

## **What will the lodges of the future look like?**

presented by R.W. Bro. David Cameron at the XIV World Conference of Regular Masonic Grand Lodges, San Francisco, Nov. 19, 2015

What will the lodges of the future look like? Will they be dining clubs? Community service groups? Esoteric associations? Whatever they will be, Freemasonry will undoubtedly be smaller – fewer members in fewer lodges. This is not your typical gloom and doom prediction. It is the natural cycle which we have seen time and again throughout our history.

Lodges have always been formed and closed as needs and circumstances dictate. A group would form in an area of economic growth, work while that area was prosperous, and then when the men left that area, it would close. That is surely how the operative lodges building cathedrals worked. When the cathedral was completed, the lodge would disband.

The Premier Grand Lodge was founded by four London lodges in 1717. By 1725 they had over sixty lodges, by 1730 a hundred, and by 1740 over two hundred. But by 1750 about a quarter of the London lodges had been expelled or erased from the register.<sup>i</sup>

Still others seceded and joined the rival “Antients” Grand Lodge after it was formed in 1751. They sought a form of Freemasonry that, at least in rhetoric, returned to the older practices which had stirred the founders.

But Antients lodges went dark too. The Antients’ practice was to re-assign the numbers of lodges that had closed to new lodges. Between 1751 and 1813 they did this 510 times!<sup>ii</sup>

The Union of the Antients and the Moderns in 1813 is held as a triumph for the Craft, but over the first thirty years of the United Grand Lodge of England, the number of lodges declined by a sixth. Fifty-nine lodges were erased in 1828 alone for not making returns. And no new lodges were warranted in London between 1813 and 1839 – twenty-six years!<sup>iii</sup>

During the French Revolution, Freemasonry almost disappeared from France.<sup>iv</sup> And edicts of Popes, Kings, and Emperors suppressed Masonry at various times, from Portugal to Russia.<sup>v</sup>

The fall-out of the Morgan Affair decimated Freemasonry in the United States. By 1837 almost two-thirds of the lodges in Indiana had closed. Only twenty-six lodges sent representatives to the annual communication of the Grand Lodge of New York that year. Illinois, Michigan and Vermont didn’t even hold sessions.<sup>vi</sup>

Whether as a result of the issues in England, or those in the U.S., even in Canada membership declined. Of the twenty-six lodges listed on the Provincial Register of Upper Canada in 1829, eighteen became dormant within the next decade.<sup>vii</sup>

But Freemasonry rebounded in all of these jurisdictions. And then declined and rebounded again.

As R.W. Bro. James W. Daniel, Past Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge of England, has said:

“Lodges come and go. They always have, because they are essentially groups of friends. Sometimes those friends almost isolate themselves and they do not bring in the next generation. Then the lodge will die. It is a matter of regret, but everybody dies. Even Grand Secretaries die. They are human. Lodges must not be kept alive unnaturally. One of the great things about Freemasonry is that basic units are allowed to die gracefully and new units are born as friends fall out and go on to form another lodge. It is a fantastic organization we have which allows this to happen and the organization goes on. It is like an amoeba. We get worried about retention rates. We did some research into the 1880’s, one of the high eras of Freemasonry. Then, the average age of a lodge before it dies was only 15 years. And we think we have problems today.”<sup>viii</sup>

There is no question but that we in Ontario have been in a period of declining membership. Twenty-five years ago we had 91,000 members in 653 lodges.<sup>ix</sup> Now we have 37,000 in 540 lodges.<sup>x</sup> Apart from the total decline, notice what that has done to *lodge* membership. In 1989 we had an average of 139 members per lodge, now it’s only 69. Given that less than a quarter of the members usually attend a given meeting, some lodges are having trouble getting enough out to open lodge.

Some lodges will go dark, other will amalgamate. Surprisingly we have found that we actually retain more members if a lodge goes dark than if it amalgamates. I think this is because, when his lodge goes dark, a brother is empowered to find a new lodge where he fits in and likes what they are doing.

Having fewer lodges is not always a bad thing. The remaining lodges end up with a larger number of active members, so that they have the critical mass to do things. There is less recycling of line officers and Worshipful Masters, leading to a more enthusiastic governance. The brethren who previously had affiliated with several marginal lodges to keep them alive have fewer mundane meetings to attend and therefore more time and energy to devote to successful projects.

Why do we obsess about numbers? Why do we so desperately want new members? Are we driven by a burning desire to improve men and society by sharing the philosophy of

Freemasonry? Or are we pre-occupied with paying for the upkeep of our crumbling buildings? Perhaps we should we rename ourselves the Architectural Preservation Society.

