

Don't Panic!

Membership is falling. Candidates are hard to find. Lodges are wondering what to do at meetings. The list of Lodges closing is now exceeding the number being founded. What do we do?

The first thing is to remember the immortal words from Dad's Army, '*Don't panic!*' The fact of the matter is that while our problems may have unique features, we are not alone. Rotary, the Round Table and others are also suffering. The Townswomen's Guild of Romford has closed because it could not get officers. Even sailing clubs on the Blackwater are having a bad time.

So what is wrong - and in particular what is wrong with Masonry? The short answer is 'nothing'. Freemasonry is wonderful, an island of peace and friendship in an increasingly frantic world ... and that is the issue. It is not Freemasonry that has changed - but the world around it.

It is the different between commitment and consumerism. We may define 'commitment' societies as those which depend for their existence upon the members taking responsibility, making a commitment to regular attendance, to contributing to management and to taking office. Without such a commitment, such societies must die. Management becomes increasingly dependent upon fewer and fewer people, maintenance work has to be put out to commercial suppliers, overhead costs per head increase as membership declines, fees escalate, a negative spiral ensues and sooner or later the inevitable results occurs.

We can differentiate such societies from 'consumer' clubs, an example of which might be a country club, owned and run independently from the membership. Reduced attendance per head is actually a profit opportunity for such a club as it enables more memberships to be sold without overcrowding. In fact, the ideal member is one who pays the fee and never attends. In the case of the consumer club, members 'snack' on their membership. They attend when they want to, when it is desirable, when it fits their schedules. Non-attendance is not a matter for guilt, it is a matter of choice. Such organisations are *clubs* only in name. They are, in reality, part of the leisure *industry*. A commitment society is very different. It can only survive if its members see it as more central to their lives, where membership implies duties and when non-attendance, to one degree or another, is letting down the

other members. The commitment society has a moral dimension to it while the consumer club does not. The latter is not immoral, it is just that membership of it implies no duties.

We might argue that there is a general movement in our society, away from commitment to consuming. The pressures of work - greater today than ever before - the pressures of a family whose expectations are greater than ever before, the increasing (and correct) equality of the sexes such that women (quite rightly) are not content to run the family while the husband indulges his 'hobbies', are all pressures on anyone's ability to commit to things. To the extent that this is true, then commitment societies will continue to decline.

So what do we do? We stick to our values. If Freemasonry attempts to change too much, to become more like a consumer club, it will only hasten its decline. If you asked St Laurence Lodge No 5511 Brethren what they get out of membership, they might say many things. However most would agree that they gain immense fellowship, mutual support, a feeling of doing the right things, a sense of continuity with the past and indeed with the future, the satisfaction of ritual well performed, perhaps an enjoyment of the 'theatre' aspects, a great deal of laughter, a few drinks, a good meal and *something special*, not easy to put into words - a feeling of something beyond oneself, something that lifts one onto a slighter higher plane of behaviour, that makes you want to live up to the ideals of Freemasonry. The same might be said by members of other Lodges.

There is more to Masonry than charity, more than a few beers and a laugh and it is this 'something special' which is our differentiating factor. Lose that and we lose everything. This 'something special' is not fashionable today. That does not mean that the fashion will always remain the same. Sooner or later, all fashions and all cultures change. What we have to do is to survive until the change occurs. It has happened in the past.

In his excellent *Provincial Grand Lodge of Essex, 1776-1976*, W. Bro. Keith S. Buck, PAGDC, PPGW writes that the first recorded Lodge in Essex was that meeting at the Three Cups in Colchester whose first meeting was on November 25, 1735, a Lodge which in 1752 moved to the Angel Inn in Colchester becoming the Angel Lodge -now number 51, the oldest Lodge in Essex. Early Lodges

were warranted in Braintree - at the Horn Inn as number 156 - in Romford at the King's Head in the Market Place as number 182 and in Chelmsford, the Lodge of Perfect Friendship No 308. In 1764, the St Nicholas Lodge, No 317 was founded in Harwich and in 1772, the Lodge of Freedom No 430 at Maldon. That Lodge in was quickly erased but the other four survived through to 1776 when that great Mason, Thomas Dunkerley, became the first Provincial Grand Master of Essex.

