

An Organization in Decline?

Presented by W. Bro. Russell Staye
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It is appointed unto man to die, and after that, the judgement.

Today, man puts forth the tender leaves of hope, tomorrow blossoms and bears his honours thick upon him, but then there comes a frost which nips the shute, and then, then when he thinks his greatness still accruing he falls like the leaves of autumn to enrich our more Earth.

It is true in our lives.

It is equally true of all that man builds. A cycle of growth, fall, and hopefully, rebirth.

There was a time, a time many of you in this room may recall. A time when most towns, most boroughs and all cities were home to an almost bewildering matrix of fraternal associations. The Odd Fellows, The Knights of Pythias, The Orange Order, the Foresters and of course Freemasons.

The reasons behind the rise of this variety of associations were multiple, and the benefits many; as all served a purpose in their community.

Of greater importance to us today is not the rise, but rather the causes and the symptoms, which have lead to the continued decline of fraternalism in North America. A decline, which has relegated most if, not all other orders to a marginal survival.

I speak to you today as one who has observed this decline first hand. My family has a long tradition of fraternal involvement with many of those societies previously mentioned.

My remarks are true of two such societies; my thoughts and observations are formed through my time as a member, an officer; through studying reports and long conversations with my brethren in these orders. My comments are not informed by a study of masonry in Ontario but I invite you to determine if any of these comments have similarities and relevance to what we see and have seen in our association.

As with the growth of fraternalism, its decline has been subjected to minute dissection. Suggested causes include the rise of the welfare state, declining community involvement, the collapse of the old main line churches, or even simple disinterest.

While all of these have merit, all place the onus on external factors alone, and do not provide for any self-reflection. I would suggest that this lack of constructive reflection also creates weaknesses in the organizations themselves.

There are several phases common to any voluntary organization in decline, and taken together form a cycle.

To begin with, membership numbers drop. Initiations slow, and demits may rise. The brethren rationalize it as a temporary setback, a momentary blip attributable to factors beyond their control. A more sustained period of decline follows over the course of a number of years. Within just a decade or more 25% of the membership has been shed, primarily because initiations have slowed, while those who are weakly allied to the organization drift away.

At this moment the membership becomes somewhat bemused by the fact that their lodge rooms are no longer full. The leadership begins to rethink and to retool their approach. A great deal of soul searching ensues, leading Grand Lodge to consult the membership as to the reasons for and the benefits of their membership.

Frankly, a consultation at this point is simply busy work. The opinions gathered will be heavily weighted by those who have a long history with the lodge, and who have an understandably decided tendency to either prefer the status quo or to advance very limited suggestions as they feel their particular needs are being met.

What follows is what I think of as a period of what I refer to as 1960's solutions. Essentially programmes consisting of structured social events, the belief that if only you can train the member to do everything the "right way" all may yet be well, and the desire to engage in events to present the organization to the public in a favourable light.

However well intentioned these ideas are, they actually create stress upon the membership. Because the numbers are not what they once were, but the quantity and scope of initiatives has increased those dedicated brethren who remain bear an ever increasing load of responsibilities.

This in turn may, and often does, lead to a disconnection between the leadership and of Grand Lodge and the membership. This occurs in main because the leaders continue to seek new ways to rehabilitate the order, while the brethren, already burdened with more work, attempt to rationalize doing more with less, with the fact that the numbers are not rebounding.

Structurally while dues received fall with the roll numbers operating expenses never do. This offers the classic dilemma of maintaining revenue though fee increases or cutting expenses. On a local level this may lead to lodges combining into one hall, raising dues, or even going into darkness.

Either choice has its pitfalls – increased dues puts a certain stress on individuals. Cutting expenses leads to a greater sense of retreat, and a pervasive feeling that the best days are past.

This may simply be the point at which the process described previously restarts, or can be the springboard for more radical reforms. A redux of the cycle returns the organization to the same point after a number of years, weakened still further. More innovative responses lead to their own unique results.

In either case the decline continues as natural attrition takes its toll. The losses are less year after year and the members can at least take cheer in this. However the truth is simply that those who wish to leave have already done so, and fewer members result in fewer deaths.

In the two organizations I have based this description on forty years had now passed and the membership stood at 40% or less of the original total.

At some point initiations do increase. There may be many reasons for this. Marketing, external events, or demographics such as the coming of age of the “echo” generation. It is at this point that the organization has the best chance of turning things around. New members and the vitality that they bring can truly create and air of generational change and growth.

But what are these new brethren joining? Will lodge rooms with a handful of stalwart brethren impress them? Will they see the ideals of the organization at work, or a series of projects designed to keep the membership busy? How are they to be retained?

Do any of you see trends that you recognize in masonry?

Is there anything to be learned for the trial of other organizations that echoes back to us?

The lesson that I personally draw from all of this is that the subordinate lodge is in effect not subordinate at all but is in fact paramount.

Our Grand Lodge has many worthwhile programmes. But ultimately it falls to each of us in our respective lodges to seek out good men, to introduce them to freemasonry, and to retain them so that they, so that we may be adornments to the craft.

I leave you with this. We have seen, we are seeing an increased interest in masonry, driven in my opinion by external factors. What I wrestle with personally is the question of how can we sustain this growth, how can we in our lodges ensure that this opportunity does not slip away but instead becomes a sustaining element for freemasonry today, so that we do not fall into these traps of cyclical decline. For that will be our judgement.