steeves of New Brunswick said at the Conference of Grand Masters a few years ago, “It is not reasonable to assume that any ambitious young man would request membership in a fraternity about which he knows very little, that is not visible in the community, whose achievements and accomplishments are unknown, and which he has not been invited to participate in or join. Nor is it reasonable or logical to assume that any man would or even could have a preconceived opinion of our order, favorable or otherwise. It is constantly hidden from his view.”

Turning now to solicitation, let’s see how Webster defines it. Solicit means (1) to make petition or to entreat, (2) to approach with a request or plea, (3) to strongly urge, (4) to entice or lure, (5) to try to obtain by asking.

With these definitions in mind, let’s review how some other Grand Lodges are approaching this subject and review their activities in this area. This review is neither to judge nor to criticize but merely to report.

In 1981 in England a policy statement was developed which says “There is no objection to a neutrally worded approach being made to a man who is conceived a suitable candidate for Freemasonry. There can be no objection to his being reminded once that approach is made. The potential candidate should then be left to make his own decision without further solicitation.” There are some key words in this statement, namely, “neutrally worded approach,” “reminded once”, and “without further solicitation.”

In 1982 the Grand Master of Louisiana issued an edict as follows, “There is no objection to a neutrally worded approach being made to a man who is considered to be a suitable candidate for Freemasonry. After the procedure for obtaining membership in a Masonic Lodge is explained, the potential candidate should be left to make his own decision and come of his own free will.” In 1985 the Grand Master of Ohio issued a similar edict followed in 1987 by the Grand Master of Delaware. Others have also been issued.

The Grand Lodge of Oklahoma code says that it “prohibits solicitation of membership from profanes (non-Masons). It is not the intent of (the code) to force the qualified profane to beg for permission to join our ranks. According to Webster the word solicit means to “beg or urge with troublesome persistence.” In light of this it is certainly not a Masonic offense to, quietly and without pressure, offer him information and assistance if he is interested. If we do less than this we are denying access to the Fraternity to the majority of good men who have an interest in and a high regard for Masonry but no idea of what it takes to become a Mason. It is just as ridiculous to expect a man to beg for a petition as it is for us to beg him to join. It is a violation of Masonic law to ‘beg or urge with troublesome persistence’ a good man to become a Mason. It is not unlawful to offer advice and assistance. It is permissible to inform a good man, ‘Do you know that you will never be requested to join Masonry?’ Again the key words are “beg with troublesome persistence”, and “it is not unlawful to offer advice and assistance.”

In 1984 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania embarked on an elaborate program to revitalize Masonry and to increase membership with the title “Solomon II ® The Rebuilding of Freemasonry.” Its specific objective was “to reverse the decline in membership and rebuild the fraternity to a minimum of 250,000 members in the next four years.” One of the premises of this program stated that “every Master Mason has friends, relatives, acquaintances, church members, fellow workers and others who would be valuable assets to the Masonic fraternity.” In announcing this program it was said that “the task can be accomplished and the goal reached without violating any dictates

of Masonic law while preserving the right standards of

qualification for membership.” Our part of this program was the

use of an educational brochure which all Pennsylvania Masons are

encouraged to carry and give to acquaintances. The first

paragraph of this brochure says, “you may be surprised to know that the friend who asked you to read this literature will not ask you to petition the Masonic Fraternity for membership. Contrary to popular belief membership in Freemasonry is not by invitation. Instead, if you seek membership, you must do so on your own initiative by making your wishes known to a member of the fraternity.” This brochure then proceeds to give much the same information as in the Delaware publication, “Freemasonry - A Way Of Life”. It then concludes with this information, “Your friend is a Master Mason and is proud of the Masonic Fraternity. He is also very proud of the fine character of its members. He sincerely believes that you possess the qualities for membership in the Fraternity and that you should, at least, have the opportunity to know more about it. By taking a few minutes to read this literature, you will be better informed about Freemasonry. You will also understand that those who seek membership must do so of their own accord. Unfortunately, without this understanding, many fine individuals have not enjoyed the special rewards of membership in Freemasonry. If, after reading this material, you have any questions or desire to know more about Freemasonry, your friend will be pleased to answer your questions or to obtain the answers for you. Whether or not you should decide to inquire about membership in Freemasonry you can be certain that you have a special friend within the Masonic fraternity who thinks very highly of you. Please consider the fact that he shared this literature with you as a message of kindness from friend to friend !” This Solomon II program

