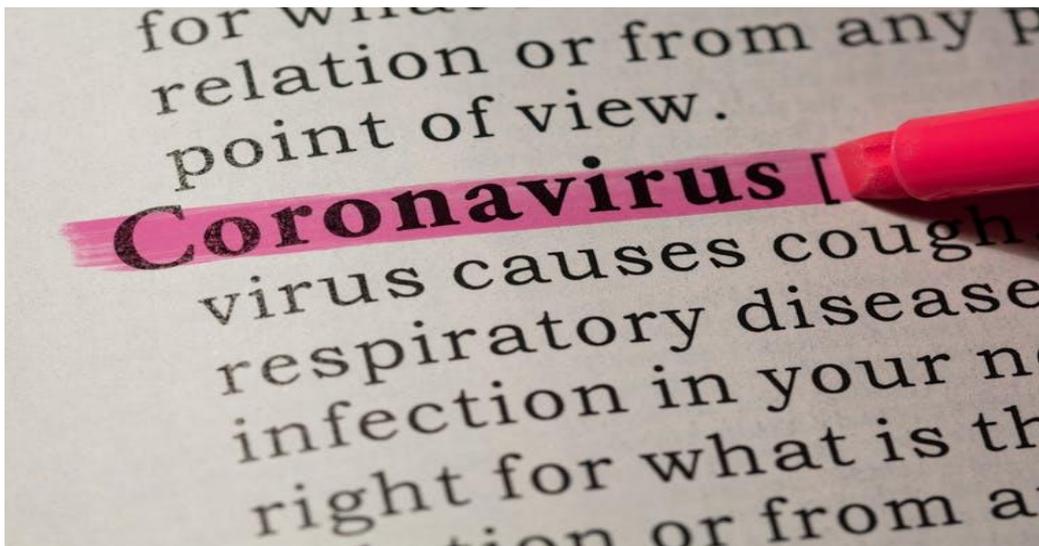




Annual Meeting, District Grand Lodge of South Africa, North
DepDGM's Address - 03 October 2020



~~YESTERDAY~~
NOW
~~TOMORROW~~

Brethren, welcome to the 125th Annual Meeting of District Grand Lodge and thank you for your attendance here today.

To all those who have received first appointments, promotions and appointments to active office, my most hearty congratulations to you. The honour bestowed ought to be celebrated and I encourage you to harness every energy to collectively embrace what the immediate future will present. Together we will adapt and overcome, and once again look forward to being summoned to a meeting. Our Annual Meeting although peppered with Masonic business, heralds a fresh start to a new Masonic year. A clear and structured plan is being established, encouraging the prospect of returning to Masonic activity.

Believe me when I say that nobody wants to re-establish our institution to its former standing more than me right now. Although the prospect of navigating the COVID-19 regulations as a preamble to the new masonic year is daunting, I'm nevertheless most optimistic and encouraged by the prospect of summoning the Brethren as soon as is reasonably possible, subject to the compliance procedures being fulfilled.

This year marks a milestone in the District's existence, one hundred and twenty five years young. Some might remember twenty five years ago when we enjoyed our Centenary celebration at the World Trade Centre, Kempton Park. The Centenary celebration was marked by a special concession, whereby Entered Apprentices and Fellow of Craft were permitted attendance and witnessed the 100th Annual Meeting. In the future, Brethren will perhaps look back on today's proceedings and recall the beginning of fundamental adjustments to what we previously considered "normal" and how we adapted and overcome, time will reveal all.

So much of how we manage our time is governed by current regulations limiting social contact and dictating the circumstances under which we meet. My address will be referencing the importance of the NOW, relying on the experience of YESTERDAY in order to prepare for TOMORROW.

The Ancient and Honourable Institution of Free and Accepted Masons, like an expertly polished diamond, has many facets. The experience of the master craftsman shaping each unique stone to its full potential presents value to what was a rough stone. The hidden flaws and imperfections honed to reveal the true diamond, the true Mason within.

At some point in our Masonic journey, we have been asked, What is Freemasonry? And should your audience ask a more difficult question, they might ask, What defines you as a Mason? Brethren, how might you answer? What experience would you draw on to reply with confidence! Would it be your YESTERDAY?

Whilst extrapolating this question, you might be asking yourself: How did I become involved? Who shaped my journey? What or who inspires me? As alluded to, like a diamond, the many facets of being a Freemason, expertly shaped by those you have held in high esteem, to reveal the very best within yourself. Is it: structure, fraternity, belonging to, participating in, or supporting humanity with

charity and compassion. Whatever the defining reasoning, it is pertinent to you, it is for you to recognise what defines you as a mason.

Your YESTERDAY will define our recovery, post COVID. Our collective experiences and many facets of excellence are critical in the post Covid renaissance of tomorrow. It's what defines you as a mason that will define our TOMORROW.

