

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT - Thoughts on increasing Lodge Attendance

by Jordan S. Levitan, P.M. Norfolk Lodge No. 1 from the February 1987 Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association

At a gathering of Worshipful Masters, inevitably one will ask, "How's your attendance holding up?" It is, for the most part a rhetorical question.

The intent of this paper is to show that substantial increases in attendance are possible provided the Master dares to be different. This does not imply the need to experiment with so called "up-to-date" methodology. On the contrary, it requires stimulating those members we already have as well as those who will be voluntarily attracted into our midst with pure and unimpaired Freemasonry. The sooner we stop blaming poor attendance on the failure of the Craft to modernize, the better.

The last substantial influx of new members into Freemasonry occurred over forty years ago. Since then, many reasons have been suggested for the decrease in attendance. Members have moved away from the metropolitan area lodges. Once in suburbia they become accustomed to more leisure time, more holidays, and longer vacations. Some turn to service clubs, where the results of their participation may be more apparent. Others find that civic responsibilities take up their evening hours.

Family ties now take precedence over fraternal ties. For some, longer work hours and the pressure of doing business at night are contributing factors.

The majority, however, do not attend simply because they choose not to attend. They are bored to tears with business meetings. Those who are not ritualists find little inspiration sitting on the sidelines listening to the same brethren perform the degree work and give the lectures time after time. Their contentions are real and can not be brushed aside.

We live in an achievement oriented society that views ambiguous programs with skepticism. Mediocrity no longer suffices. It's time Masonic leaders stopped saying "something should be done" and begin saying "I'm going to do something about it."

The call to the Master is the same today as it was when the candidates petitioned in droves: to create an atmosphere for intellectual and spiritual growth so that the members know from experience they are missing something by not attending lodge.

Merely to suggest programs that others find helpful is only part of the answer. What may work for one lodge may not necessarily work for another. Symbolic Lodge Masonry cries out for an enlightened membership responsive to the Master who carefully lays his designs upon the

trestleboard. The approach, therefore, includes preparing the members as well as the Master. There are no shortcuts.

THE CANDIDATE

The Lodge Investigating Committee

The Masonic life of the prospective candidate begins with the Lodge Investigating Committee. A committee that consists of one Past Master, one line officer, and one member at large represents a cross section of the lodge.

The Master who dispatches the committee to the candidate's home with clearly defined directives takes the first step in laying a solid and dependable foundation. In its visit with the petitioner and his family, the committee should emphasize what Freemasonry is and what it is not. Their discussion should include the following:

1. The purpose of our Ancient Order is to build temples in the hearts of men;
2. The pursuit of excellence is one of Freemasonry's noblest aims;
3. Freemasonry is religious in nature, but it has no creed or theology, and it is not incompatible with one's religious beliefs;
4. Freemasonry has an obligation to the community, but it is not a service club;
5. Freemasonry stands for citizenship of the highest caliber, but it does not engage in political activity;
6. Freemasonry emphasizes one's obligations to assist the needy, but it is not a welfare organization;
7. Freemasonry is not a benevolent society providing insurance benefits; a Mason must make proper provisions for the protection of his family in the event of illness or death.

These and many other points are proper for the Lodge Investigating Committee to discuss with the petitioner and his family. This approach enables the petitioner to gain a better understanding of our principles and purpose, and the lodge can better judge his motives for seeking membership.

Degree Work

Few candidates arrive totally prepared for the ordeal of initiation. Even fewer receive a kindly briefing in the preparation room. Whatever fears the candidate might have should be put to rest at the outset. Initiation requires a sense of reverence. It should be impressed upon the candidate that he is about to enter a solemn and dignified ceremony. Degrees must then be performed with

a like measure of dignity. Anything less raises doubts in the candidate's mind about the worth of the experience.

The best way of assuring that new members return is to not only confer the degrees, but to also make Masons. Through its appropriate committee, every Grand Lodge determines the procedure for conferring degrees. The symbolic Lodge, however, makes Masons at its own pace. There is a distinction. And we should always remember that a Master Mason cannot be made in three easy lessons. It takes time.

