

DISTRICT GRAND LODGE OF SOUTH AFRICA, NORTH

Of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of England



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The way forward:

An address given by Guy Charlesworth, DistGM, South Africa, North

at the annual briefing session of District Officers, 31 August, 2011.

This address is based substantially on a paper presented by Lord Northampton, the Past Pro Grand Master in 2005 to the Cornerstone Society, London.

We belong to the biggest Grand Lodge in the world with a membership of some 272 000 Masons spread over the four quarters of the globe. Throughout Provinces, Districts and the London Metropolitan area, great efforts are being made by many Brethren to recruit, retrieve and retain our members (The Masonic “Three R’s”) with various schemes designed for that purpose. However, something is not right with our Anglo Saxon Freemasonry. The overall picture is far from satisfactory as you will appreciate from the following figures.

Statistics show that across the Constitution, we have lost 40% of our membership in as little as 30 years. Our more recent losses are often blamed on the fact that a 1000 Lodges were consecrated in the five years following the Second World War to accommodate men returning from active service and wanting to join a fraternity. But that is not the whole story, as most of those Brethren have long since passed to the Grand Lodge above. We continue to shrink at the rate of between 2-3% every year. Whilst the decline has lessened in the past couple of years, no doubt through concerted efforts, we still need to work hard at maintaining and growing our membership.

On a District level, we have declined 33% over the last 10 years, however, we have fared better than our Sister Constitutions. With decreasing numbers, we have several lodges that are struggling to survive with fewer members. The situation is made even worse when low attendance figures are factored in. It is not easy to see how we can correct this situation except by encouraging lodges to consider closing or amalgamating when their numbers drop below a viable level.

Lord Northampton reports that a recent survey held in the Province of Buckinghamshire showed that 30% of all Master Masons ceased attending their lodges within 3 years of being raised. Presumably, because they have not bonded with their peers and they have no real understanding of the meaning of the ritual.

The quality of Members is more important than their quantity, but it is of course possible and preferable to have both. There are plenty of “just upright and free men of sound judgment and strict morals” in society, if only we could attract them to join us.

The final statistic we must add into the equation is the number of certificates issued by Grand Lodge. In the past ten years alone the number of men we initiate annually has fallen by 30% from just under 12,000 to 8,400. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out that within the next twenty five years English Freemasonry could well have shrunk to as little as half its present size. This means that one in every two lodges will have disappeared and even then we will not have increased the low numbers we may have in the remaining ones. The extra financial pressures on our members will become intolerable and there will be a corresponding knock on effect on our Masonic charities and the number of Masonic Halls that will remain sustainable. It is clear, therefore, that doing nothing now is not an option, but knowing what to do and how to do it, is something on which we should all concentrate.

It is Lord Northampton’s view that in order to plan for the future we must first look back at our roots and understand the reasons why we were formed and have survived. We spend too much time worrying about “when” rather than “why” we were created. What was in the minds of those men who started Freemasonry and what was the purpose behind it?

Of course we know that some form of what we call Freemasonry was being practised in the late 16th Century in England, long before our first recorded initiate, Elias Ashmole, was introduced to a lodge in Warrington by Henry Mainwairing in 1646.

This was a period when certain men of great intellect were planning a future society as an utopian ideal. Francis Bacon’s book “The New Atlantis” is full of Masonic symbolism and describes an island where just such a perfect society existed. Unfortunately, such a vision could not be grounded in Europe, with its political intrigue and religious intolerance. Hence the attempt to do so in America through the Virginia Company which they believed would provide the perfect conditions for just such a society. Whether Freemasonry was influenced by this ideal of perfection is difficult to prove but it is certainly one of the main themes running through our rituals.

