

# WHAT REALLY MAKES A SUCCESSFUL LODGE

By WBro Frederic L. Milliken

For years I have been studying how to make a successful, vibrant, growing Lodge and trying my best to implement it. This subject has interested me ever since I served as Worshipful Master at Plymouth Lodge, Plymouth, Massachusetts in one Masonic District in 1994 and then again in another Masonic District at Paul Revere Lodge, Brockton, Massachusetts in 1999 & 2000. These Lodges were very high profile and very successful at one time. But the membership numbers, attendance, and the ability to fill an officers' line had become critically deficient. So as I assumed the East at both these Lodges I spent a good deal of time not only researching and reading what other Lodges across the nation were doing to try to boost interest, but I also experimented with a number of ideas to try to recharge these Lodges.

I borrowed many ideas, thought up some on my own, tried and failed and tried and failed again. My affiliation with Paul Revere Lodge was with a Lodge of considerable means with Lodge money available to spend on the Brethren and my affiliation was deliberate to have the means available in order to execute programs that would make the Lodge grow. After two attempts to work some magic in the East I was no closer to finding the formula for a successful Lodge than when I started. What really moved the learning curve along was my personal move from the Northeast to the South. And what became even more enlightening was my transfer from Southern mainstream AF & AM into Prince Hall Masonry. Armed with this experience I have classified the different styles of rejuvenation into FIVE categories or Lodge Models.

## 1) AMENITIES ORIENTATED

Model One says that what is lacking in Freemasonry is some comforts of life. It says that Freemasonry has become miserly, its Lodges bare bones and its practices devoid of celebration. All that is needed, this model exhorts, are some really great meals and some social functions such as Ladies Nights, Christmas Parties and summer barbeques, all subsidized by the Lodge. In addition the 50s furniture and the old style carpet need to be replaced with 21st century furnishings. Add a pool table, a wide screen TV, high-speed computers and piped in stereo sound and you have the makings of a Lodge that will attract men to relax and enjoy fellowship and brotherhood. Along these lines, the Lodge should have a part time bar, if allowed, and if not, occasional after meeting fraternalism at a local Pub is in order. Run your Lodge like an English Gentlemen's club with some modern updates and acquiescence to youth and watch attendance grow, this model touts.

This type of approach is one, which I early on embraced wholeheartedly. My first time around at Plymouth Lodge I started an annual surf and turf night-boiled lobster and steak off the grill cooked on the premises. At Paul Revere Lodge, I put on catered meals every meeting that were outstanding, like steamship beef. We also ran Christmas parties, Ladies nights and a summer barbeque at both Lodges. Both Lodges were repainted and recarpeted. In addition, at Paul Revere, where the budget was very generous, I was able to add some special programs. One was a Masonic Roast, Dean Martin style, for a beloved Past Master; another was a special dinner held at a restaurant for the secretary of the Lodge and yet another was a breakfast for a Past Master in charge of the hospital visitation program. There were many other perks and celebrations too numerous to mention all here. I had high hopes with all these amenities, held in many cases on a grand scale, that enough enthusiasm would be generated and that word of mouth would get around that Freemasonry had something to offer men searching for: camaraderie. Surely the Brethren would turn out in greater numbers and the Lodge would grow with new members if we pampered our membership. Sadly there really was no noticeable difference in the attendance and growth of the Lodges even with all these benefits. This model was a dismal failure.

## 2) EVENT ORIENTATED

Model Two says that Blue Lodge is boring and it says that it is boring because if all you are doing is business meetings you are not really practising Masonry or doing anything different from what many other organizations do. And this is precisely the reason that many Brothers flee the Blue Lodge for the more inspiring confines of the York Rite or Scottish Rite. Put some programs together, says this model, that help express Freemasonry, or that celebrate the Craft. It is no wonder that Blue Lodge attendance is so low seeing as how all it does is a one-hour business meeting followed by stale donuts and coffee and then all the Brethren go home.