To the average candidate, the philosophical depth of the ritual is overwhelming. He hears a set of references that he has never heard before and phraseology he does not use in daily conversation. We then compound matters by delivering the lectures immediately upon conferring the degrees.

Clearly we have no reason to congratulate ourselves when a candidate rapidly memorizes the catechisms and receives his dues card four weeks after initiation. So why not slow down the process. Dare to be different. The Masonic Service Association is an invaluable source for information to complement the degrees. An index of current publications is available for the asking. The candidate who receives good and wholesome instruction at a leisurely, informal pace away from the lodge room is likely to become an enthusiastic member who returns frequently. There is an old Chinese proverb that if you are planning for one year, plant grain. If you are planning for ten years, plant trees. If you are planning for a hundred years, plant men.

THE WORSHIPFUL MASTER

Knowledge Beyond Ritual

Grand Lodges appoint instructors at all levels to teach Masonic ritual. Few Masters, however, receive training in how to conduct lodge meetings. Little is done to assure that the incoming Master has a grasp of the history, philosophy and symbolism of the Craft. The fundamentals of lodge management and good programming are rarely talked about in detail. For these, lodge officers are left to educate themselves. Many never do. Others start too late.

Prior to setting his designs on the trestleboard, the future Master would do well to spend at least two years becoming a knowledgeable Freemason. This is not to suggest that he must become a Masonic scholar, only that he become familiar with the writings of learned brethren-Joseph Fort Newton, Thomas Sherrod Roy, H.L. Haywood, Albert Mackey, Robert Gould, Roscoe Pound, Dwight Smith, Alphonse Cerza, Harry Carr, Conrad Hahn, and Carl Claudy among others. The Grand Lodge library is an excellent source for material, as is the Masonic Service Association. There are, in addition, outstanding Masonic publications in the United States. One is The Indiana Freemason, which features articles on contemporary Masonic thought as well as essays by distinguished Masonic writers of the past. Membership in the Correspondence Circle of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, London, England, the premier Masonic research lodge in the world, is recommended.

The Master who acquires a background in the history, philosophy, and symbolism of the Craft understands the mission of Freemasonry. Lodge attendance will reflect the extent of his preparation.

Setting the Craft to Work

Setting the Craft to work implies more than initiating, passing, and raising candidates. It implies that the lodge is a dynamic rather than a static entity. The Master should encourage each member to take part in the activity suited to his character or abilities and to make sure there is an activity in which he can participate.

In one particular lodge, a member rarely set foot in the lodge room for almost twenty years. A Past Master remembered that the brother spent his leisure hours interviewing applicants for admission to a major university. The lodge wanted to start a scholarship program for needy and deserving students, so the Past Master asked the brother for assistance. The rest is history. The scholarship program has been a major commitment of the lodge for fifteen years and the brother later served the lodge as Master.

Brethren involved in something they like to do value their membership and return frequently. For those who like to putter around the kitchen, help is always needed on the Refreshment Committee. For those handy with axe, hammer, and saw, there is wood to be chopped or a fence that needs mending at the home of an infirm brother or Masonic widow. The lodge publication requires the assistance of brethren with writing skills. For brethren with experience in fund raising, help is needed on the lodge Charity Fund or Masonic Home appeal.

We cannot expect brethren to return to lodge week after week, month after month, if not given a specific responsibility. With nothing to do, sooner or later they tire of sitting on the brow of the hill and before we know it, stop attending altogether.

Programs

The composition and character of the lodge are determining factors in the selection of programs. Masonry teaches that men of every sect and opinion meet on the level. We aim for common objectives among men with dissimilar backgrounds. The Master who combines programs of Masonic interest with fellowship and establishes a continued line of communication with his lodge will sustain interest and induce attendance.

