

MULTI-DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

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Although begun much earlier in other parts of the world, in the Middle Ages a pseudo science called Alchemy riveted the attention of the people of those times. Basically, Alchemy was thought to be a way of turning base metals into gold. What more could one possibly ask than a shortcut to riches?

In many respects Freemasonry today has turned itself into the Alchemists of old. Although our goal is different we nonetheless are looking for a shortcut. A shortcut to membership.

We have tried everything imaginable and that anyone could possibly think of. The most often tried of the new approaches are:

1. Shortened proficiency
2. Lowering the age to petition
3. One day classes.

Each of these programs, when properly used, has an important and significant role to play. **The key is when properly used!**

For example:

1. Shortened proficiency is important for those who have difficulty memorizing.
2. Lowering the age to petition is important for those who want to become Freemasons at an earlier age.
3. One day classes are important for those who truly feel they do not have time to become Freemasons in the accustomed way.

There are many examples that could be given of successful applications in all of these programs and, quite frankly, very few negatives in any of them.

However, we have to understand that they are only stop gap measures.

We have simply got to come to grips with the realization that no matter how quickly we bring in new members, by whatever method we use, we are still losing members faster than we are gaining. The tragedy is, our losses, through Demits and

NPD's, in many cases equal, or are sometimes greater, than the numbers lost through deaths. And, in all cases far greater than new raisings.

What does this statistic tell us? Simply put, our greatest problem is disinterest. Far too many members are leaving because they have no real ties to the Fraternity, have never been shown any ties to the Fraternity, have never experienced any ties to the Fraternity. During the period after WW II we had a membership surge in such great numbers that the individual attention usually given to new members could not keep pace. Today individual attention, that used to be so significant, is not only no longer practiced, it is barely even remembered.

If we cannot retain our current members, why on earth will new members be any more satisfied with the Fraternity and their role in it? The answer of course is, unless we do something positive with new members they won't be satisfied and we can't expect them to be. A stagnant organization cannot grow and, truthfully, that is what we have become.

We are a far cry from the Fraternity that once helped develop Democracy in North America, supported the public school system so that everyone could get an education, and built homes for the Aged and Orphans. We now seem unable to think of anything productive to do. Yet this very statement is not totally fair, because in many cases we are doing things. Some Grand Lodges do try to promote programs, unfortunately; all too often, with little success in the lodges. So what we need to do is stimulate our lodges into action. Action in a positive way. The word action is sometimes terribly misused, but its meaning today is simply to find ways of converting the lethargy of our members into an energetic call to "wake-up and get to work".

Like the alchemist of old, if only there was a magic formula to mix, or a magic wand to wave, to solve all of the issues facing us, how happy we would be. To the best of my knowledge no such answer exists and so we have to face the reality of what is needed in Freemasonry. In my opinion it can best be illustrated by the 3 r's. Remember the old 'readin,' 'writin,' and 'rithmetic' that used to be the hallmark of the school system? We got away from those basic needs and today are paying a heavy price in the quality of education that our children receive.

It is my suggestion that Freemasonry faces the same problem. We have gotten away from the values that Freemasonry truly represents because in today's world they are embarrassing. Who wants to talk about honesty, integrity, truthfulness, morality, and all those crazy things that the "old folks" used to believe in? As one commentator phrased it, "it all sounds so twentieth century".

But, quite frankly, if we do not begin the process of teaching our members, even before that our prospective members, that there is far more to Freemasonry than taking three degrees and signing the by-laws, we shall simply have labored in vain! What Freemasonry truly stands for needs to be communicated, in every possible way, to all our present members and new initiates as quickly as possible and then followed up constantly.

The danger we face is that if we do not place a strong emphasis on fraternalism and the values Freemasonry stands for we may be bringing in new members who will be next years drop-outs.

What can we do? **Start paying more attention to members and develop ways to stimulate their interest in the Fraternity.**

New members must be given something to do, something productive to do, within the Lodge. It doesn't matter if its making them Stewards Assistants responsible for refreshments, or serving on a committee, or teaming a small part in a degree. Until a new member starts experiencing the camaraderie, the friendship, the Brotherhood of Freemasonry he is not going to have any real interest. Give him a reason to come back to lodge!

The importance of stimulating the new member cannot be overstated or overstressed. When you join an organization your excitement and interest are at their highest peak. Unless something happens that is satisfying to the new member they will look elsewhere for things to do. A minister at my church in Vermont used to say about new member's, "use them or lose them". This dictum is as important in Freemasonry as in the church or any other organization.

Programs. Every lodge needs to have something to do. Something in addition to degree work. This in no way minimizes the significance and importance of our degrees, but once they have been completed we have to have additional avenues of interest.