Navigating our Covid Exit (CovEx) will require structure, fraternity, participation, support, charity and understanding. Yes brethren, *Yesterday's news requires action NOW to define Tomorrow's result.*

So where do we find ourselves now? Referring to COVID-19 statistics incorporating infections, recoveries and fatalities, one could argue for and against exactly how this pandemic has impacted our lives. The District of South Africa, North encompasses three provinces, as well as Mauritius, Botswana and eSwatini, countries that have or are about to open their borders to the outside world and will, in all likelihood, have to combat the possibility of imported infections. The "first wave" has been traversed. Opening borders and relaxing regulations governing social gatherings will, in all probability, result in a resurgence or "second wave". A far greater understanding of the Coronavirus is required, coupled to the available statistics and not losing sight of compliance regulations and the future prospect of a vaccine, remain barriers to a safe return to Freemasonry for all our members. Much patience and understanding is required.

The suspension of all Masonic activity, including meetings and social events, was imposed on the 21st March and reinforced on the 8th June of this year. Today I once again reinforce the suspension of all Masonic meetings. To reiterate, Craft and Royal Arch masonry in the District of South Africa, North remains in a state of suspension with the exception of Mauritius and Botswana who have, by dispensation, permission to summon and convene meetings.

Level one lockdown regulations permit social gatherings as defined by the Government Disaster Management Act¹. The notice of suspension issued by R W Bro Charlesworth on the 21st March 2020 placed all Masonic activity including social events under suspension.

As a first step toward the exit strategy I, with immediate effect, lift the suspension on Masonic social events.

As previously stated, in my opinion relaxing regulations governing social gatherings will, in all probability, result in a resurgence or "second wave". Should you be wondering why I am cautious on one hand and yet permit gatherings on the other, the answer is balance.

This virus will be with us for a while Brethren, and until effective vaccines have been developed and administered, COVID-19 will continue to linger. Maintaining sanitising, wearing of masks and social distancing will go a long way to safeguard and mitigate infections. The reality is that we are social beings, we crave social acceptance and enjoy the company of family and friends. The same could be

¹ Disaster Management Act, (57 of 2002). Declaration of a National State of Disaster dated 15 March 2020 and subsequent Amendments.

said of Freemasonry. We crave the structure and fraternity Masonry presents and enjoy the company of our Masonic family. An equilibrium must be struck, it's my opinion the longer we remain apart the more difficult it will be to come together again and so a balance must be allowed to develop.

To recap: Your defining Masonic facets will support and reinforce our exit strategy.
Suspension of all Masonic meetings remains in place for the time being.
...and Masonic social gatherings suspension lifted.

Over the past five months the District of South Africa, North has hosted virtual meetings between all the English Constitution District Grand Masters, and District and Provincial Grand Masters of the Irish, Scottish and GLSA Constitutions, as well as Heads of the Progressive Orders and Independent Degrees. These meetings had a single purpose in mind, to reach consensus and unite in resolve to suspend meetings until a safe exit period is established to return to Masonic activity.

As the time is drawing near to implement the CovEx strategies, new virtual meetings will be convened for the purpose of reaching consensus on the Memorandum of Understanding regarding protocols and procedures for the implementation and enforcement in all Masonic Centres.

The plan is: Regardless of which Masonic centre, Order or Constitution you visit or attend, the protocols and procedures will be endorsed by all the Heads of Orders in our region.

The CovEx Strategy will require additional administration to ensure its correct application. Through consultation it appears that our options are fairly limited with respect to compliance, implementation and enforcement. For a safe CovEx return to a "new normal" we must establish firm but friendly measures to guard against infection. Our very existence depends on our collective effort.

You will be pleased to hear that the District Board of General Purposes, the Committee of the District Grand Charity and the District Board of Benevolence have maintained all their scheduled regular meetings via Zoom social media platform. Remarkably, attendance at these virtual meetings was outstanding, prompting me to encourage participation from the further corners of our District. Mauritius, Botswana and Limpopo province will now participate, by invitation, on the Board of General Purposes and the Committee of the District Grand Charity virtual meetings.

To the members who have served during the past year I thank you. To the new members, I look forward to your active participation and welcome your contributions. To the members who remain on the Boards and the Committee, I thank you for your continued support.

The Coronavirus Pandemic forced a Suspension of Masonic activity, yet the District had to continue functioning. In some respect a higher level of engagement with the Secretariat brought about great opportunities. Firstly, everybody was under lockdown level 5 and arranging Zoom meetings mid-week at midday was distinctly possible.

At this time a "Caring District" initiative was launched, #DONATEMYMEETING, supported by a Pastoral Care message from the District Grand Chaplain. Further attention was given to mental

wellness, with an Anxiety and Stress letter, with referral to the SADAG. (South Africa Depression and Anxiety Group) Social media has played an enormous role in uniting Brethren and Lodges through regular contact on WhatsApp, Zoom or MS Teams chats, and hopefully neutralised to a large degree any anxiety or stress the lockdown regulations had created.