This too was a model I endorsed. Good programs add purpose and meaning to Lodge life, I reasoned, and surely will draw many Brethren to active participation in their Lodge. So at Plymouth Lodge we did a Lodge visitation to another Lodge 40 miles away and they returned the visit. We participated in the travelling gavel program. I had a DeMolay Chapter come in and do a degree. And we had the Paul Revere Colonial Degree Team degree team come and perform the third degree in colonial costume. This Lodge also held a very good and well attended Table Lodge which I held in special honour to a very hard working member of the Lodge. When my Secretary announced his retirement I had a dinner in his honour at the Lodge and invited all the Secretaries in the District to come help me honour him. We also did the usual Past Masters night where all the Past Masters assumed officer stations and performed a degree.

Next time around in the East at Paul Revere Lodge I built on that event record, by making existing events more lavish while adding some new ones. The Lodge had a special Colonial Degree Team. This team I took to a neighbouring state to perform. It all started when an elderly church member sold her house to move to assisted living quarters. In packing up she found an old Masonic diploma from another state in the basement of her house which had been in the family for generations. Knowing me to be a Mason she

handed the Masonic diploma from the middle of the 19th century to me. I called the Grand Lodge in question, located the Lodge from which it was issued and arranged for a delegation to visit them to return this Masonic memento. Six months later we returned with the Colonial Degree Team and a bus load of Masons for a revisit and a special performance. The colonial Degree Team also went to a very historic town about 40 miles away where we performed the third degree, after which we retired for a Tri Table Lodge. Three Lodges were present and over 100 Masons celebrated the Craft that evening. While in the East I worked on sending our Degree Team to Indiana, a trip of about 1000 miles. A year after retiring from the East we made that trip. The Lodge participated in a District - wide outdoor third degree in the forest where we raise five new Master Masons.

At the Ladies night at the Lodge I hired a twenty member women's barbershop chorus for the entertainment. At our annual dinner for our Blood donors and hospital workers I hired a "Nitty Gritty Dirt Band" styled performers for entertainment. We offered a CPR program at the Lodge. We had a Scottish Degree Team dressed in Kilts and accompanied by bagpipes raise three Master Masons at the Lodge. At the last visitation by the District Deputy I choreographed and performed with the officers a special funeral memorial service for all the Brothers who had passed to the Celestial Lodge above during my two years as Master. For this event I imported a Masonic soloist, who sang for us all some inspiring and heartwarming songs and a special organist to accompany him.

Most business meetings had a speaker. One I can remember vividly was a PDDGM, who was chief air traffic controller for a military airbase and small suburban airport. He spoke about the time that Air Force One landed at his airport and what the President's plane looked like inside. Another speaker was the fishing/hunting writer for the local paper. He was syndicated across the state as a Conservationist Authority and had many interesting observations about the status of our wetlands and our lakes and streams.

With all that we did, with all that we accomplished there was *not one bit of difference in Lodge attendance*, nor was there an increase in applications for the degrees. This model, also, was a dismal failure.

### **3) RITUAL ORIENTATED**

Model Three says that what is lacking in Blue Lodge is well performed ritual. Reading from the book and/or stuttering through a lecture while having to be prompted many times is not inspiring at all. This model points to well performed degrees as not only motivational to the candidate(s) but also the basis from which all Masonic knowledge is transmitted. If you want new Brothers to return to Lodge and become actively involved in the workings of the Craft, says this model, then well delivered ritual is that which will create the understanding of how great Freemasonry is. Furthermore, it adds, it is necessary that all new Brothers memorize and learn their proficiencies. Once memorized, Masonic virtues and the Masonic way of life makes a strong imprint on the character and development of the individual Brother. This shows each Mason that Masonry is a way of life, a noble existence from which many personal benefits will be the result. I bought into this model, also mainly because that was the way I was taught. Perfect ritual, great memorization makes a good Mason. The only problem with this model is that it is not true, and therefore will not work. Great memorization makes a parrot but it doesn't necessarily beget understanding and comprehension. What it gets are men who are more interested in form rather than substance.