Booklets. Encourage lodges to prepare a booklet giving information about the Lodge. A brief history of the Lodge, the website location if they have one, the Secretary's name and address for contact purposes.

Capture the interest of the new Mason as quickly as you can. And mail a copy to all members.

Masonic Education. Freemasonry has no greater asset than a member who has taken time to learn something about the Fraternity. This is the purpose of Masonic Education and we must give more attention and emphasis to educating our members. Both present members and new initiates.

Programs need to be developed where very basic information about the Fraternity can be made available in easily understood terms. We need Research Lodges for more advanced stages of learning but what we are talking about here is very basic information about the Fraternity. It is very likely that if a search is made within each lodge you will find someone involved in education who is a member of the lodge. That person, given some basic material, could develop a short course to be given to the members.

Walkabout

Past District Deputy in Ontario, Edward Peters, wrote an outstanding article about how to treat a new member coming into Lodge. His idea is to conduct the Brother about the lodge room, explaining the officer stations, who the officers are, what many of the symbols mean, the significance of the altar and much more. Not only is it a great idea for the new Mason, it is also a terrific way to bring back Masons who have not been in lodge for a long time and give them a refresher course.

Rusty Nail Degree

In another Short Talk Bulletin we used an outline from the Grand Lodges of Maine and Missouri about conducting a *Rusty Nail Degree*. This is simply a refresher course for Masons who have not attended lodge and are embarrassed to come back. The degree presents an opportunity for a group of non-attending Masons to be brought together so that they will not feel embarrassed because they don't remember the grips, signs and words. Some lodges even have a certificate made, saying that they have completed a Rusty Nail Degree and in some cases a pin has been made. The object is to reinvigorate members who either have not attended lodge in a very long time or have never attended lodge.

Communication

The Lodge Trestleboard is the only solid communication any lodge has with all of its members. Through the trestleboard current programs can be discussed, future programs can be introduced, and always ask for the Brother's opinion as to their

reaction to how the lodge is conducting its business. Never underestimate the value of the opinion of the Brothers.

Volunteers. It was a shock and almost with disbelief to learn that one of the biggest problems facing the American Red Cross is the lack of Volunteers and the inability to recruit people to volunteer. Our own Hospital Visitation Program suffers from this problem, but it was our feeling at MSA we were facing the same apathy that is a Fraternity wide problem. It seems the public sector is also suffering, almost to a crisis stage, from a lack of volunteers.

Yet if we look at volunteering from a Masonic perspective, what an opportunity for service. It costs nothing in dollars, is easily arranged, and can benefit the public enormously. Let me share with you two examples of volunteering that every lodge could participate in:

1. The school system. Listen to any educator, listen to any teacher, and hear what they have to say about the need for volunteers. Just recently, at the Grand Lodge of Colorado, an educator made an impassioned plea for Masons to volunteer in the public schools. It isn't just cleaning up classrooms. There is an opportunity to help teachers and other openings within the school system that we could fill. The kids love the Volunteers and have a tremendous amount of respect for them. What an opportunity for Freemasonry!
2. The outstanding work done by an organization called Habitat for Humanity. Building low cost housing fulfills a crying need among many who have nowhere to live. Masons could volunteer within this organization and again do outstanding service for the general public. Tennessee has a very successful partnership with Habitat For Humanity.

Cyberspace

There is an aspect of cyberspace that needs to be understood. This was very clearly pointed out by Michael Walker, Grand Secretary of Ireland in an article which we condensed and made into a Short Talk Bulletin. In this article Brother Walker says

"I believe that Brother Michael Yaxley, President of the Board of General Purposes of the Grand Lodge of Tasmania is quite correct when he writes: "Society does have a need for a body such as Freemasonry. I

believe that this need will increase rather than decrease. In the next century the work .place will not offer fellowship and camaraderie sufficient to satisfy the social instincts that people have. Many people will work at home, linked to the office by computer and telephone. Others will work in an office with complex but nevertheless inanimate equipment. The irony of the Age of Communication is that people spend, and will spend, more time by themselves".

The significance of this statement is that if we are going to be alone, more and more, in the future, what an opportunity for Freemasonry. This will give us a chance to provide one of those vital links where people actually communicate, in person, with each other. This is what lodges were intended to do, provide the place where Freemasons work and socialize together. It is one thing to talk about communicating with people around the world through e-mail, but we also need personal contact and Freemasonry offers an excellent opportunity to do that.

Conclusion

We are limited only by our own imagination as to where we can serve. The cost is time, but all of us have time that we can give.

The conclusion then, is that we can continue searching for the overnight cure and continue our position of being the Alchemists of old. Or we can look to Freemasonry as described by A.G. Markham when he said: *In the end, one would like to think it possible to show a proper recognition of Freemasonry as the remarkable historic institution, beneficial to humanity, which it is.*