

Planning Questions for “Ensuring the timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario”

Delivered by R.W. Bro S.W. Libbey
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Let me first say at the outset that we have been asked to challenge our thinking and so please appreciate that is the vein in which this presentation is given.

Of our six strategic imperatives outlined in the Long Range Plan of Grand Lodge¹, it is easy to find parallels for some of them in other familiar organizations:

- Two of the strategic imperatives, **Communications** and **Effective Operations**, can be found in any organization.
- In addition to the above, **Membership (or Membership Services)** can be found in most umbrella associations.
- All of the above and **Community Outreach** is a major thrust of service clubs with their charity driven agendas.
- **Strategic Execution** may be found in any of the above organisations.
- Unique to us in Masonry is **Craft Stewardship** and parallels are hard to find.

When it comes to ideals and charity we compete with service clubs for members. Many service clubs have excellent tenets to guide their members to be better in society and most service clubs have more and better social and family events than we do as Masons.

But we are not a service club, we are a fraternity with religious roots, we have ideals that are more than simple truths...
but we don't lift the veil...
and many of us don't know what precious things are behind it.

Hence how can we plan to fulfill the vision of Grand Lodge, “to ensure the timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario”. What could or should we do to strategically differentiate ourselves from service clubs.

To that end I will make a number of observations.

First our esoteric roots.

A definition is helpful here:

Esoteric Freemasons seek to spiritually improve themselves.
Most of the work done by Esoteric Masons is individual inner work.
Most of the work done by regular Masons is the rituals of opening and closing their Lodges and initiating new members². (Esoteric Masonry on Web)

I quote from Mark Stavish³, (a book recommended to me by our Grand Master): (Stavish p200)

“Today, many young men joining regular Freemasonry are finding their expectations of encountering men of learning, culture, and self-improvement are not being met. Instead they are greeted by members of twenty, thirty, and even fifty years for whom the craft has provided a lifetime of fraternity, social contacts, and civic service but has not been a philosophical or particularly highbrow organization.

Masonic education has consisted of generous and impressive amounts of memorization, particularly in the rituals, but nothing in terms of their symbolic meanings or possible origins, let alone an active study of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences.
Esotericism – seeking to improve ourselves – is all but unknown to 90 percent of the Brethren. This emphasis on form – i.e. memory work and ritual – over essence has meant that Freemasonry has lost one if not two generations of potential members.

In many jurisdictions, Traditional Observance lodges, or lodges in which member must prove intellectual and philosophical proficiency before they begin advancing to the next degree and wherein esotericism plays a primary or strong secondary role in the interpretation of the Craft’s meaning, will be the norm and not the exception within ten years.”

This was written in 2007 and today we have one lodge, namely Templum Fidelis Lodge No. 746 GRC, which is Canada's first Traditional Observance Lodge.

Traditional Observance Lodges have a Chamber of Refection as a means of understanding the deeper aspects of the craft. (p46) The objects that can occupy the Chamber of Refection can be as simple as a chair, writing desk, single candle, human skull, mirror and writing paper and pen. (Stavish p47)

Should we consider including a “Chamber of Reflection” in our ritual without going as far as including the proof intellectual and philosophical proficiency before advancing.

Another observation:

We seem to spend all our time talking about the origins of masonic lodges from the guilds of the middle ages.

We spend no time talking about the origin of the ritual from the writings during the

Renaissance and the religious and mystical practices – primarily those of Jewish and Christian experiences – of very long ago – Egypt and King Solomon. (Stavish xxi)

I won't dwell on this subject anymore but it now opens the door to review how we pass along the "timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario" and how other jurisdictions do their work.

My observations here are based on my 40 years of Masonry.

We are now at the point where we have itinerant ritualists who go from lodge to lodge doing their piece of the work. We have degree teams that are not called in for a change or break but called in because the lodge cannot mount a degree. Could we be just old men playing little theatre?

