

MEETING A YOUNG MAN'S NEEDS

This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a paper which Right Worshipful Brother E. Gene Ross, Deputy Grand Master, of Illinois delivered to the Midwest Conference on Masonic Education in 1981, at Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Before we can determine the educational need for the "youth" of Masonry, we must first decide which specific "youth" group we are trying to reach: those who come into our Fraternity at a young age; or those who, regardless of age, are considered youths in Masonry.

Surprisingly enough, the educational needs for the most part are basically identical; however, the prelude to their fraternal relationship may differ considerably. Therefore, we need to define or determine our goals in providing Masonic education to those groups.

Let's take the first group and attempt to present a brief analysis of the needs of those who come into our Fraternity at the minimum age (in Illinois, this would be 21; in other Jurisdictions, the age varies).

With this group, again we have two factions: those with previous exposure to fraternal procedures, ritual, etc.: and those totally unknowledgeable in fraternal organization.

Statistics have shown that over the years we have not received a large percentage of input from the young men of DeMolay. Not too surprising when we consider our attitude toward them in the past, best described by a remark made by a Past Grand Master: "We certainly have no future there." When the young man of DeMolay comes into the Fraternity, his background or exposure to ritual and procedures has already been established. Unfortunately, so has his opinion as to the emphasis placed on his ability to memorize rote ritual and to execute precise floor movements. Thus, he has been indoctrinated with the importance of ritualistic ability and floor proficiency and with the fact that if he meets these requirements he will generally be accepted into the "inner circle" and become an active participant in the lodge.

Unfortunately, should his desires not run in this vein, he may well find himself just another member left alone to shift for himself, and eventually to drift away.

On joining the Masonic Fraternity, again he finds himself overwhelmed with ritual and precision floor work, beautiful and impressive as it may be; and yet, here again, unless he is inclined to this extensive study, he will soon find himself "just another member" left alone and eventually his interest will begin to wane and he, too, will drift away. Herein lies a need and emphasis for a good educational program.

The other side of the coin is the youth with no previous exposure, coming in "off the street" so to speak. Here, too, he is exposed to the beautiful impressive degrees, which at the time leave him totally awed and confused, however impressed he may be. Again, the opportunity to take part, if

he is inclined to the study of ritual and/or floor movements, is extended and teachers or coaches will be assigned to educate him in these functions. But--if not so inclined, then again--just another member left alone, soon to drift away. Again, a need and emphasis for a good educational program.

What then can Masonic education do to provide educational progress and material to meet their needs? First of all, we must present an educational program structured to meet the needs of those members who are not ritualistically inclined, who do not care or intend to learn to take part in degree conferral, who could care less, so to speak, of past history, but who nevertheless are Masons and desire to do Masons' work. Thus the pattern or first lesson format for us to build our Masonic education program. What is Masons' work? Have we ever attempted to put this teaching into proper perspective--just what we stand for and what we do? Our ritual, and floor work, and our ancient history, are all important; however, we have placed them in the number one position of importance, forgetting our major goal is to love our fellowman and to help one another. We must get our goals--our purposes--in the right perspective.

Encouraging the youth Mason, be he young or old of age, to study our current educational material such as Colonial Freemasonry, Signers of the Declaration of Independence, Founding Fathers, etc., is as outdated and ridiculous as asking them to revert back to travel by horse and buggy. This material is excellent for those of us who are interested in Masonic history and desire to study the genealogy of Masonry, but, my Brethren, we are few in number when compared to the educational need of the majority. We must realize that the youth of today DO NOT view the world as our forefathers viewed it, and are much more concerned with what is happening today than what happened 100 to 200 years ago. We do not minimize the importance of our Masonic history and heritage, but we are saying that it is not looked on by all in the same light nor does it fill the need for Masonic knowledge required by the young man of today.

For too many years we have ignored the needs of this group and now it will take time to acquaint them with our sincere desire to accept them and welcome them into the Fraternity, and to provide for their educational needs.

In visits to sister Grand jurisdictions, a universal challenge exists in most of them--loss of membership and a decline in lodge attendance and interest. To digress for just a moment, last November we exercised the right of every American to go the polls and vote for a candidate of our choice to lead our great country. The newspapers for several days afterwards contained statements from defeated candidates to the effect that they didn't have a strong enough organization to campaign properly, they needed more money, and the excuses went on and on. Not once did the man admit that he was not doing what the people, his people, wanted, or that his program did not meet the need of his constituents. Aren't we doing the same thing in our Masonic Fraternity? We blame loss of membership on lack of interest, joining other organizations, TV, movies, and everything but our own inability to meet the needs of the members. Let's take a good hard look at ourselves. If we think for one minute that we can function today with methods, and especially educational programs, geared to standards of 100 years ago, we are wrong. If our minds are closed to modernization, to structuring our programs to meet the needs of today, then all the talk and good intentions in the world will be to no avail.

Now if you are still reading this, it means you are interested in doing something about it. We would propose this: Gear up our educational programs to provide leadership data to lodge officers. (In Illinois we have a great publication, Advancing Toward the East.) Provide material on fiscal management for lodge officers, management of lodge business. Provide educational material for the Mason who isn't a ritualist but wants to do something. Provide programs on how to help your community; what projects could and should be undertaken by a lodge; education programs to encourage charitable involvement to help the less fortunate; educate the youth Mason in what to tell his friends so he doesn't violate any antique laws of his Grand Lodge but can create a desire in his friends to become a part of this great Fraternity.

We lose young members, and old members, because they joined our Fraternity to become a part of doing good to and for mankind. But after joining, if all they are subjected to is the conferring of the same degrees over and over, then they will look elsewhere, be it Lions, Elks, Moose, or some other civic group who are doing something for their fellowman.

To tell a man our purpose is to take a good man and make him better is true, but meaningless unless we educate him as to how we do it, and what should be done to accomplish it, and his part in the overall program.

In summary, our program of education needs revision, filled with imagination, enthusiasm and positive action to provide education about the things of today, and the projections of the future. The ancient history of our educational programs must be turned over to the historical personnel for maintenance of the established facts and statistical figures, but the educational programs for our youth must be how to live today and to work and plan for tomorrow.

I once hired a man for a custodial position. I took him around and explained all the procedures, the rules, the regulations and briefed him on the history and background of our organization, and showed him the entire area of our operations. At the conclusion of the orientation, I asked if he had any questions and he replied, "What do you pay?" I had missed his most important concern. So, too, are we missing the most important concern of our youth--what's in it for me? The good feeling of doing--the reward of self-satisfaction of being of service to our fellowman. We have the brains, the knowledge, to provide them with guidance, or in plain language, with the know how to do it. So let's use our imagination, our enthusiasm, a positive attitude, and get our job done.

So, my Brethren, it's as we choose--continue in the time-honored tradition because we have always done it that way, or will we explore new fields and meet the challenges of youth?

(The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's, based upon personal observation and the laws relating to the Grand Lodge of Illinois.)