In my first two Lodges in the Northeast great ritual and good memorization was a cornerstone of Masonic performance. Of course so were other things like Model One and Model Two. My mainstream AF & AM Lodge in the South was solely built around this one model. Ritual was everything, and basically all they did. They met every week with three of those gatherings being informal practices (rehearsals). The problem here was that all the energy of the Lodge was devoted to ritual perfection, leaving no room for creative Masonic expression and celebration. The Lodge really turned off many fine men, who did not want to spend all their time in intense perfection of minutia. While most Lodges might be a combination of Models, this Lodge was a true ritual Lodge. Its downfall was not in its lack of variety, but its putting all its eggs in the wrong basket. Add to the fact that a good ritualist does not necessarily make a good Mason, and you have a recipe for disaster. The lesson of this Model is that you really have to understand that which you can speak. Memorizing ritual and even performing letter perfect degrees does not necessarily make a strong, vibrant, growing Lodge. What it can make is an elitist group of nitpickers.

### **4) CHARITY ORIENTATED**

Model Four says that Freemasonry is dying because nobody knows who we are. The solution, says this Model, is to get out into the community with Masonic-backed charities and Masonic community service and become known for being a force in the community. This will not only add zest, meaning and purpose to your Lodge but will also give you the recognition factor which will lead to more applications. Serve the community and the community will come knocking at your door.

In my Northeast Lodges this Model was adopted by the Grand Lodge and foisted upon individual Lodges as their only means to salvation. As I assumed the East for the first time DARE was on its way out as the big Masonic charity and CHIP was on its way in. In addition Grand Lodge started investing heavily into a state Masonic Health Care System. District Deputies started to try to out vie each other to see who could get their Lodges into the most community action programs. By the time I was in the East again at Paul Revere Lodge, we were marching in parades and participating in that city's special promotion of itself by selling banner promotions on every pole in town. Naturally my Lodge spent big bucks on this publicity stunt. CHIP had increased from one big event per year to more than fifty per year.

It wasn't like we never did any community/charity work on our own. We already had two very good programs in place that we initiated ourselves. One was a hospital visitation program at the VA Hospital where we escorted those in wheelchairs to church service on Sunday mornings. The eight Lodges of the District took turns in performing this kindness. The other was a community Red Cross blood drive held at the Lodge every two months. We supplied a free, full breakfast for all donors consisting of scrambled eggs, sausage, English muffins, baked beans, juice and coffee. Yearly blood contributions were around 1000 pints. So there was really no need for Grand Lodge to step in and mandate statewide programs. But my District Deputy felt a need to concoct his own special program. We had nearby a railroad park which had gone bankrupt. This park offered a five mile railroad trip, using vintage locomotives and railroad cars, through the cranberry bogs and past a little old fashioned scaled down village of two hundred years ago. At Christmas time special decorations and lights were installed along the way. New owners came in and were looking for community help (translation: cheap labour) to get the park restarted. My District Deputy committed my Masonic District to many weekends of work by up to fifty Masons to landscape and rebuild this dilapidated, run down village in exchange for the right to add a Masonic Temple replica to the village. Up to this point, I had bought into the Masonic community service and charity focus as a way to revitalize and restock Lodges. But with the advent of this railroad park project I finally saw through the illusion of what was really happening to Freemasonry.

The problem with this Model is very similar to my Southern Ritual Model – one aspect of Freemasonry takes over everything and in the process reinvents Freemasonry into something it was never intended to be. Trying to make the Lodge charitable is a corruption of the teachings of Freemasonry. The Three degrees of Freemasonry shows a man how to build his spiritual building, his Temple within. They teach an individual Mason to be charitable and then to go forth into the world and live out those Masonic virtues taught inside the

Lodge room. These Masonic virtues do not teach the Lodge how to be charitable or how to be anything. They teach each individual Mason a way of life. All Masonic charity should be the result of individual Masons making individual decisions providing one on one relief and help to those in need.

