

## **Challenges Faced by Minorities in Masonry**

Given By W. Bro. Adam Nesrallah  
at the Especial Communication of Grand Lodge, G.L.C.P.O.  
Saturday, October 16, 2010 at Ottawa, ON

Greetings, Most Worshipful Sir and Brethren assembled. I thank you for the invitation to speak on a subject of great significance to a growing number of men in Canadian Masonry. The ever changing demographic of Canadian society means that all institutions, Masonry among them, are faced with an influx of people from diverse minority communities.

As speculative Masons, we profess a keen observance of fairness and equality. Thus, it is incumbent upon us all, individual Masons and the whole of the Craft, to seek to understand our Brethren within the minority and to enable their full participation in Masonry.

It is my observation that Masonry has largely succeeded in avoiding many of the biases and discriminatory social norms of the period, particularly racism and elitism. Despite having succeeded in this regard, men of minority still face key challenges integrating into Masonry.

I will discuss the issues of the language barrier in learning the ritual, the former's effect on one's ability to participate in Lodge, certain irregularities with regards to regularity of membership and the formation of cliques within Lodge.

My comments are based on observation of, and personal experiences with, brethren within my mother Lodge, St. Andrew's, which is a fine example of diversity. A Scottish lodge with a vision to uphold the proud traditions of its founders, we count a variety of men among our membership. There are Lebanese brethren, European brethren of Jewish faith, a Muslim PM and brethren hailing from Bolivia and Brazil. St. Andrew's has seen four men of Lebanese origin sit in the chair of King Solomon prior to myself. Many of our present and past officers are also what we would call, in somewhat prosaic terms, visible minorities.

For those men, participation in the Lodge is not a simple affair. Most brethren from outside our borders admit to a certain difficulty with English as a second, third or fourth language. It should not surprise you that the form of English employed in our Ritual, challenging as it is to us, its native speakers, is slightly more so to them! Some lodges have taken creative measures to promote the participation of these brethren in the Work; an example being the mentoring program used by St. Andrew's. All brethren, aspiring officers or not, meet with a mentor before and after their degrees to review the key elements of masonry. These brethren have the opportunity to practice the Work in a private and supportive environment which bolsters their confidence in delivering it in open Lodge.

One method, employed by Eddy Lodge in Aylmer, is to divide large lectures such as the JW lecture in the Ceremony of Initiation into manageable pieces to be given by several brethren. This has the dual benefit of involving more brethren in the Work while providing many men the opportunity to learn an unwieldy piece of work incrementally. Two years ago, I would have dropped to my knees in gratitude had I known I had four potential backups for that particular

piece!

If the study of the Work alone is daunting to some brethren, imagine the strain of desiring to participate as an officer, eventually hoping to lead in the East. I believe that many brethren, for the same reasons noted previously, hesitate or avoid entirely the chairs. Were it not for the language barrier, these Brethren would most amply display the drive, leadership and commitment to the Lodge to be outstanding officers and Masters. But truly it is difficult to express leadership and conviction when one has difficulty expressing oneself at all. Brethren, it is our collective responsibility to support and mentor these men. Let's recall those familiar words in the MM degree which allude to our responsibilities in that regard. It is to our benefit as an organization to help all brethren persevere through their difficulties and insecurities so that we might be exposed to their fine inner qualifications. To effect such a thing is not far from our grasp. Having already embraced mentorship, we need only add oversight. Past Masters and expert ritualists might participate in practices, offering guidance on the Work and methods of tackling lodge duties in efficient and proven ways.

Perhaps, from time to time, there is a brother who shows promise but is not yet ready for his next station. In such cases, it were better that the brethren show compassion and understanding rather than frustration. Let us not be afraid to ask that the brother devote another year to his chair before advancing. While logistically, this may be a burden, it benefits the man individually and the lodge as a whole when a man's trusted peers have the integrity to express that, while they support his endeavours, they require further engagement from him to prepare for the rigours of successive offices.

I will now touch briefly on a complex and very sensitive issue for some brethren hailing from other lands. I am in no position to make recommendations in this regard, but I leave it to you and to our distinguished Grand Lodge, Most Worshipful Sir, to address it in a suitable manner. Some of my brethren have indicated anecdotally that, although their mother lodges in other countries have been warranted by Grand Lodges such as those of the State of New York or the GL of Scotland, upon attempting to affiliate in Canada, these brethren are compelled by the receiving lodge to be re-initiated and to redo their degrees. As I say, this is anecdotal, however I have no reason to doubt the veracity of these claims, if the frustration of the brethren so attesting is any indication thereof.

Finally, Brethren, permit me to discuss a common occurrence in many minority communities. I mean ghettoization or the formation of cliques. It is not uncommon to see brethren of a shared heritage or mother tongue sitting together in lodge and in the festive board, apart from others. There is no problem with this; security is found in numbers and in the familiar. However, rather than permitting this to become a tacitly divisive practice, let us seize upon it as an opportunity to share our respective cultures. Sit amongst them or invite them to sit amongst you. You may discover that you speak the same second language – an experience I have often enjoyed indulging. You will most certainly have your eyes opened through stories, anecdotes and enlightening world views that are alien to you, as will these brethren who may at times struggle to understand the Canadian, Anglo-Saxon, Francophone or myriad other indigenous cultural viewpoints within Canadian society.

Brethren, Masonry is a convention of like-minded men who value self-improvement, morality, fairness and goodness. Our brethren within the ethnic and linguistic minorities are vital threads in the Masonic fabric. They bring to us the gifts of diversity, warmth and curiosity. Let us reciprocate with curiosity of our own. Let us show them our love and support as they endeavour to participate in what may be a very daunting process for them. Leaving one's home for a far off land takes courage. Joining a society of men who are, until the moment of that obligation, total strangers, likewise requires faith. These men are our brothers. We are sworn to that. Let us welcome them as we would any member of the family. Doing so will contribute untold diversity, breadth of experience and richness to all of our lives and to the Craft as a whole.

Most Worshipful Sir, Brethren, I thank you for your kind attention and open-mindedness. I hope that my comments have given you cause for introspection. I wish to sincerely thank all of the brethren who contributed to this discussion and especially V.W. Bro. Nick Khoury, who was kind enough to review it at the eleventh hour. At this time, I welcome comments from the floor, and once again, my thanks.