So we can say with certainty that some form of philosophical fraternity existed in the late 16th Century and part of its ethos was to counter political and religious intolerance. Freemasonry has retained that as part of its ethos to this day as it refuses still to allow any member, whether in Lodge or in his capacity as a Freemason, to discuss or to advance his views on theological or political questions. This fraternity which stood for freedom of expression or thought had to be kept secret at a time when men were beheaded for holding different views to the Church and Monarch. Since that time, the Order has gone through varying periods of openness and intense privacy, but even in its early days the rituals were widely known through exposures of one kind or another. Nowadays we are just coming out of a period of privacy and are developing a more open approach with the popular world.

The fact is that this is a brotherhood which was designed for the improvement of the soul of man, but however hard we try to show ourselves in a true light we are always faced with two questions – who are we and what we do in our lodges?

The answer has traditionally been that our members feel that they will be discriminated against if it is known that they are Masons, and what we do is private and nobody else's business. Of course there are brethren who genuinely fear they will be discriminated against if their membership becomes known, but society now expects transparency in everything that it perceives may affect it adversely. We cannot hope to change our member's fear of discrimination unless we change the perceptions which cause it and to do that we have to explain to the popular world the good things that Freemasonry stands for, and talk openly about the lessons that are taught in our rituals. I don't think I need to remind you all, that our Grand Master, HRH The Duke of Kent has been promulgating a policy of "openness" since 1984.

It is now generally acknowledged that the "secrets" of Masonry are only the modes of recognition without which you cannot witness our ceremonies – the grips, tokens and words of the three degrees. These have been exposed on numerous occasions but all Masons promise not to reveal them to the uninitiated, in part to keep cowans and intruders out of our ceremonies but also to show that we can be trusted to keep a promise. The "mysteries", which we also promise not to disclose are something completely different. Any member of the public can buy a copy of the Emulation ritual book and tens of thousands of lady masons have done so over many years. The vast majority of the ceremonies are there in full for all to read, the main exception being those words which relate to the modes of recognition and the preparation of the candidate. So if anyone wants to know what we get up to in our ceremonies why not suggest they buy the ritual book and read it for themselves. Before anyone gets upset, let me stress that you cannot discover the mysteries of Freemasonry by reading the ritual book. You have to go through the process of initiation to realize and unlock the mystery, because it is a felt experience. You cannot understand it in any other way than by doing it; just as you cannot learn to swim by reading an instruction manual.

We are the inheritors of an important initiation system containing universal truths, some form of which has probably been in existence for thousands of years. During that time it has been a beneficial guiding influence on the evolution of humanity and our present day Freemasonry is no exception. The three degrees of Masonry are like symbolic rehearsals for those major initiations that we must all take on our journey of Self discovery. Thus Freemasonry is a system which guides man in his search of the sacred. The three degrees equate to body, mind and spirit, the three essential parts of man.

In the first degree, the emphasis is on the physical and its objective is "from darkness to light". It is symbolized by the rough ashlar and the working tools are those implements needed to work on the unshapen stones brought to light from the darkness of the quarries. The consciousness of the first degree is at the level of instinct.

In the second degree the emphasis is on the powers of the mind and its objective is “from ignorance to knowledge”. It is symbolized by the smooth ashlar and the working tools are designed to perfect and prove the stone after rude matter has been brought into due form. The consciousness of the degree is at the level of intellect.

In the third degree, the emphasis is on spirit and the objective is to build the Temple, “ not made with human hands, eternal in the Heavens”. Its symbol is the blazing star, its consciousness is at the level of intuition, the voice of Nature.

The objectives of the three degrees – illumination through the search for light, wisdom through the increase in knowledge, and transformation through the process of death and renewal – portray the story of the evolution of human consciousness leading ultimately to enlightenment.

So how does any of this help our Freemasonry in its present decline ?

The reasons why men persevere and enjoy their Masonry are complex and will be different for each of us. On the one hand there are those brethren who are looking for companionship alone and Freemasonry provides them with a friendly and trusting environment. Then there are those who value the contribution the Craft gives to charity, and are motivated by a desire to help those less fortunate than themselves, both Masons and non-Masons alike. Some like the chance to perform the rituals and work hard to ensure high standards are maintained in our ceremonies. Others make a study of freemasonry from an historical or social perspective. Then there are those who choose to explore the inner and more esoteric aspects of the ritual in order to discover more about Freemasonry and themselves. It is for the latter that we need to give a better understanding of the inner meanings of the Craft; partly to encourage a better study of Freemasonry and partly to increase the amount of knowledge in the Order as a whole. The success of such a venture will only be judged by the effect it has on those who are interested and want to deepen their knowledge of the true nature of the Order.