puts much emphasis on increasing membership numbers and recognizes first line signers of subordinate lodge petitions with recognition pins for one new member, two new members, etc. Some Masons have expressed concern that when public recognition is given to obtaining new members, the idea of proper vs. improper solicitation gets very dark gray! Several other jurisdictions, including Maryland, Maine and the District of Columbia, have approved use of variations of the Solomon II program.

The Foundation Builders Program is in use in Illinois with information similar to that used in Pennsylvania, but with a different design of pin being given for new members.

There is another program being used in many New England and some mid-western states which involves “friendship nights” or “membership nights” at which time Masons invite non-Masons to attend a dinner meeting and have presentations afterwards discussing many facets of Masonry. Visitors are not asked directly to petition the lodge, but are encouraged to ask questions. Some jurisdictions, including Indiana, have banned this type of meeting. If these meetings are for information, fine; if for solicitation, some Masons have a problem.

Not all publicity is favorable inclined toward relaxing the rules on solicitation. For example, PGN Dwight L. Smith of Indiana says, “Anyone who thinks a program of invitation could be controlled, discreet, dignified, so that only men of high caliber would be invited, is living in a fool’s paradise. What reason do we have for thinking that our membership at large, representing all walks of life and all strata of society, would confine its efforts to the cream of the community.”

Brother Brent Morris of Maryland made a statistical study of Freemasonry vs. the Odd Fellows - two organizations with similar objectives and organizational

structures. The Odd Fellows permit solicitation; Freemasonry does not. In 1900 the Odd Fellows had 870,000 members while Freemasonry had 839,000 members. In 1915 both organizations had about 1,500,000 members, but in the early 1920's membership in the Odd Fellows started to drop and in 1986 they had only about 160,000 members while Freemasonry continued to grow to over 4 million, down today to about 3,000,000. Brother Morris cites this example to show that solicitation per se does not necessarily lead to long term membership increases.

The Grand Master of Missouri in 1983 says, "Some say that solicitation is the answer. This may be true, but it has very definitely not worked for the Odd Fellows and similar fraternal groups. Our law is very explicit on solicitation. It is a Masonic offense. My own feeling is that the best result for our Fraternity will be attained if it becomes generally known that we do not solicit, and that one must seek our portals through a friend who is a member."

Similarly the code of Iowa was amended in 1984 to read as follows, "It is unMasonic to improperly urge profanes to become members, but whether or not such action is a triable offense is a question for the lodge, depending upon the facts of each case."

Turning now to my own jurisdiction, Delaware, members are solicited in many ways, none of which has ever been challenged. For this reason, it must be assumed that they are in the gray area of proper solicitation.

First, we display proudly on our lapels the Masonic emblem, as well as on our car insignia, caps and jackets, etc. We advertise that we are Masons and are proud of it. These outward symbols are question marks for the uninitiated and can be used to encourage questions about membership. One nearby state advertises by using the square and compasses on auto license plates. Another state forbids the

use of the Masonic emblem on car insignia or even on caps and the Grand Master commented in a directive to all the lodges “that this sort of thing is an ostentatious innovation that will not be countenanced in this Grand Jurisdiction.”

Second, Masonic ceremonies are held with the public invited open installations, cornerstone layings, funerals, etc. These events are not solicitation affairs, but they all offer opportunities for non-Masons to witness Masonic ceremonies and become acquainted with Freemasonry. On these occasions, talks have been given on “What Masons Can Tell Non-Masons.” Most ladies nights are open to our non-Masonic friends who might be encouraged to ask questions and see the type of individuals who are Masons.