The #DONATEMYMEETING appeal has received and continues to receive valuable contributions. Thank you to all who have most generously contributed. Additional support to the appeal was received from Mark Masters Masons District Grand Lodge of the Transvaal, the Order of the Secret Monitor, the Masonic Charity Foundation, Lodges and members within the district. This program, supporting Brethren with a virtual food voucher, is still in full swing. Please consider referring a Brother in need of support and who is in distress or suffering food insecurity to make use of this fund. Contact W Bro Chris Adams or Lance Epstein for further information. (W Bro Chris Adams m +27 83 654 5555 email adamsc@veripath.co.za, W Bro Lance Epstein m +27 83 600 0006 email lance@zetetic.co.za)

A further initiative referenced during the virtual announcement of Active Officers on the 8th August, is the #LEAVENOBROTHERBEHIND appeal. Many households have lost regular income which could negatively impact the ability to maintain subscriptions. Before a Brother or Companion is lost through financial distress, I appeal to the charity within the Lodge to exercise goodwill and harness the opportunity to support a brother, #LEAVENOBROTHERBEHIND.

An appeal was to be launched at the 125th anniversary celebration of our district, #FRIENDSOFPARKLANE. Although the Heritage Fund is well managed, the cost of running Freemasons' Hall is ever increasing, and the Heritage Fund barely keeps abreast. Hence there are no funds available for major maintenance projects. Detailed reports are being compiled by W Bro Eugene Barnhardt, DistGSuptWks, to ascertain the costs, prioritise and oversee the work required to preserve our asset, the home of English Freemasonry in South Africa, North. Despite the COVID disruption, this appeal will, in time, be launched. Our building is in urgent need of some serious TLC. #FRIENDSOFPARKLANE needs to be championed.

Brethren, The Annual Grand Festival in April at Freemasons' Hall, London was cancelled due to the Pandemic, travel restrictions and the consequent regulations enforcing social distancing at the time. Grand appointments and promotions were conferred, and I congratulate the following Brethren for the honour accorded to them:

1st Appointment:

W Bro Andre Ferreira to **PAGDC**, Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies,
W Bro Dirk Norton to **PAGDC**, Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies and
W Bro Nigel Fenwick to **PGStdB**, Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies.

Promotions:

W Bro Howard Freeman to **PJGD**, Past Junior Grand Deacon and
W Bro Simon Knutton to **PJGD**, Past Junior Grand Deacon.

Well done and well deserved Brethren. As it is the first time they are wearing their various new Grand Ranks, I ask you to give them a round of applause.

I take this opportunity to extend my most sincere appreciation to our secretariat for the exemplary manner in which the execution of their work was dispatched. W Bro Southgate, our Past DistGSec, has enjoyed a remarkable recovery after having spent more than a month in ICU. The passing of the badge of office to W Bro Roland Dunstan has proven most beneficial to the District. W Bro Dunstan, under extremely trying circumstances, you have not failed to impress. We wish you well in all the work to be undertaken and pledge to support the exciting initiatives and innovations that are being worked on. I likewise thank Mrs Fern Rowles, a singular pillar of wisdom and strength. Fern your support to the DistGSec is invaluable and our reliance on your support is not misplaced. Thank you.

To the Past DistGM, I must express my sincere appreciation for your guidance and support. Brethren, well in advance of R W Bro Charlesworth's patent ending, he consulted me on a regular basis and involved me in the decision making processes. Throughout the Covid lockdown, R W Bro Charlesworth has made his time and experience available. The transition period, especially under the present circumstance, requires careful navigation and I am privileged to have the Past DistGM's counsel. R W Bro Charlesworth, when we get to celebrate my installation, I hope to have the opportunity of further expressing our appreciation for what you have done for Freemasonry and the District of South Africa, North in particular. In the interim, the District extends our best wishes and good health to you and Helen whilst exploring the order of: "Nights at Home."

Brother Chains, members of the executive, members of the Boards and Committees. The period that lies ahead is going to be challenging. The District is relying on our judgement and leadership to navigate this COVID disruption. There is going to be nothing that resembles normal for a while, however I firmly believe a healthy dose of enthusiasm and motivation will assist in navigating our CovEx with all the structure, fraternity, participation, support, charity and understanding required to establish confidence. Never before has the saying "The future is in our hands" been truer. Thank you Brethren.

I extend a further welcome to heads of the Progressive Degrees and Independent Orders present today:

- V Ill Bro Charles Burn, 33°, Inspector General of South Africa North-East, Ancient & Accepted Rite.
- R E Kt Prof E Guy Charlesworth, K.C.T., Provincial Prior of the Transvaal, United Order of the Temple and also R W Provincial Grand Master of the Transvaal, Royal Order of Scotland.
- R Ill Bro Paul Knight, District Grand Master of South Africa, Royal and Select Masters; and,
- R Wy Bro Brian McDermott, District Grand Supreme Ruler of South Africa Northern, Order of the Secret Monitor.

Further appreciation for support and assistance in preparing for today's meeting must go to the DistGSec, the DistGTyler and the staff of Park Lane, together with all Brethren participating in the success of today's limited meeting restricting us to less than 50 participants.

Thank you Brethren.

V W Bro Christopher van Gaalen, PGSwdB
DepDistGM – in Charge