I heard a new mason say I would rather have the ritual read than stumbled through. Little did he know that many jurisdictions read most if not all of the ritual, Austria for one. That does not mean that all readers can lift the word off the page to make it more meaningful.

But, maybe we need to present portions of the work using dramatic reading techniques, or costumed plays like other degrees or jurisdictions.

Another observation is we dwell on the ritualist not the candidate. In other words we strengthen the transmitter and forget to tune the receiver.

If we change our focus to the candidate and his Masonic experience, should we offer discussions taking up to year before the candidate is initiated like they do in Germany? Remember our ritual is written in a style which requires knowledge and concentration to fathom.

Wouldn't it be great if every candidate got much more of the meaning of the ritual during his degree. . .

Now that would make not only a lasting impression but would that not also lead to his early efforts to spiritually improve himself – esoteric masonry?

Could we at least give out "teaser" books before each degree including the first degree to inform the candidate of what to listen for in the ritual?

And then could and should we not give out books after each degree explaining the meaning of the ritual at all of its levels . . . like peeling back an onion to whatever candidate can interpret and accept?

And would the Grand Lodge "Group of 15" manuals suffice?

Another observation:

We ignore the religious roots of our fraternity.

Masons built sacred architecture in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages as Gothic Cathedrals. It is no accident that they, as concrete structures, have esoteric symbolic meaning. (Stavish p84 & p87)

Do we examine our masonry in light of the symbolic intentions of the early Masons?

We ask three crucial questions to each candidate before initiation,
we offer prayer before every opening,
we offer prayer for every candidate in each of the degrees,
we say grace, or at least we should, at the banquet . . .
and then we duck our religious roots.

Just because Masonry is not a religion, it does not mean it should be devoid of religion.

For example, lodges that held annual church parades now have only a district masonic church service to attend.

Our belief in a Supreme Being and the equality and acceptance of other Masons it brings to the fraternity is a catalyst for world peace . . . and that was true during the time of the Renaissance and its religious wars.

It was a motive for many to join masonry then and it still could be today.

We should recognise and build on this tenant.

Our banquets are more often than not just social clubs. Indeed in some cases more like the social interaction of finger food after church.

Breaking bread together means more than just eating in the same room.

(Banquets implies a programme of toasts, speeches, etc. at every meeting including festive boards or light lunches.)³ (Meeting the Challenge p89)

Here again, we have let one of the landmarks of masonry lapse.

Some of you have heard me say this before:

We are a fraternity: common purpose from the ritual, brotherhood from the banquet.

So where do we stand in the order of priorities for men seeking to add meaning to their lives?

All told, many service clubs have more to offer. . . but only because our offering is only a shallow presentation of masonry . . . we do not lift the veil and plumb the depths of masonry and our souls.

How far ahead do we need to plan to strategically differentiate Craft Masonry from other organizations and “to ensure the timeless vitality of Freemasonry in Ontario”?

Paraphrasing our Mission,
we must “provide effective and sustainable leadership . . .
and preserve the timeless Masonic Initiatory system
as a framework for all good men to transform their lives
through the ancient and enduring tenets of brotherly love, relief and truth.”

Society has given us modern working tools, let’s get to work.

REFERENCES

¹ *Grand Lodge of A.F. & A.M. of Canada in the Province of Ontario, Rebuilding the West Gate: The Grand Lodge Strategy for the Growth & Vitality of Freemasonry in the Province of Ontario 2010-2016*, Hamilton, ON, 2010

² <http://www.esotericmasons.com/candidate/index.html>

³ *Stavish M., Freemasonry: Rituals, Symbols & History of the Secret Society*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2007

⁴ *Masonic Holdings, Meeting the Challenge*, Hamilton, ON, 1976

From page 89 Meeting the Challenge:

“At all Masonic functions at which food is served the following three items should always be included on the agenda, without exception, no matter how small or informal the gathering: grace or invocation, Toast to the Queen and the craft (usually before refreshments), Toast to the Grand Master and the Grand Lodge (after refreshments). This toast may be very brief, and it need have no response; it should *never* be omitted.”