

Stemming The Flow

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(M.S.A. is indebted to M.W. Brother E. R. Minchew, PGM of Louisiana, and Director of Masonic Education for the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, for sharing his thoughts on "stemming the flow" of membership losses.)

Most Grand Jurisdictions, if not all, are concerned with the loss of members. Basically, there are three categories of membership losses that claim their attention: by demits, by non-payment of dues, and by candidates who fail to complete the degrees.

With reference to the first category – Demits. In Louisiana, as an example, the number of demits that were granted in 1976 was 284; in 1977, the number was 64; in 1978, the total was 317. While it is true that some of the demitted Masons affiliated with other lodges, it is roughly estimated that two-thirds did not. This is a loss that is worthy of attention. Louisiana has about 47,000 Masons. Other Grand Jurisdictions report comparable losses through demit.

What can be done to reduce the losses by demit? It appears that the cause for demit losses should be examined. There are at least three reasons why a Mason gets a demit and never affiliates with another Lodge:

First - He feels that he is too old to be of service to Masonry.

Second - He has lost interest in the Fraternity.

Third - He cannot attend Lodge.

There are probably other causes for a demit, but these three are certainly worthy of consideration.

The solution to the problem must rest with each lodge, particularly with the three principal officers. There is no doubt but that some members of the Lodge have been neglected.

A well-planned program by the Lodge is necessary, a program that will involve as many members as possible. Specially planned programs will attract and encourage the presence of members. Homecoming, Father-and-Son Night, etc. Each Lodge meeting should include a discussion of some Masonic topic for information when no degree work is on the agenda. There are many sources for information topics on Masonry; probably the best is the Short Talk

Bulletin. (Ask M.S.A. for the catalog listing the more than 680 titles.) Most Masons are interested in learning more about the history, heritage, philosophy, famous men in Masonry, and ideals of the Fraternity. Open meetings, where the doors are opened to non-Masons, are excellent opportunities for good fellowship and for improving the image of Masonry.

In other words, A MASONIC EDUCATION PROGRAM in each Lodge is a MUST. In such meetings, a special effort should be made to acquaint all members with what the Lodge is doing and how each member is a part of the program. The Lodge program should include opportunities for the members to discuss what each wants out of his Masonic life. It is surprising how many good ideas for improving the interest and attendance of the members can be provided by the members. Too frequently they are not encouraged to let their wishes be known.

Some Lodges send out questionnaires to all members asking for the members' desire to do a certain work in the Lodge. This method gives every member the opportunity to let his wishes be known. A follow-up use of members is the result. Other Lodges have seminars with members to get the members' reaction to what the Lodge should do. It all boils down to what has often been said, "A working Mason is an interested Mason."

Some Lodges use a Contact Committee to get in touch with Masons who do not regularly attend Lodge and inform them that they are missed and that they are needed. When such efforts are exerted, the members will feel a part of the Lodge, and many even become regular in attendance.

Members who are unable to attend Lodge meetings should be visited by the Contact Committee as often as possible, and by the principal officers. Telephone calls can be used by the Committee to prevent disabled Brethren from feeling a sense of neglect, and to assure the aged and infirm that they are still a part of the Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons. On special occasions, such as when honoring the members with long years of service to the Craft, the Committee should arrange transportation for the disabled.

The second category of membership losses is through suspension for non-payment of dues. Some Grand Jurisdictions report as many as five to eight hundred per year. Of the total number that are suspended, about fifty percent request reinstatement. Again, a sufficient loss to cause concern.

There are sundry reasons for failure of Masons to pay their annual dues. The primary causes might be loss of interest, living in another location, financial difficulties and a feeling of neglect.

Some Lodges have sought to solve this problem by making personal calls on the delinquent Brothers. When this is not possible, Masons in the vicinity of the domicile of the delinquent Mason are asked to make a personal contact. In some Lodges the Worshipful Master appoints a

committee to visit a Brother who is suspended and persuade him to pay his dues. Other Lodges use different appeals. Financial aid is often provided for the Brother who is in financial straits.

Whatever is done when a Mason becomes delinquent is like locking the barn after the horse is stolen. Rather than treat the disease, perhaps more attention should be given to prevention.

