

How Do Non-Masons And Masons View Freemasonry? Robert Singer

We would like to thank M. W Bro. Robert Singer PGM-NY for putting this Short Talk together. M.W Bro. Singer was a member of the Masonic Renewal task Force which was formed to gather information to help the Masonic Fraternity in its vital/y needed Renewal Program!

– Editor

Introduction

In mid-1988, the Masonic Renewal Task Force, a group consisting of 21 active Masonic leaders – Grand Masters, Past Grand Masters, heads of concordant bodies – held weekend-long meetings in St. Louis and Kansas City to consider projects and programs that would benefit the Craft, improve leadership and help stem the problem of declining membership.

Early on, it was clear to all that what was needed, as a benchmark for any future planning, was professionally-conducted opinion research to ascertain the views of non-Masons and Masons alike.

The Barton-Gillet Company of Baltimore MD, was retained to manage the research program, with Mr. Dudley Davis, who was experienced in performing similar consultative services for several Grand Lodges, as the over-all project director. The field research was conducted by Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, NJ, a leading firm in this field.

For practical and financial reasons, it was decided to conduct two separate phases of research: Phase I with non-Masons randomly selected; Phase II with Masons whose names would be furnished by participating Grand Lodges.

The results of the non-Mason survey were presented to the Conference of Grand Masters of North America at its February, 1989 meeting in Crystal City, VA. The Masonic survey was completed in late 1989, and the results were given to the Grand Masters at their February, 1990 meeting in Salt Lake City.

(MSA has available, at low cost, videotapes of both presentations, sets of 35mm slides, and the detailed results in a new Masonic Digest, in addition to this Short Talk Bulletin. Both Scottish

Rite magazines and several Grand Lodge publications have also published summaries of the results.) This Short Talk Bulletin will provide a brief outline of the results of each survey, highlighting the key points, but without detailed editorial comment.

Phase I – Survey Of Non-Masons

- Research was conducted among a random sample of 850 American males over 21 years of age and 150 females. Telephone interviews lasting 14 to 16 minutes each were conducted with this group, providing reliable data with a 95% confidence factor (a 5% margin for error). This sample size is viewed as being representative of the attitudes of all American males.
- The survey represented an almost perfect correlation, demographically, with available U.S. Census data.
- AGE: 52% under 40; 26% 40-54; 22% 55 or older.
- INCOME: 28% under \$25,000; 44% \$25-50,000; 20% over \$50,000; 8% no response.
- EDUCATION: 33% high school graduates; 57% with some college.
- MARITAL STATUS: The majority were married.
- 84% were not currently members of Elks, Grange, Kiwanis, K. of C., Lions, Shrine, Moose, Rotary, Masons. Among those who had some current membership in an organization, most were members of a local church or synagogue, and devoted up to 5 hours per month to that organization.
- Among non-members, 50% stated they were not interested in joining any of the groups listed above.
- Among those with any interest in joining, 2% were definitely interested in joining, while 22% might be interested. This represents an outside total of 16 million American men, but many of these would not be potential Masons due to religious restrictions and other factors. Still, it was a large number.
- When asked for reasons why they would not join, 61% cited lack of time – too busy, their occupation was too demanding, too much time away from family.
- Among those interested in joining, the majority were under 40 and married. Location, income and education were not factors. They said that they would give up to 5 hours a month in time (their wives said 3 hours!).
- Among those who were not members of any organization surveyed and who were asked to select from a list of possible reasons for joining, these were the principal responses:
- Chance to meet new friends and to socialize

- Engage in community service and charitable work
- Involvement of the family

Specific Questions About Freemasonry

- About 30% said they were familiar with the Craft; 23% were not very familiar; 30% knew the name only; 11% had never heard of the group.
- When asked which Masonic ideas were most similar to their own, 45% could not name a single one.
- A majority could not name either an attractive or an unattractive idea of Masonry. About 10% thought the Fraternity was too clannish, secretive or ritualistic. IMPORTANT: The problem is not dissatisfaction or unacceptability but lack of knowledge and ignorance.

Some Significant Conclusions From The Survey Data

- Geographical location is not a factor in renewing the Fraternity.
- Wives play an important role in the joining process.
- The available market of potential members is well-defined and of more than sufficient size.
- Potential members have specific expectations for joining.
- The vast majority of Americans know little or nothing about Freemasonry.
- Some who might join consider Freemasonry too secretive, but the greatest number did not have enough information to form an opinion.
- Nearly all fraternal organizations are facing membership and related problems, and since Masonry is the largest, its problems are particularly apparent.
- The emergence of television, the changing role of the family and the impact of work and community on the life of the American family, all play a role in membership and activity decline. They may also be in conflict with current Masonic practices, e.g., time demands.
- Those inclined to join have a generally defined profile:
 - Under 40-45 years of age
 - High school or better education
 - \$25,000+ income
 - Membership in religious or neighborhood organizations

- A major conclusion is that a substantial number of males available for membership have no knowledge of the Fraternity.
- The conclusion is inescapable that unless American Freemasonry becomes more aware of the needs and expectations of its potential members and acts to meet them, possibly through the process of change, the membership decline of recent years will continue unabated.