Our Masonry has strayed from its original purpose and no longer teaches its candidates the fundamental truths which underpin the Craft. Educating our members about the purpose of Masonry should be a priority. That is why the initiative to start a Mentor and Orator schemes has been implemented by Grand Lodge. Much continental masonry, which continues to thrive, and Latin American masonry, which is the fastest growing masonry in the world, insists on the candidate becoming proficient in and having an understanding of any degree they have taken before allowing them to progress further. They have to write papers and answer questions on the ceremony they have experienced before they are allowed to move to the next degree. Do we really consider the questions our candidates have to answer before being passed and raised really give “ proofs of proficiency” in the former degree ? I don’t think so.

However, as well as educating our members I believe it is important also that we educate the public at large. We need to explain ourselves and what we do to non masons who show a genuine interest in us. We must be able to explain in layman’s language the lessons we are taught in our lodges.

I strongly believe that the way forward for Anglo Saxon masonry as advocated by Lord Northampton, is for its members to be encouraged positively to talk about the ritual in simple English, avoiding all Masonic jargon. Instead of saying “Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth”, try and explain in other simple appropriate words. The real test comes when you are asked to explain Freemasonry in words of one syllable to someone at a dinner party. Obviously care must be taken in not exposing too much to prospective candidates so as to dilute the effect the ceremonies will have on a future candidate.

So how do we go about addressing a group of non-Masons. A talk on Freemasonry could include its symbols and its principles. Passages could be quoted from the Charge after Initiation to give an idea of what a Candidate is taught in the rituals. The working tools could be briefly explained and how we moralise on their uses (I’m not suggesting actual ritual is presented, rather an explanation is given in one’s own words). Importantly, it needs to be stressed that Freemasonry is a system without dogma and doctrine which leads us through three ceremonies on a progressive path from ignorance to enlightenment. As a Brother passes from an Entered Apprentice through the various degrees, and by holding various Offices to the Master’s Chair hopefully he develops his intellect, leadership qualities, self confidence, his ability in public speaking, tolerance, kindness, compassion, service to others, open heartedness, social responsibility, temperance, and above all self awareness.

If we all make an effort in explaining Masonry to laypeople in suitable terms we *can* make a difference in how we are perceived. Above all we must stress how enjoyable it is. The brotherhood will come to an end if it ceases to be fun. I might add that the Festive Board is an equally important part of our meetings. Care should be taken to maintain high standards and to hold it in a convivial atmosphere.

If we inspire our Members to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge and attract men to join us because of its exciting message, we will be able to slowly turn the Craft in the direction for which it was founded.

Brethren, I have no intention, as District Grand Master to go down with a slowly sinking ship. So I have put the following initiatives into place:

First, at the Annual meeting last October, I appointed W Bro Roger Webster as the first District Grand Mentor. Roger has been extremely busy visiting lodges in several identified Masonic areas. To date he has visited some 60 Lodges delivering a motivational presentation on the First Degree. He has also addressed non-Masons at several organized functions and has been busy laying the ground-work to identify regional Mentors. Following my recent visit to Cape Town where I attended a regional meeting of District Grand Masters, chaired by the Grand Secretary, we were informed that at the forthcoming December Communication of Grand Lodge, it will be proposed that the Office of Lodge Mentor will be instituted. The full ramifications and the scope of his duties will be announced in due course, but the prime concern of the Lodge Mentor will be to act as a coordinator in Lodge, to give oversight that each Candidate will be mentored by a

senior member of the Lodge. He will also interact and have a reporting role to the Regional or Group Mentor and the District Grand Mentor. From recent surveys in England it has been noted that 80% of the Mentor's time will have to be addressed towards pastoral care. It is in this field that most of the causes of withdrawal of our new Candidates lie. I might add, that this new lodge office is considered to be extremely important by the High Rulers and Masters will have to look at suitable appointments extremely carefully.