Third, Masonic buildings are frequently open to the public. Are the libraries and displays of Masonic memorabilia at 818 Market Street, in our lodges, in the museum at Lombardy Hall, at the Scottish Rite Cathedral ways of soliciting questions about the fraternity? Doesn't the historical value of some of these items arouse questions which can lead to a broader discussion of Masonry and ultimately of membership?

Fourth, isn't participation in our youth organizations a form of solicitation? Masons have a golden opportunity to create interest in Masonry in our youth so that they will be favorably inclined to participate when of a lawful age. Comments on how their organizations are related to the Masonic Fraternity can be considered a light gray form of solicitation. Comments that good ritual work in these organizations is a good preparation for later Masonic activity might be construed as a form of solicitation. Likewise, some non-Masonic fathers of DeMolay members may ask questions leading to Masonic membership.



Fifth, our educational booklets, *Freemasonry - A Way Of Life* and *Should I Ask?*, for many years have been made available throughout the state. Derogatory comments have not been expressed about the information presented in these booklets although the obvious reason for their existence is to inform and thereby indirectly to solicit members.

Sixth, one-on-one conversation is probably the most frequent method of solicitation and here the gray area can be very broad. A father may say to his son, "If you ever decide to become a Mason, I'll be proud to sign your petition." A business acquaintance or friend may be told in casual conversation that he will never be asked to become a Mason. A friend may indicate that some member of his family was an active Mason which can lead to the follow up comment, "It's a wonder you never joined." Or the individual may be asked if he is a member and if he says "no", the questioner may shake his head and turn aside with the comment, "Too bad!"

A darker shade of gray may be the classic story of a grandfather's discussion with the grandson on his 21st birthday. He said, "Son, now that you're 21, whose lodge are you going to join - your father's or mine?"

One of the most highly respected senior Masons in our state has on rare occasions been known to hand a petition to a life long friend, who he knew in his heart would be a good Mason, and was well thought of in the community with the comment, "If you ever decide to join, I'll be happy to sign your petition." Is that proper or improper solicitation?

The final kind of solicitation may be by the indirect method. Mothers may be responsible for encouraging sons to petition lodges for membership. Secretaries typing Masonic letters or trestleboards may influence non-Masons. One secretary commented that she would like to see her husband become a

Mason because his grandfather had been active. Soon afterwards a copy of Freemasonry - A Way Of Life reached his hands and he petitioned a local lodge. Another indirect petition resulted from an individual's interest in the activities of one of the appendant bodies. While taking his blue lodge degrees he became so interested that he became a most proficient officer and later served on the Grand Staff. Undoubtedly there are numerous other examples of indirect solicitation which you could cite.

A clear definition of Improper Solicitation is hard to define except by implication that it is improper to push or to promise. It is improper solicitation to use a repeated, high pressure sales approach, at one time associated with carnival barkers. Asking once is permissible as defined in many Grand Lodge edicts and programs. It is improper to promise the candidate that he will receive material benefit or some special recognition if he joins. A few Masons might regard it as improper solicitation when the sponsor is materially rewarded or overly recognized for soliciting. Improper solicitation would be giving a petition to a person of casual acquaintance or of uncertain background. Candidates who are improperly solicited seldom will be of long term benefit to the craft.

Having reviewed what some jurisdictions consider proper solicitation and what to me are the ways we in Delaware solicit, it appears that Delaware is about in the middle of the proper solicitation spectrum - not being as strict as some jurisdictions and not as liberal as others. Therefore, my first conclusion is that we should continue and perhaps relax our forms of "proper" solicitation. My second conclusion is that we should not only feel free to discuss Masonry with the uninitiated but we should be knowledgeable enough to be comfortable in doing so. Knowledge brings confidence and confidence comes from individual study, from personal discussions, from attendance at workshops, from meaningful

educational lodge programs, from observations made while attending other lodges and appendant bodies.

Free Will and Accord -

Proper Solicitation -

Improper Solicitation:

White - Gray - Black

Individual Masons determine their shade of gray depending on their individual background and as permitted by custom in their jurisdiction.