By 1813, there were 15 Lodges in Essex. Given the small population of Essex and the difficulties of travel at that time, this counts as growth. The total population of England and Wales in 1760 was about 7 million. (Today it is about 55 million.) Chelmsford had about 2,500 inhabitants. The coach took ten hours to get from London to Colchester, the time that it takes today to fly from London to Singapore, and even though Colchester was a relatively important place as the centre of the Essex wool trade, it had a population of only 9,000.

However, that early growth did not continue. By 1832, there were again only four Lodges in the province. Essex lost two-thirds of its Lodges - exactly the same proportion lost by English Masonry in general which declined from 647 to 424 Lodges. The decline of Masonry was further hastened in Essex by a lack of leadership of the Province for there was no Provincial Grand Master from 1823 to 1836.

We can be very grateful to a small number of enthusiastic Masons at this time, who set out to preserve Lodges in danger and to preserve Essex Masonry as a whole. One of these Masons, Bro. Buck tells us, was a Brightlingsea shopkeeper James Webb, reputedly the ugliest man in the town, who was initiated in the Angel Lodge in Colchester in 1834. At the age of 45, he is said to have walked to Colchester and back for Lodge meetings, a round trip of 20 miles. That's leadership by example.

So the decline we are experiencing is nothing new. Even the attacks on Freemasonry are nothing new. The first attack on Freemasonry that I know of was published in 1698. *"For this devilish sect of men are meeters in secret which swear against all without their following. They are the anti-Christ which was to come leading men from fear of God. For how should men meet in secret places and with secret*

signs taking care that none observe them to do the work of God; are not these they ways of evil-doers?"

So it is back to us. Even if we are a little less ugly than James Webb, we should still emulate his leadership and commitment. However, *exhortations* to commitment will have little effect on their own. If I am right that there is a shift from commitment to consumerism in our society, exhortations will be as effective as King Canute. So what *practical* things can we do?

In my mind, it is vital that we remember that the private Lodge is the root and branch of Freemasonry. By private Lodge, I mean the ordinary Lodges - not Installed Masters' Lodges, not research Lodges or even Grand Lodges, as valuable as these may be. If the private Lodge is in trouble, if the roots stop doing their job, then the leaves fall off the tree. If the private Lodge fails, then wave goodbye to the Royal Arch, the other degrees in general, to Provincial Grand Lodge and to Grand Lodge itself. We need to do all we can to protect the private Lodge and the continuity and history that many of them command.

In my mind, this means a refusal to allow the foundation of new Lodges. With a declining membership, new Lodges just mean fewer members per Lodge. Some new Lodges may appear to be needed for reasons of demographic shift. Equally, many seem to have other motivations and a few actually seem to be about to kill off the Lodges that sponsored them. So no new Lodges. Let us manage the demographic issues, not by closing a failing Lodge with a history and creating a new one without any tradition, but by enabling, and more importantly encouraging, Brethren to 'take over' failing Lodges and move them to the desired location. This was done frequently at the beginning of the 19th century, when the Secret Societies Act prevented the creation of new Lodges.

Let us build upon Brotherly Love. Let us make it honorific to manage the *merger* of Lodges, make it easy to create combined names and crests, enable the resultant combined Lodge to date itself from the consecration of the oldest constituent Lodge and create a Ceremony of Brotherly Love to consecrate a merger - a ceremony that is attended by the highest ranking Freemasons in the province. Let us issue special 'Brotherly Love' jewels to replace founders' jewels.

Let us encourage our Lodges to carry out different workings in their Temples. The routine of initiation, passing and raising gets a bit dull anyway and with the falling numbers of candidates is less and less the staple diet of the private Lodge. Let us create a slate of speakers, demonstration teams, and theatrical groups and use the honour system to support and motivate them. Let us issue a jewel - crossed actors' masks? - to thank people for their effort and commitment.

Let us revisit the workings of the 18th century Lodges, who did not spend all - or even much - of their time on the three degrees. The staple in those days was composed of the Lectures. Let us revisit these almost forgotten gems, especially those derived from the creative mind of William Preston. Let us create a team in Essex, in a way similar to the Lodge of Promulgation, that can perform, teach and encourage others to carry out the lectures. Let the leadership of Freemasonry in the province not only recognise this but actively support it. Ensure that whenever a Lodge does something special, an Assistant Provincial Grand Master attends.