Most Worshipful Dwight L. Smith, Past Grand Master of Masons in Indiana, in his widely acclaimed essays "Whither Are We Traveling?", suggests that Masonry should be a social, cultural, and intellectual experience. A balance of all three elements is the Master's objective in setting his designs in the trestleboard.

Programs for a typical year might include patriotic observances, Ladies' Might, Past Master's Night, Founder's Day Observance, Youth Night, Father and Son Banquet, lodge picnic, Mother's Day Breakfast, and Masonic plays. By the time he becomes a Senior Warden, a line officer should have assembled sufficient material to begin looking around for brethren to present papers

on selected topics. Masonic book reviews should also be considered. The distinguished Masonic scholar, Most Worshipful Conrad Hahn, observed "...the lack of educational work in the average lodge is the principal reason for the lack of interest and the consequent poor attendance in Masonry over which spokesmen have been wringing their hands for at least a century."

The educational meeting is for enlightenment and fellowship. Lodge business is not discussed. Ample time should be allowed for those present to ask questions and make comments. Meetings of this type usually last one hour and often the discussion continues in the dining room at refreshment. A well balanced program of Masonic education includes films, video tapes, and slide presentations, some of which are available through MSA or the Grand Lodge.

The Meeting

Ask those who at one time regularly attended why they stopped and the most frequent reply is, "The meetings are boring and much too long. If the Master doesn't put me to sleep, the Secretary does."

Not all Masters are comfortable in the role of presiding officer. However, there are steps the Master can take which minimizes the anxiety of sitting in the East. One is to smile from within. A lodge senses devotion and understanding from the Master.

Another is to control the meeting. The Master who looks to the sidelines for a Past Master to tell him every move to make does not have control.

Nor should the meeting come unraveled at the Secretary's desk. Most correspondence read word for word can be summarized, including communications from the Grand Lodge. Usually, whispering good counsel in the Secretary's ear gets the point across without creating an adverse relationship.

Interminable introductions are the downfall of many meetings, particularly when Masonic dignitaries are present. By the time for the main event, the members are worn out from jumping up and down to salute each group the Master paraded to the East.

One innovative Master said, "Enough!" Laying aside the manual of ceremonies, he announced, "Brethren, tonight we are honored to have as our guest speaker a distinguished Freemason. In addition, we have with us two Past Grand Masters and several Grand Lodge officers. In order that you will have an opportunity to meet our visitors, we will dispense with the usual procedure for presentations and salute you in a manner we trust is worthy of your high office."

Instead of appointing committees to present four separate groups of dignitaries in the East with accompanying salutes and responses, the Master introduced at their seats Past Grand Masters, Grand Lodge officers, District Deputy Grand Masters, and Worshipful Masters. Other groups were recognized at their seats without individual introductions. A forty minute procedure was reduced to ten minutes, and the lodge enjoyed the extra time at refreshment following the meeting. It came as no surprise when the Master received an overwhelming endorsement for the way he handled the introduction.

The festive board is an ideal way to divide a long meeting. When there is an unusual amount of business to come before the lodge in addition to the program, the Master would be well advised to start the meeting one hour early, take care of lodge business, call off for dinner, and return for the program. Those who want to come for the business portion will be present, and no one complains about having to sit through an overly long meeting.

Some lodges guard against lengthy meetings by convening two stated meetings by each month the first to conduct lodge business and the second for a program.

CONCLUSION

Good attendance is the natural result of stimulated interest. Stimulated interest is the natural result of preparation, planning and execution. First, the Candidate must be prepared to receive the benefits of Freemasonry.

Second, the Master must be prepared to execute a year by planning intelligently, communicating effectively, and conducting meetings with dispatch, dignity, and diligence. Continuity among line officers is required to sustain an increase in attendance. Nothing kills momentum quicker than the failure to follow an up-tempo year with another up-tempo year. Regenerated enthusiasm becomes contagious. Word spreads about the enjoyment of returning to lodge. Increased attendance feeds on itself. And Freemasonry's light burns brighter because the Master dared to be different.