

Ambassadors for Freemasonry: From Secrecy to Openness

An address presented at the briefing session of District Grand Officers, 26 July 2012

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Brethren,

This evening I would like to share with you some of the most important ideas which have been put forward in recent years by the Grand Master, the Pro Grand Master, the Grand Secretary and other high rulers of our Order on the future of Freemasonry. The Grand Master has stated: "Talking openly about Freemasonry, as appropriate, is core to my philosophy, central to our communications strategy and essential to the survival of Freemasonry as a respected and relevant organization".

Freemasonry has undergone many changes in its history, although it has been able to adapt to its times, yet remaining true to its basic principles. I believe this move to openness is important for its survival and relevance in our Society.

The Pro Grand Master and the Grand Secretary are promoting the concept of being Ambassadors for Freemasonry. As stated by them, this is not a rank or an office but a concept that is simply aimed at every Mason being able to speak freely about their Masonry to non-Masons in a confident and competent manner.

If this is achieved it will not only create a positive image of the Craft amongst family and friends, but it will also improve our public relations. It will help to dispel the horrific myths that some people in society have about our Order. It will also attract men of the right caliber to enquire about Freemasonry. It is, however, not a recruitment drive.

The aim of being Ambassadors will not be achieved immediately. Not only does it mean interacting more with Society, but it also entails putting our own house in order. It means improving and turning around the present understanding of our members, encouraging them to talk openly about Freemasonry. We need to dispel the view of secrecy and silence held by so many of our members, largely through ignorance. The reticence of many of our members to talk openly about Freemasonry has come about through many years of encouraged silence.

Brethren in 2017, in five years time, United Grand Lodge will be celebrating its Tri-Centenary. During the past 300 years our relationship with Society has changed from periods of secrecy and silence to those of openness.

For many years, the policy towards external relations followed that of the motto of our order, “Audi, Vide, Tace” – “Hear, See and be Silent”. The exact reason for following the policy of privacy and silence is not entirely clear, perhaps it followed the path of least resistance. It was easier to keep quiet and ignore the awkward questions than to speak openly. But out of this has grown an atmosphere of rumour, miss-information and false statements about our Order and the extremely negative way in which our Order is perceived by the public.

Grand Lodge has set a target that by 2017, we will have dispelled many of the myths held by non-Masons through a new communications strategy.

To reach this goal, it is essential that all our Brethren are behind this change. Our high rulers are leading the way by giving their views promoting the positive image of Freemasonry. The Pro Grand Master, Peter Lowndes has addressed the way forward at the recent opening of the fourth Mentoring Conference. He has also presented a number of important addresses in Grand Lodge. The Deputy Grand Master, Jonathan Spence has given his views in a Freemasonry Today article “Speaking Openly”, whilst the Grand Secretary is successfully talking to local and national media in England. In addition, Grand Lodge will shortly be publishing a pamphlet for the use of our membership to explain more about the Craft.

For the first time Grand Lodge has approached an independent, non-Masonic body, the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford to produce a report for the media on the future of Freemasonry. As stated by this research group “we needed to test Freemasonry’s claims for openness and transparency”. The full research report is available on the Freemasonry Today website. To quote from the report, it states “One thing that immediately became apparent was that the notion of Freemasonry as a secret society was clearly inappropriate”. In fact one of their key findings is that “Freemasonry shows genuine openness and transparency”.

As stated by the Pro Grand Master, it is the Mentoring scheme which will play a vital role in the drive towards openness: From the District and Provincial Grand Mentors, through to Regional Mentors, to Lodge Mentors and to the Personal Mentors.

We all understand that the first task of the Personal Mentor, who will usually be the Candidate’s proposer, will be to look after the new Candidate and ensure that he receives a proper welcome into the Lodge. The second step is to ensure that the Candidate has a fundamental understanding of the ritual of his Initiation, then the

ceremonies of passing and raising. It is vitally important that the Candidate knows what he is doing in Lodge and has a basic understanding of the Ceremonies, to help him with his own personal development and Masonic journey. Hopefully, he will then be able to answer questions and talk about Freemasonry. I'm not suggesting he has to be a rocket scientist. In fact how deep he delves into the meanings of Freemasonry will depend on the individual.

The District Grand Mentor, Bro Roger Webster together with the Assistant District Grand Master, Bro Chris van Gaalen who is also the Preceptor of District Grand Stewards Lodge is doing much to role-out walk-through explanations of the First Degree and now subsequently of the Second and Third Degrees to assist in the understanding of our ceremonies.

An understanding of the ritual, will give the Candidate the knowledge and confidence to talk to the non-Mason about what Freemasonry means. Importantly, the Candidate might like to start by explaining and talking about Freemasonry to family and friends. This can then be expanded into talking to other members of the general public.

So what may we tell others about Freemasonry? - Just about everything. The only aspects that we have taken an obligation not to divulge are the signs and secrets or modes of recognition in each degree. They are in fact available to members of the general public if he or she wishes to find out. They are readily available on the internet and from various bookstores etc. It is simply that as Masons we have agreed not to divulge them. In this we have been entrusted to keep a promise.

In talking about Freemasonry, it is essential to try and explain your own experiences. Present your own story. You are not attempting to sell anything, but rather to illustrate, to showcase and to engage. Where do you start? Well at some stage you need to be able to answer the following questions: What is Freemasonry? How did you become a Mason? and why are you a Mason?

In explaining Freemasonry, you have to be careful to avoid jargoned clichés and quotes from the ritual, which mean absolutely nothing to the non-Mason and are counter-productive.

So avoid the phrase to describe Freemasonry such as “a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols”; otherwise you will have lost your audience. Don't say “Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth”, rather express it in your own

terms, such as 'respect of others', 'looking after others less fortunate' and 'being fair and honest in business and life'.

Above all you need to be able to say something about the aims of Freemasonry. You need to be able to say something about what the various degree ceremonies represent. Keep it simple, without getting too involved in esoteric explanations.

You need to tell people that Freemasonry has an enjoyable social side which involves family and friends. It is open to men of all faiths and all nationalities which is extremely important and relevant in today's society.

Charity is an important component of the Craft and obviously you can say something about the charitable work that we do at Lodge, District and even Grand Lodge levels. But Charity is not everything. Freemasonry is unlike many other organizations, such as Rotary, Lions, Round Table etc. that also undertake charitable work. What makes Freemasonry different? You need to be able to explain something of the antiquity of the Order, from Operative to Speculative; but nothing too involved or profound.

In conclusion, Grand Lodge has recently amended the Book of Constitutions to ensure that a Mentor may be appointed as an Officer of the Lodge. A letter from the District Grand Secretary together with pamphlets from Grand Lodge outlining the roles of the Lodge Mentor and Personal Mentors has recently been sent to each Lodge Secretary. In addition, the District DC team will also be ensuring that each Master Elect is made aware of my wish that a Lodge Mentor be appointed, failing which, if a Brother cannot be identified, the office is regarded as being so important that the Master Elect must take on the responsibility himself.

The prime function of each Lodge Mentor will be to ensure that each Candidate has a Personal Mentor. He will also liaise with the Regional Mentor and District Grand Mentor for guidance and direction. It is the mentoring of each Candidate which will be mainly carried out by the Personal Mentors that is going to be so important. Important to ensure that each Candidate becomes aware and learns about Freemasonry and its ceremonies so that they will have sufficient knowledge and confidence to become Ambassadors to Freemasonry.

This process is of course not restricted to our Candidates, but I hope that as senior members in our District you will also take up the challenge and become Ambassadors for openness.

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