

Whither Are We Traveling?

By
Dwight L. Smith, P.G.M.
Grand Lodge of Indiana



Whither Are We Traveling?

The Wailing Wall is crowded these days. Masonic leaders, great and small, are lined up, each awaiting his turn to lift his voice in lamentation. The figures show a falling off of membership. Attendance at Lodge meetings is not what it used to be. The thing to do is to adopt this project or that gimmick, and then all will be well. As might be expected, the projects and gimmicks are about as impossible as they are ridiculous.

For several years, the bosom-beating has been going on. Firing with a shotgun rather than a rifle, our leadership has offered little of a constructive nature. Prescriptions for the most part have consisted merely of sales talk for whatever pet scheme was being proposed. Only a few voices in the wilderness have made a mature and realistic appraisal.

I. Faulty Diagnosis

At the outset, I may as well precipitate an argument by disposing of the old favorites:

One: Whatever attendance troubles our Lodges may be having are not caused by television, nor the automobile, nor by bowling, nor togetherness, nor any of the other “busyness” in which our restless society is engaged. A multitude of activities may contribute to a decline in Lodge attendance, but they do not constitute the cause. When we complain of lack of attendance, what we really are saying is that *interest* is at a low ebb, for in any organization, if there is interest, there will be attendance. No amount of television or bowling or endless “busyness” can usurp the position of eminence a Lodge of Freemasons occupies in a man’s loyalty if the Lodge is in a position to command his loyalty.

The ailment isn’t quite that simple. We are looking at the symptoms – not the disease. The real source of the trouble is within ourselves.

Two: Such problems as we may have will not be solved by forcing men to memorize a set of questions and answers, nor by cramming books and lectures down their throats, nor by any Big Brother Plan, nor by devoting our energies and resources to other organizations or movements, however worthy they may be.

The cure isn’t that simple, either. The patient’s indisposition will not be relieved by nostrums. The treatment, too, must come from within.

II. Basic Premises

Next, may I offer what I consider to be three basic premises. Then we shall get down to cases.

First: The history of Freemasonry is one of ups and downs. If this brief period is one of the “downs,” it is nothing compared to some of the crises through which our Fraternity has passed.

Second: In our membership decline, we again see history repeating itself. It simply is a case of our sins catching up with us. We had a decade in which there was a membership influx that was both unhealthy and unhappy. We ran a production line; we counted new members by the hundreds of thousands; but we could count new Masons only by the score. Now comes the payoff.

Third: Whatever is wrong with Lodge attendance in 1962 was wrong 25 years ago when I was Master of my Lodge. I doubt seriously whether Lodge attendance ever has been “what it used to be.” I had to work by head off to sustain interest in 1937. Sometimes I succeeded; sometimes I didn’t. The situation is no different today; tomorrow and the day after it will be the same.

I repeat: we have only to look at ourselves to discover the cause for whatever unhappy days have come upon us. Our troubles are of our own making. Such corrective measures as we take must go beyond the surface; they must go to the roots of the problem or be of no avail.

Then let’s take an honest look at some of the conditions within our own house which may be contributing to a membership decline and a tapering off of interest.

III. Self-Examination

1. **Let’s face it! Can we expect Freemasonry to retain its past glory and prestige unless the level of leadership is raised above its present position?** On many an occasion in the past 14 years, Masters and Secretaries have come into my office to ask my advice on what to do about lagging interest. Again and again I have said, “There is nothing wrong with your Lodge, nor with Freemasonry, that good leadership will not cure.” I believe that.
2. **How well are we guarding the West Gate?** Again, let’s face it. We are permitting too many to pass who can pay the fee and little else. On every hand I hear the same whispered complaint, “We used to be getting petitions for the degrees from the good, substantial leaders in the community. Now we are getting...” Just what it is they are getting, you know as well as I.

3. **Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain?** Fees for the degrees are ridiculously low; annual dues are far too low. Everything is geared to speed – getting through as fast as possible and on to something else. The Lodge demands little and gets little. It expects loyalty, but does almost nothing to put a claim on a man's loyalty. When we ourselves place a cheap value on Masonic membership, how can we expect petitioners and new members to prize it?
4. **Are we not worshipping at the altar of bigness?** Look it in the face: too few Lodges, with those Lodges we do have much too large. Instead of devoting our thoughts and energies to ways whereby a new Master Mason may find a sphere of activity within his Lodge, we let him get lost in the shuffle. Then we nag and harangue at him because he does not come to meetings to wander around with nothing to do. We are hard at work to make each Lodge so large that it becomes an impersonal aggregation of strangers – a closed corporation.
5. **What can we expect when we have permitted Freemasonry to become subdivided into a score of organizations?** Look at it. Each organization dependent upon the parent body for its existence, yet each jockeying for a position of supremacy, and each claiming to be the Pinnacle to which any Master Mason may aspire. We have spread ourselves thin, and Ancient Craft Masonry is the loser. Downgraded, the Symbolic Lodge is used only as a springboard. A shortsighted Craft we have been to create in our Fraternity a condition wherein the tail can, and may wag the dog.
6. **Has the American passion for bigness and efficiency dulled the spirit of Masonic charity?** The "Box of Fraternal Assistance" which once occupied the central position in every Lodge room has been replaced by an annual per capita tax. That benevolence which for ages was one of the sweetest by-products of the teaching of our gentle Craft has, I fear, ceased to be a gift from the heart and has become the writing of a check. And unless the personal element is there, clarity becomes as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.
7. **Do we pay enough attention to the Festive Board?** Should any reader have to ask what the Festive Board is, that in itself will serve to show how far we have strayed from the traditional path of Freemasonry. Certainly the Festive Board is not the wolfing of ham sandwiches, pie and coffee at the conclusion of a degree. It is the Hour of Refreshment in all its beauty and dignity; an occasion for inspiration and fellowship; a time when the noble old traditions of the Craft are preserved.

8. **What has become of that “course of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols,” that Freemasonry is supposed to be?** If it is a course of instruction, then there should be teachers, and if ours is a progressive science, then the teaching of a Master Mason should not end when he is raised. I am not talking about dry, professorial lectures or sermons – heavens no! That is the kind of thing that makes Masonic education an anathema. Where are the parables and allegories? Alas, they have descended into booklets and stunts. No winder interest is so hard to sustain.
9. **Hasn’t the so-called Century of the Common Man contributed to making our Fraternity a little too common?** We can not expect to retain the prestige the Craft has enjoyed in the past if we continue without challenge to permit the standards of the picnic ground, the bowling alley, the private club and the golf links to be brought into the Lodge hall. Whether we like it or not, a general lowering of standards has left its mark on every Lodge in Indiana, large and small.
10. **Are there not too many well-meaning Brethren who are working overtime to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry?** It was an unhappy day when some eager beaver conceived the idea that our Craft should adopt the methods of the service club, or the luncheon group, or the civic league, or the Playboy outfit. Whoever the eager beaver was, he lost sight of the fact that one of the reasons our Fraternity is prized so highly is that it does *not* operate like other organizations.

Well, that should be enough for one dose. The following pages elaborate on the ten points enumerated above.

Let me give you fair warning. In the following essays I shall call a spade a spade. Some of my readers are not going to like it. But what I have to say I believe our Craft needs to hear, and it is only for the “good of the Order” that it is said.

I shall propose no bright new ideas – not one. All I am going to advocate is that Freemasonry remain Freemasonry; and if we have strayed from the traditional path, we had better be moving back to the main line while there is yet time to restore the prestige and respect, the interest and loyalty and devotion that once was ours.