Again, a well-planned program of Masonic Education that will touch the lives of all of the members is suggested. Several Grand Jurisdictions are making much improvement in Grand Lodge oriented and sponsored educational programs that are directed toward improving attendance at Lodge meetings and having a better informed membership on Masonry. There remains much to be done. Perhaps too much money is being spent on administration and other acute needs of Masons and Masonry. There should be some kind of an annual program in every Lodge to reach as many members as possible.

The third category of membership losses,

and the one in which the writer is personally interested, is in the loss of candidates who take the first degree and then drop out of Masonry. This problem has been discussed with Grand Lodge officers of several Grand Jurisdictions and there is a kindred anxiety and concern.

For instance, in Louisiana in 1976, 1187 candidates were initiated and only 874 were raised. In 1977 there were 1279 who were initiated while only 901 were raised. In 1978 the number initiated was 1139 with 886 being raised. In three years there was a total loss of 944 Master Masons. Most of these will probably not repetition for advanced degrees. There would have been a gain in membership in Louisiana if the losses due to not completing degrees could have been drastically reduced.

Why don't candidates complete the three degrees? The writer has made a study of this problem and presents one actual case.

In one of the Louisiana Lodges there were twelve petitions for degrees that were formally approved by the Lodge. Seven of the applicants completed the degrees within the required time. The other five went no farther than the first degree. The degrees, in each instance, were well conferred. Each candidate received the same information before and after each degree. The five who did not pursue advancement in Masonry beyond the first degree were interviewed and asked "why"? Here are the answers: Two said they did not have time to learn the catechism; one said that he petitioned only because his wife wanted him to become a Mason, and that Masonry demanded too much of him; another said that he could not abide by the moral teachings of Masonry as exemplified in the first degree, especially the obligation; the last one said he couldn't learn the work.

The result of the interviews were reported to the Master of the Lodge. He appointed a committee to visit each of the five candidates and to persuade him to continue his Masonic career. The committee was successful with only one – can you guess which one? Yes, it was the

one who said he couldn't learn the catechism. He tried, did his best, was not perfect in his recitation but was passed and finally became a Master Mason. You will be glad to know that this Brother is now one of the most used Masons in his Lodge in everything except degree work.

The reasons given by the five Entered Apprentice Masons in the example that has been cited are probably the most often found excuses for not completing the degrees. They might give a hint as to what is needed to be done.

In Louisiana the Grand Lodge is working on a statewide program to educate the applicants for Masonry through the appointment of a committee in each Lodge to visit the petitioner after he has been accepted for the first degree. This is called the Lodge Program of Masonic Education. The appointed committee (this committee is not the investigating committee), visits the candidate and his wife (and older children if possible) to give to them the philosophy of Masonry that will inform him of the step he is about to take. After the discussion, the committee gives to the candidate a copy of SEARCH FOR MASONIC LIGHT entitled PREPARATION. (This is the first of four small books that have been prepared by the Committee on Education of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana and are available from the Service Committee of the Grand Lodge.) Preparation further enlightens the candidate on Masonry. After the first degree is conferred, the committee again visits the E.A. Mason, further enlightens him on the Philosophy of the E.A. Degree and answers any questions that may be asked. This process is continued through the second and third degrees. The program reduced the losses by seventy-five in 1978. (A similar program is contained in the new M.S.A. Digest, "Tried and Proven.")

Another suggestion for reducing the losses through failure to complete the degrees is that of "Sponsorship." When the applicant's petition is presented to the Lodge and favorably received, the Master appoints a well-informed Brother to act as the candidate's sponsor. The sponsor works with the candidate throughout his degree career. The duties of the sponsor supplement the work of the Education Committee and assures the candidate that he has a friend to guide him through the three degrees, to arrange for a lecturer and assist the candidate in any way necessary. (In some Jurisdictions, this is called "the Mentor System.")

In summary (1) Losses in Membership must be the concern of both the Grand Lodge officers and the Lodge officers; (2) The Lodge must include and involve as many Masons as possible in the annual program of the Lodge; (3) A definite program of Masonic Education on a personal basis is essential.

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