Let me be painstakingly clear here what I am talking about: It is Institutionalized Charity, which I will define as large, impersonal, labour intensive and ever ongoing programs that never end, that is the problem here. It is not geared to helping individuals, for one on one aid, but for massive fund raising to finance high profile, self perpetuating charities whereby the Mason involved never gets to see the persons he is helping. Thus have many Grand Lodges in counterpart Masonry turned Freemasonry into a Service Club, whereby its charitable work has been renamed Masonic Awareness, where its main mission is Masonic publicity, and actually helping people takes a back seat. Contrast that with Prince Hall charitable focus. Here we are talking about benevolence – The Prince Hall summer camp, scholarships, holiday gift baskets and so forth. Prince Hall Masons can, in most cases, look into the eyes of those who they are helping and I applaud you for that.

So my Brothers, don't fall into the trap of beating your breasts for public consumption. Don't model yourself on the Pharisees or on counterpart Grand Lodges, who have sold their soul to Masonic publicity, that further degenerates into billboard advertising, radio ads, theatre promos and One Day Classes that make a Mason in one day. Spending scarce Lodge resources on Institutionalized charity and community service programs, rather than benevolence, takes away from the time, talent and money devoted to the actual practice of Freemasonry. Abused Community action creates no special bonding and its result is a watered down, poorly executed Freemasonry. Masonic recruitment programs disguised as charity work do not bring in new candidates and the large amount of time involved drives Brothers away from the Lodge. This Model has proven over and over again to be another dismal failure.

## **(5) KNOWLEDGE ORIENTATED**

This model says that successful Masonry is a philosophical society that really makes good men better rather than just offering lip service to the performance of this important task. It says that it is this character building process that binds Brothers into the mystic tie and keeps them an active Mason. It says that the other Models are superficial, making superficial Masonry, where style is honoured over substance. This model claims that the instruction, study, education and research into the symbolic meanings of Masonry is what stirs the soul of men to commit themselves to active participation, that Masonry is a way of life and that the effect that it can have on a man's life is so profound that he is forevermore bound to the Craft.

By the time I had switched to Prince Hall Freemasonry I had been through the first four Models with no success. I despaired for the future of Freemasonry. And what I initially saw at my Prince Hall Lodge did not lead me to think that I had found the answer. We meet in a small rented one room building also used by a church. The Lodge has little Masonic furniture and what it does have is old and in need of repair. The air conditioning works when it feels like it. As I participated in the Prince Hall degrees I was surprised. The degrees are conducted in a much more informal manner than I was accustomed to. The Lodge did not conduct a weekly or monthly practice. It did not do anything special together as a Lodge in acting out its Masonry other than social functions. Absolute heresy, I thought. This goes against everything I had been taught as a Mason. Ritual has to be memorized and delivered to perfection. Lodge buildings need to be stately affairs appropriately decorated and furnished. Masons needed to be knowledgeable! **WAIT**, wait just one cotton pickin' minute! The Prince Hall Masons of my Lodge are at least twice as knowledgeable about Freemasonry as their counterparts in mainstream AF & AM Freemasonry. How could that be? My eyes were really opened when I sat through the questioning of the Entered Apprentices, Fellowcrafts and newly raised Master Masons in open Lodge. It's all your fault Deputy Grand Master Michael Anderson! Yup, you are to blame. Your teaching standards and questioning of the candidates caused a light bulb to

go off! I finally figured it out – what really makes a successful Lodge. It's understanding the symbolism, the mysteries of Freemasonry and how that intertwines with the living of one's life, with one's religion, work, relationships with other people, with God – it's tying it altogether. And, I witnessed that and my own ignorance. After I couldn't answer a number of questions myself, I began to see things in a different light.

