

Addressing the Membership Crisis in Virginia

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That there is a crisis in Freemasonry regarding the decline of our membership requires no tabulation of our losses. Suffice it to say that, on a national basis, our membership is at its lowest level since 1920. In Virginia, our losses began in 1971 and, in the ensuing twenty-three years have cost us 25% of our strength. What began as a trickle has now grown into a cataract of deaths, demits, and suspensions for nonpayment of dues.

When I succeeded to the Grand East on the tragic death of Most Worshipful Werner H. Morlock, it soon became apparent that action must be taken to stem this relentless wave of losses. Dire predictions had been made, based on computer projections, of the complete destruction of the Craft in Virginia by the year 2010, unless something was done.

Many of my predecessors had recognized the problem confronting us and had made some effort to alleviate it. But these fell far short of the intended goal of showing a positive growth. What was needed was a comprehensive approach to the crisis. The time was long past for patchwork remedies and blithe continuation in our traditional course, downward though it might be. In consultation with the Grand Lodge officers, a twenty-three step program was devised for membership renewal. We recognized that considerations of available time and funds meant that all could not be accomplished in a few short months. Rather, a long term approach, extending over several years, was needed to achieve the desired results. Nevertheless, initial indications make it probable that we will experience positive growth this year for the first time since 1971!

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Several of the steps in our renewal program are based on projects earlier placed in operation. They have, however, been given stronger emphasis in this administration. Thus, friendship nights have been continued as mandatory programs, with a new videotaped version of our history made available to each Lodge. Scripts have been provided for the evening's presentation, as have brochures to be handed to attending prospects. It has likewise been made clear that it is perfectly correct for one to approach a person whom one believes would make a good mason and give him an informational pamphlet on the Craft. The prospect is left free, of course, to choose whether he will petition.

This method of approach, approved by the Grand Lodge in 1990, has been further perfected. An improved pamphlet is in the works. In the meantime, I have personally written every member of the Craft in Virginia, enclosing a copy of the pamphlet and two petitions and urging him to seek out two friends whom he knows meet our qualifications. The results have been excellent!

The age of petitioning has been reduced to eighteen years. Here, too, the statistics are encouraging as young men seek us out! Consideration is also being given to chartering new Lodges at various colleges and universities throughout the commonwealth. These would be sponsored and assisted by existing Lodges in neighboring communities and will make the Craft directly available to our college youth.

A program has been instituted with respect to brethren dropped, or in danger of being dropped for nonpayment of dues. Every member in danger of suspension receives a personal letter from me, in which I outline the benefits he will give up by leaving the Craft. The replies which I have received are most encouraging, but they also establish one thing beyond question! We lose many of our brethren simply because we do not bother to keep in contact with them at the lodge level.

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For the first time, a public relations program has been instituted under the direction of an appointed Grand Lodge officer, with a budget and the mission of making our Commonwealth and its citizens aware of this great Fraternity.

Radio spots have already been created, with professional assistance, billboards are planned on major highways, and other steps are being taken to counteract the vicious attacks of the hate monger and bigots.

These programs are absolutely essential if the Fraternity is to survive. Surveys taken in 1988 and 1989 indicate only twenty-five percent of the public has heard of the Craft and only five percent are interested in membership.

Times and mores have changed and the Craft's historic reticence must be laid aside if it is to attract new members. With the demands made on the modern individual in the work place and at home, little time is left him for other activities. It will go to those which he is convinced have something to offer. And it is important that we sell our story to him!

There are many other facets to our program. One day classes may be considered in the future. There is an active program of recognizing all Eagle Scouts. Community service awards are available from every Lodge to local citizens, who are not Masons, but who have made a substantial contribution to their communities.

All these things help, but above all is the need to carry these programs forward year after year, if positive results are to be obtained.

We did not get ourselves into this membership crisis in a day, and we will not get out of it in a day. What is demanded is leadership and cooperation, not only at the top but in every Lodge and district to overcome the inertia and resistance to change which has characterized this Fraternity from its earliest days.

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But, my Brethren, the task can be done. We have made a start in Virginia; it will continue for the next few years under my successors, who will offer their own improvements and variations, until at last in a very few years we will see positive growth once more.

[At the conclusion of his address, the Grand Master played several sample radio announcements that will be on radio during 1995. He also answered several questions pertaining to his programs for 1995.]