What harm can focusing on numbers do? It might lead to accepting a candidate we shouldn't, because we need his money! We might focus our time and effort on recruiting new members, rather than developing the members we already have (and then they, of course, will leave, leaving us just as desperate.) You know, we often talk about how things were in the good old days when our temples were overflowing, but who wants to join a group that continually says "We *used* to be great."?

And measuring a lodge's health by its size is not a valid method. Some small lodges are quite healthy thank-you. Some even purposely limit their size to a small number.

Grand Lodge focuses on this decrease in numbers and feels it needs to help, so it develops programs to increase membership. But as R.W. Bro. Russell Staye, a Past Provincial Grand Master of the Orange Order, and a Past District Deputy Grand Master in our Grand Jurisdiction, said in a speech distilled from his observations of both organizations:

"What follows is what I think of as a period of what I refer to as 1960's solutions. Essentially programmes consisting of structured social events, the belief that if only you can train the member to do everything the "right way" all may yet be well, and the desire to engage in events to present the organization to the public in a favourable light.

However well-intentioned these ideas are, they actually create stress upon the membership. Because the numbers are not what they once were, but the quantity and scope of initiatives has increased, those dedicated brethren who remain bear an ever increasing load of responsibilities.

This in turn may, and often does lead to a disconnection between the leadership of Grand Lodge and the membership. This occurs in main because the leaders continue to seek new ways to rehabilitate the order, while the brethren already burdened with more work attempt to rationalize doing more with less, with the fact that the numbers are not rebounding.

Structurally while dues received fall with the roll numbers operating expenses never do. This offers the classic dilemma of maintaining revenue though fee increases or cutting expenses. On a local level this may lead to lodges combining into one hall, raising dues, or even going into darkness.

Either choice has its pitfalls – increased dues puts a certain stress on individuals. Cutting expenses leads to a greater sense of retreat, and a pervasive feeling that the best days are past.<sup>xxi</sup>

So what can we do? As Grand Lodges, we need to stop making more and more programs to rescue lodges. Instead, we need to empower individual lodges to look at their unique situations and make the changes they need to thrive.

Let them adopt an Observant model if they wish. Allow lodges to meet in undedicated rooms, so they can sell their millstone of a building and instead rent a room once a month in a multi-use facility. (I favour a room in a hotel, or a tavern - that seems to have a precedent!) Let them know they can change their bylaws so they meet less often. Then their meetings could be more elaborate, perhaps with proper festive boards, so they become events to look forward to. Let them focus on mentoring, or education, or mysticism – whatever it is they want their lodge to be. But above all, encourage them to strive for excellence in whatever they choose for themselves.

Many a present-day Mason thinks Grand Lodge will not let them explore these options, so *we* have to give them *permission*. And some ideas of where to start their thinking, like the ones mentioned above. As long as they don't alter the Ritual or the Landmarks, they're open for discussion. The funny thing is that none of the above is an innovation. They are all things that Masons have done in the past!

What will the lodges of the future look like? Certainly there will be fewer of them, but the ones that are there will be vibrant. Personally I hope some look like the Lodge at the Goose and Gridiron.

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<sup>i</sup> Berman, Ric, *Schism: The Battle that Forged Freemasonry*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, U.K., 2013, p.4

<sup>ii</sup> Kearsley, Mike, *The Prestonian Lecture for 2014: 1814 – Consolidation and Change. The First Year of the United Grand Lodge of England*, Carrfields Publications, Nottingham, U.K., 2013, p. 53

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>iv</sup> Beresiner, Yasha, “A French Masonic Certificate & Associated Personalities” *The Journal of The Masonic Society*, Issue 26, Indianapolis, IN, U.S.A., Fall 2014, p.31

<sup>v</sup> Rebold, Emmanuel, Brennan, J. Fletcher, trans., *A General History of Free-Masonry in Europe*, American Masonic Publishing Assoc., Cincinnati, OH, U.S.A., 1869, pp. 113 - 154

<sup>vi</sup> Bullock, Steven, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., U.S.A., 1996, p. 282

<sup>vii</sup> McLeod, Wallace, Ed., *Whence Come We? Freemasonry in Ontario 1764-1980*, Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 1980, p. 53

<sup>viii</sup> Daniel, James W., *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario, 2001*, p. 236

<sup>ix</sup> *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario, 1990*, p.75

<sup>x</sup> from data compiled by M.W. Bro Terence Shand, Grand Secretary of The Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario

<sup>xi</sup> Staye, Russell, “Masonry in the Round”, a speech given in 2010 in Ottawa, Canada