

Peaks And Valleys

Unknown

A recent survey of Grand Masters indicated a need for factual data on "membership retention." This Short Talk Bulletin has been prepared to put the "problem" into perspective.

This is an age of super technology. The electronic hardware, such as calculators and highly sophisticated computers operated by teams of programmers, statistical specialists, analysts, forecasters and "whiz kids," seems to have generated a new breed of "prophets of doom." They are reminiscent of those of a few years ago who operated the Ouija Boards and crystal balls, and who were also predicting the demise of Masonry.

To listen to these alarmists, one would think that shrinking membership is downright sinful and that within a matter of a very few years, the only Masons left will be you and me.

Sure, statistics can prove or disprove almost anything. And these computers can only produce results from the facts which their human operators provide. A great many of the factors which affect membership are not easily cranked into a computer. There are such things as wars, economics, social unrest, population shifts, taxation, transportation and even weather conditions which can seriously show its effects upon the membership picture.

To get a better insight into the membership problem, we need to take a long, hard look over the past half century. During the period between World War I and World War II, American Masonry suffered many losses. The patriotic fervor of the First World War generated a great deal of lodge activity. That activity generated interest in membership. Following the war, during the "roaring twenties" social attitudes went through big changes. Those were the days of wild parties, "flappers" and "bathtub gin." The automobile became popular, plentiful and affordable. Consequently, lodge attendance and activity fell off.

In the 1920's and 1930's, the United States was hit by a series of disasters. Florida was hit by two devastating hurricanes. Floods swept across Mississippi, New England, and Kentucky. The Western states were struggling under the effects of drought and dust storms. And then there was the matter of the Bank Crash and depression. They were difficult times. And it was a hard period for Freemasonry. In 1941, Masonic membership had dwindled to less than two and a half million members. (A low point.)

Hitler's hordes were gobbling up one after another European country. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor – and America was again at war. The national will became strong again. There developed a feeling of togetherness. There was an urgent need for brotherhood ... for unified efforts. Masonic lodges were a focal point of activity.

During World War II, Masonic Service Centers were established by the Masonic Service Association throughout the country near military bases and in metropolitan Areas. There were also Masonic Service Centers established in London, Paris, and Aukland. As an example of some of the services performed by these centers, following are the statistics for the first months of 1945.

Total attendance, all Centers, 904,847. Of all visitors, 12.86% were known to be Masons. Contacts made in posts, 8,460. Contacts outside of posts, 8,919. Total contacts, 17,379. Checks and loans, 791; rooms and apartments secured, 18,916; other services rendered, 3,776. Patients visited in hospitals from hospital visitation Centers, 52,763. Total patients visited 75,559. of these, 15.4% were Masons.

A noble effort-in the name of Freemasonry. M.S.A. was then, as it is now, "Freemasonry's Servant."

Activity at lodge level during the War Years generated involvement. Involvement spawned increased interest. Petitions poured in. The membership trend reversed; instead of losses, we showed constant gains. The trend continued through the post-war years and through the Korean War period, peaking at a total of 4,103,161 Master Masons in 1959.

The decline in membership since 1960 has reflected many of the social changes affecting the nation. There have been large population shifts. A large portion of Americans arc "on the move" to warmer climates, job changes, retirement homes, and just plain traveling. Air transportation has become an accepted way of life, encouraging more and more people to travel. Keeping up with changes of address has become an accepted way of life, encouraging more and more people to travel. Keeping up with changes of address has become a Lodge Secretary's nightmare. And if a Brother doesn't get his dues notice, he frequently overlooks paying his dues.

There's a whole mass of problems tied up in this situation, each of which could be a major topic of discussion. A number of surveys have been conducted regarding the large number of Masons suspended for non-payment of dues. A basic conclusion is there is a loss of contact . . . a lack of communication ... and a lack of understanding. Too many Brethren are not aware of how to "demit" or how to affiliate with another lodge when they move. Too many don't know that, if they cannot afford to pay dues, other arrangements can be made. Frequently, we find that Brethren in financial straits arc too proud to admit it.

And, then, once a Brother has been suspended for non-payment of dues, he doesn't know the procedure for being re-instated. We find that too often he is under the mistaken opinion that he

must pay for all of the years he has been suspended. This is an area of information which needs to be made a matter of common knowledge.

The losses through death are normal and must be expected. Remember, the large number of initiates in the 1940's are now more than thirty years older. The hourglass and scythe are symbolic of time and the bringing of human life and its time to a close. We can easily relate this factor to our Masonic teachings.

The incidents of crime in the metropolitan areas particularly, have been a factor in lodge attendance. Many are intimidated by the reports of muggings, thefts, and vandalism. This has resulted in many lodge consolidations, which in most cases does not make either lodge stronger or more active.

Too many lodges have lapsed into unimaginative, apathetic, boring, repetitive business meetings which do nothing to stimulate attendance or interest. Those lodges quickly develop the problem of not having anyone willing to take office.

A lodge can be compared to a place of employment, where one must enjoy what he is doing; receive adequate pay; enjoy certain fringe benefits and where one feels useful and needed. It helps if the surroundings are attractive and there is a chance for advancement. Harmony with the boss and with your fellow workers is also an essential ingredient.

To be effective, the lodge, too, must provide an opportunity for useful and needed involvement for a member to enjoy it. It helps greatly if the Lodge room is clean, attractive and pleasant. The Master, Wardens, officers and members must work at practicing fellowship and strive for harmony. If these elements are all present, the symbolic wages will be received in abundance. The corn, representing plenty will be paid in plenty of opportunity, plenty of friends, and plenty of work. The oil will truly be represented in gladness, happiness and real joy; and the wine will be that of peace, spirituality and health. The rewards of a good life represented by these symbolic wages will apply to both the members and the lodge.

It is not a Masonic "secret" that harmony is an essential ingredient in a successful lodge. By working together in harmony, putting into practice our tenets, and keeping the members informed and usefully "employed," membership retention will not be a target for the "Prophets of Doom."

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