Leadership is best carried out by example. We may need more APGM's because we need more and more to be seen actively to be supporting and encouraging the private Lodge. The rules, as they stand today, restrict the number of APGM's in a Province. Worse than this, the rules actually motivate an increase in Lodges because the number of APGM's is related to the number of Lodges. This is wrong and we should lobby Grand Lodge for change. A visit once every two years is *not* leadership. In times of stress and trouble, leadership has to be more visible, not less.

We need to recognise that our Freemasonry is about to become more expensive. It is simple business mathematics. For example, the overhead costs of temples are fairly fixed. Buildings require upkeep and refurbishment and this is not related much to the number of people that use them. So as our numbers decline, so the (overhead) cost per head will increase. Caterers have to make a profit. If they do not, then they go out of business. As the number of diners declines, so their profit declines - in fact almost exponentially. Caterers have overheads too and the fewer people that dine, the more that overhead has to be loaded on the rest of the diners. So we will have to pay more in dues and almost certainly more in dining costs. The latter may put Brethren off from inviting many guests and so a

vicious circle may be set up - a further decrease in diners and a further increase in costs. This is another reason why we should consecrate no new Lodges. Fewer members per Lodge just means greater overhead costs per member.

What can we do about this? We may have to set some priorities. Charity is almost a landmark of the order but we may well have to cut our coats according to the cloth. Lodges might be better advised to start, right now, to build up reserve funds - not in their Benevolent Association but in the main Lodge accounts. Such reserve funds will be necessary to pay for levies from the Masonic hall, to subsidise dining costs, particularly for those Brethren who are least capable of handling an increase in dues and dining fees, and even to assist less well-off Brethren to continue their membership. To build up such reserve funds, Lodges may well divert some of what used to be charitable donations and may well make appeals to those Brethren, who have a little more money than others, to donate to the Lodge itself. This again needs leadership. We need to give Lodges guidance on this and the provincial leadership needs to put together some advice and ground rules. It is not that we do not wish to be charitable. It is just that if we do not exist, there is no charity. The world economy will reinforce this trend. If you travel to the Far East, then you will take the situation seriously. This is no joke and no passing matter. Things are about to get *really* tough.

We need to use central provincial funds as well. Essex has, in the past, built up a substantial Provincial Charity Fund. We cannot, and should not, touch this but we could commence, perhaps as soon as Festival 2000 is over, to appeal for funds to form a provincial subsidy fund which might be used to help the refurbishment of temples and so on. We need to offer recognition to Brethren who contribute to such a fund in a way similar to the way we recognise festival stewards.

We need to recognise that more and more work is about to fall on fewer and fewer people. Finding Secretaries and Treasurers may become more and more difficult. We need therefore to make their work as easy as possible. We must set up a working party to simplify reporting, reducing the number of forms and getting rid of the duplication of information requirements. In this day and age, it should not be difficult to create computer packages for secretaries and treasurers and it should be possible to start using e:mail and the Internet in general for information flows. Perhaps we can institute another

provincial rank - Provincial Grand Computer Buff! In particular, we should stop sending material to Lodge Secretaries for onward transmission - for example to Almoners and Charity Stewards. This adds to a burden and adds to the cost of postage. We have the addresses of the right people and there is no reason why we cannot send direct.

There are probably many other things we must do - and I am sure that the *Essex Mason* is a good medium through which such ideas can be expressed. In short, in my view, we need to take urgent action now to batten down the hatches a bit, in expectation of a period of rough seas, so that the ship is still afloat when calmer waters return. If we do, and if we maintain our values and traditions, then I am convinced that the world will change again and we shall experience another turn in the cycle.

Let us make no mistake. The barque of Masonic life is about to experience some rough seas indeed. The helmsman will need a sure touch and a keen weather eye. More than anything, it is a matter of 'back to basics'. The past, present and future of Freemasonry is in the private Lodge. Let us concentrate our efforts in this direction.