Phase II – Survey Of Masons

- Research was conducted among a random sample of 1000 Masons from lists supplied by 21 Grand Lodges in the major U.S. geographical areas. Telephone interviews lasting 14-18 minutes provided reliable data with a 95% confidence factor (a 5% margin for error). The sample size is viewed as being representative of the nearly 2.7 million American Freemasons. MEMBERSHIP PROFILE
- More than 50% of the membership is 61 or older; 26% is age 70 or older. This is significantly older than the American male population in general as identified in Phase I research.
- Nearly 60% have been Masons for 20+ years; only 8% have been members for 5 years or less.
- About 50% of the Craft is retired; the same percentage continues to work.
- Household income was comparable to the Phase I sample. The older the Mason responding, the lower was his income.

Masonic Activity

- Only about 30% is involved with other Masonic organizations: Scottish Rite – 20%; York Rite – 10%; Shrine – 17%.
- The sample said 18% attended nearly every Blue Lodge meeting, and another 25% attended three or four times a year. This would seem to be in conflict with actual experience, and may indicate a lack of pride in the member's not supporting the Fraternity. If these numbers were correct a typical lodge of 400 members would have 72 members out at nearly every meeting, and up to 172 out three or four times a year. It is more likely that 10% is active, 90% inactive.
- There was some correlation with age here, with younger members attending a bit more frequently.

How Do Masons Feel About Their Craft

- Masons, by a very sizeable majority (87%) reported either that they were "very satisfied" or "generally satisfied" while only 13% reported any possible dissatisfaction. A majority said they were reluctant or opposed to change. Interestingly, even though Masons were satisfied with today's Craft, they did not appear to associate "satisfaction" with the need to attend lodge.
- It would appear that most Masons are content to take their degrees, identify themselves as a Mason, not attend lodge, but continue to pay dues.
- When asked for important reasons for being a Mason, 94% said it "gives meaning and perspective to life," 92% said it "provides moral, ethical development." This would appear to be a mismatch with prospective members' interests (social opportunities, community service, etc.) This is not a right or wrong question, but points up how current members might be presenting the Craft to prospects.
- Some 72% of all Masons have no, or only minor, disappointments with Masonry. Response in single-digit numbers indicated specific disappointments, such as unfriendly brothers.
- Major reasons for not attending lodge on a regular basis were all time-related: too busy at work, too busy at home. Secondary reasons, in the 40-60% range, included points such as: "little happens at meetings, "not much was accomplished," "leadership was ineffective." 48% said they could obtain all the benefits of Freemasonry without attending meetings.)
- Those who were least satisfied with the Fraternity (small %) were in favor of changes, such as making meetings shorter, more interesting, offering educational programs and lodge-sponsored activities. They rejected reducing the ritual requirements and spending less time on formal business.
- The distance a Mason lived from his lodge was not a factor in his activity nor was the time he devoted to other organizations.
- Those most in favor of a more public organization were least likely to support advertising and other uses of public media – an anomaly.

Conclusions And Interpretations

As with all surveys, one takes selectively from the information generated depending on one's personal views and orientation. However, some general conclusions would seem to be clearly indicated, and are reflected in the steady membership decline of recent years.

- Based on lack of public knowledge of the Fraternity, it appears that we are an organization largely out of touch with Mainstream America.
- Emphasis on being a "secret" organization, coupled with an ever-faster-moving society, has hurt membership acquisition.
- Questions are raised about Masonry's relevancy to the community. Are we too self-centered, too inward-turned for the 1990s?
- The Craft seems to be struggling with the concept of change.
- It is the younger and more active member who supports change to improve lodge attendance.
- By a significant degree, Masons are inactive in their organization.
- It appears that Masons do not need to attend lodge to achieve satisfaction. They maintain membership because of pride. Dues are not a factor.
- Masonry is among the most elderly institutions in America today.
- The concordant bodies suffer from the same problems as the symbolic Lodges and are equally at risk.
- Left to its own devices, with the prospect of little change, the Craft could be one-half its present size in 2000 and one-half less again in 2010. The financial consequences of this loss alone are difficult to imagine.
- Certain fundamental changes need to be considered to bring the Craft in line with the needs of future members, especially the younger man with his time constraints and different value system, as well as the rapidly changing role of the family in American life.