This style of operating caused me to pause and reflect. Our last set of interviews netted us many applicants to take the degrees. The Brothers seem tight, like one big family. There are some really good social functions. It doesn't matter that the building could be better. The Lodge is not a building. It doesn't matter that the Lodge is not well endowed. Money doesn't buy a successful Lodge, nor create that special bonding. It doesn't matter that the degrees are informal and detailed explanation is offered in a teacher's own words. Form doesn't matter, substance does. What matters is that the Lodge is practicing Freemasonry and understanding it, and that this knowledge, this practice from a deep understanding of it all has so inspired and so affected all who work at really doing Freemasonry, that it has set their souls on fire. These men, armed with this knowledge, are born again Masons, and what they possess is not able to be provided, bought or commanded. The greatness of Freemasonry is not in its lavishness, not in its strict adherence to form, not in its pomp and circumstance, not in the perfect articulation of its ritual, not in its events or social functions or charitable works, but in taking it all in, assimilating it, understanding it, making it a part of you and then realizing how awesome, how profound and how life changing this process can be. This Model is the one that makes a successful Lodge.

Let me expound on that some more. The knowledge of who you are and exactly what that means and how it affects you is vital to the pride, enthusiasm and workings of an organization. When an individual is part of a group that feeds on the interaction of its philosophy, it creates an aura of appeal and a group identity that cannot be artificially created. The camaraderie comes as a result of the knowledge – the light – and is not an equal partner in the process. The camaraderie does not create the thirst for knowledge; the thirst for knowledge creates the camaraderie. The perks and amenities flow from the light and the camaraderie, as a result of them, not the other way around. When the light of your raising makes you born again into a new life, and what Masonry has imparted is so awesome and earth shaking that it has transformed you into something so wonderful that you will never forget it – well then such a group, a Lodge will never die. It will always grow and be successful. But when a Lodge downplays the importance of the Light and the education to sustain it and turns the Lodge into a social Lodge or a Service Club, then the Lodge no longer has the real transforming power to sustain success.

So depart from here today Brethren with a clear sense of what our priorities are in running a Masonic Lodge. I am going to recommend a book to you; no, actually two. The first is "The Meaning of Masonry" by W. L. Wilmshurst, who tells us what Masonry and a Lodge should **not** be:

*"This is the stage of knowledge in which the Craft is regarded as a social, semi-public, semi-secret community (says Wilmshurst) to which it is agreeable and advantageous to belong for sociable or even for ulterior purposes; in which the goal of the Mason's ambition is to attain office and high preferment and to wear a breast full of decorations; in which he takes a literal, superficial and historic view of the subject-matter of the doctrine; in which ability to perform the ceremonial work with dignity and effectiveness and to know the instruction catechisms by heart, so that not a syllable is wrongly rendered, is deemed the height of Masonic proficiency; and where, after discharging these functions with a certain degree of credit, his idea is often to have the Lodge closed as speedily as may be and get away to the relaxation of the festive board."*

Brethren we have a golden opportunity before us as there are a whole group of men who are "seekers", longing for something substantial in their lives where they can live out their values. Today's generation is a cyclical swing that is common; rebelling against their fathers, they have rejected the values of the hippie generation of the 60s and the feel good drug culture. Make no mistake - Vietnam killed us. Free love, drugs, and acid rock created the ultimate drop out society and drop out they did. We missed a whole generation and more of Masons. This is all chronicled in the second book I will recommend to you today – "Bowling Alone" by Robert D. Putnam who will tell you why we have been struggling with membership.

But this is a new day with a new generation. We are the antidote to the drop out, drug crazed, promiscuous society, if we concentrate on our Masonic message, rather than creating a feel good Brotherhood. The question is; are we going to feed them pabulum or are we going to give them the real deal – Freemasonry.

By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail. -Benjamin Franklin

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