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DDGM Talks

Talk Number 4

Topic: Ups and Downs of Membership Numbers?

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UPS AND DOWNS OF MEMBERSHIP NUMBERS

At my visit to Coronation Lodge No. 502, the title of my talk was, "Does Size Really Matter?". This evening I wish to take a further look at Lodge membership by addressing the ups and downs of membership numbers. As St. George's No. 15 is the oldest Lodge in the City of St. Catharines, the second oldest Lodge in the district and the third oldest in the Region of Niagara, I can't think of a better venue to discuss this. Taking a quick look at the 1938 (80 years ago) Annual Proceedings of our Grand Lodge, St. George's No. 15 listed 332 members on their register. Today's membership is 56. So yes, definitely, they have seen their share of ups and downs in membership numbers.

A concern I frequently hear expressed by Masons is that of declining membership. Any expressed concern needs to be confronted, to be sure, but we have to make certain that we confront it positively, rather than with negativism. In that light then, let's consider this "declining membership" situation. Has it always been there? The answer is no...for a basic law of nature is that what declines must at some point have inclined. To be positive, let's look at the "inclines" first.

These inclines, in my mind, come from four possible sources:

- a) A boom area for a community, or an overall population increase;
- b) A snowball/domino effect in membership;
- c) A major crisis or significant event; or
- d) An improved/enhanced image of the organization.

Let's look a little deeper at each of these:

More population or boom era---Since the formation and incorporation of the Regional Municipality of Niagara in 1970, the

population has risen by over 35%, with most of the homes having been built in the north end of the region. This area falls within the catchment of our Masonic district.

We all know that Lodges can get on a roll with new initiates and one new member usually means that some of that person's friends/contacts may become interested and this often times means there could be further new members. Hence, the domino effect.

The Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 and their follow-up had a significant effect on lodge membership. Why would this be? I suggest it was for some of the following reasons;

- (1) An acknowledgment of the frailty of human life (i.e. the mortality rather than immortality) created a closer link with their Great Architect, and prayer was certainly more common.
- (2) Men, after their daily tour of duty, enjoyed getting together with their "friends" and sharing their life's concerns (successes and shortcomings).
- (3) A need for more education was felt both during the war crisis and on the return home and re-entry into the marketplace and the readiness to help one another seems greater in time of great need, hence Masonry's benevolent and charitable features was an attraction to the returning veteran. A highly charged personal crisis often presents the same act of circumstances and thus, a tendency to join groups like the church or Masonry.
- (4) And fourthly, Masonry, as a result of the above three, was able to show an increased presence—its colour, and its order, bore an attraction for the young men of the day. Men were seen going to and from Lodge meetings and this created an interest in "What they were up to".

Having said that then, what about the decline? How or why do we lose brethren? Only in the following ways, I suggest---expulsion, death,

relocation for work and/or life opportunities, demits and suspensions. Let's take a closer look at these.

Expulsions—these are so few that they are not really a concern as far as membership numbers are concerned.

Death—nothing can be done about that—it's a fact of life

Relocation for work and/or life opportunities—if a person moves away, he must be going some other place and if he is a good Mason here, he'll join wherever he goes so Masonry doesn't lose membership wise—similarly our area must at times benefit from relocation here.

Demits or suspensions—I handle these together because they are so similar, one is brought about by the brother himself, the other by the Lodge—but probably for the same reason—he/they are not getting the benefit to stay.

Therein lies the key to decreasing membership numbers---the fourth reason; demits and suspensions. Men are not interested in “so-so” organizations. Men may join, but they just don't stay around long unless they feel they're getting what they came for. How many of our brother Masons leave within five years of their joining? In that regard, and as an aside, how often do Lodges form an Investigating Committee and hear its report before a demit or suspension is agreed upon? We investigate before admitting—shouldn't we investigate before demitting or suspending? And yes, I am proud to say, Grand Lodge has now started such a pilot program with 10 Lodges in this District participating.

I suggest that to keep members committed we need to ensure that EXCELLENCE is indeed there in our Lodges. You should note that I say “excellence in our Lodges”— “excellence” is already there in Masonry. It's how the individual lodge handles Masonry that determines whether a member's satisfaction is what he expected.

What then can we do about that in our Lodges? My suggestion is that we focus on these functions of Masonry which attracted the Brother in the first place.

Strive for excellence in fellowship—ensure that brethren have good personal experiences before, during and after the Lodge meeting.

Strive for excellence in Lodge education and ritual work. We all tend to fight homework, we always did, even the youngest child will fight against learning, but it is learning that makes the youngster a proud, productive member of society. We get great satisfaction out of doing something well and if we don't demand and give credit for excellence in our Lodge routines and personal development, why would any member put forth the effort to achieve...and without effort success is improbable if not impossible.

Let us strive for excellence in our personal well-being privately and publicly. Let us show ourselves as virtuous individuals. At memorial services, at Divine services, at Ploughing Matches, at sport activities and at the annual communication of Grand Lodge. Let us strive for excellence to show the world that Masonry and Lodge membership is a worthy ideal.

And finally, as I mentioned earlier, 1988 was a time of excitement and great expectations as St. George's No. 15 was preparing to celebrate its 175th birthday. Many in the district, including some of their own members, were wondering if St. George's would see its 176th. Attendance had started to lag, candidates for membership seemed few and far between and Past Masters were being recycled into the officer lineup. Fortunately, since then, through prudent management and sound planning, this Lodge has rejuvenated itself back to life. Not in the mass membership numbers it once boasted, but rather in a way of

striving for excellence in the community and amongst their peers. For that they are to be congratulated.

Thank you, Worshipful Brother Monteith, and thank you brethren for your time and attention this evening. Take care.