Secondly, at the last Annual meeting I also expressed the wish to see Masonic seminars re-established, similar to those presented by W Bro Grosskopff, a number of years ago. In consultation with the District Grand Mentor, I am grateful that Lyceum Lodge of Research has come to the fore and agreed to assist in Masonic education. As an academic I am only too well aware that Research and teaching go hand-in-hand. A good teacher undertakes active research and a good researcher shares his findings in his teaching. Here at Park Lane we have a rather unique scenario, with over 36% of our Lodges operating out of Park Lane and some 50% of our membership concentrated in the Gauteng area. So I am delighted that members of Lyceum have agreed to hold a series of seminars: **1) The prospective Mason:** This will be designed for the prospective candidate and will be open to members of the public and Ladies alike. I have offered Park Lane as a venue and have encouraged a walk-through tour of the building to be part of this initiative. **2) The new-made Mason:** A seminar for the EA, F/C and new Master Mason. Currently this is designed for the Entered Apprentice and the first seminar was held recently, and **3) Masters in the Making:** A seminar to assist Wardens and prospective Masters to plan for their year in the Chair.

I'm sure further seminars will be designed to delve into the Second and Third degrees, for those who are qualified. Because these series of seminars are being held in the name of and for the benefit of the District, I have directed that the District Grand Mentor gives oversight on the content and form of presentation of these seminars. I am adamant that these seminars must be of a fully professional standard and best given as powerpoint presentations, with suitable handouts for participants. They should not be designed as a debating society meeting or workshops. If there is a call for workshops, then they should be organised separately.

Thirdly, following discussions with the W Master and Brethren of District Grand Stewards Lodge, I am pleased to announce that they have agreed to introduce, in addition to their regular demonstrations, a narrated demonstration working, to take to various Lodges. I am hopeful that the demonstration can be suitably choreographed by the DC of DG Stewards Lodge (W Bro Chris van Gaalen) and the script produced by the District Grand Mentor, W Bro Roger Webster. Obviously these two Brethren will have to work together to produce the final product. Here I am looking for a single script and not a multitude of different versions from individuals. Secondly, the explanation has to be deliberately kept simple, sufficient to explain the ceremony in simple terms in the time available but to whet one's appetite for further insight into the ritual.

Two other important incentives are in an advanced stage of implementation. The first is that President Lodge will be moving to Park Lane from its Installation ceremony on 22nd October and

will then become a lodge dedicated to admitting University Graduates and Undergraduates. I have asked W Bro Chris van Gaalen to champion this initiative and together with some relatively young Past Masters, I am hopeful that the Lodge will sign up as part of the University Scheme of Lodges chaired by the Assistant Grand Master, RW Bro David Williamson. The second initiative is the implementation of the Connought Club to serve specifically under 35year old Freemasons. I have asked W Bro Colin Robinson to act as my liaison with the Club. The official launch will be in early December. Meanwhile, the Club is making enormous strides and giving young Masons a suitable vehicle to interact and network with one another.

Finally, I must just add that the welfare of the Brethren in the District has not been forgotten. I am putting in place an initiative with the incoming President of the Board of Benevolence, W Bro Brian Kretzschmar and his Board, a programme to address the appointment and duties of Lodge Almoners. I am deeply concerned about the lack of Almoners' duties in many lodges and I would like this issue addressed fairly urgently so that we as a District can be in a position to set up a scheme to access the Grand Samaritan Fund in Grand Charity. More news on this will be forthcoming.

Although these several initiatives are being put in place, the overall success as to whether this great District of ours will show growth again will critically depend on your assistance. It cannot be done by myself alone, I need your help. In the first instance, as senior members of the District, I would like you all to spread the word as to what we are aiming to do and I look for your support.

Bibliography

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