

Where Did All Our Freemasons Go?

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I would venture a guess to say there's not one single Lodge within our Grand Lodge that isn't concerned about membership and Lodge attendance. Each year on the Official Visit your Secretary and your Master fill out their report and one of the questions is about Lodge attendance. What I believe Grand Lodge is looking for in these reports, is to know if the Lodges are active and healthy. Fortunately, I've got a few ideas of my own on this subject. I think I can explain why Lodge participation is such a problem in some Lodges. I even have a few suggestions about what a Lodge experiencing these issues might do to improve in this area.

First of all, membership and Lodge participation are two very different things. I know, I know--they are very often lumped together as one and the same, but they are most certainly not the same issue; they are very different issues. I'm sure I'll raise a few eyebrows by saying the far more serious problem isn't new membership--it's Lodge participation. Lodge participation is really the problem you must solve - nearly every other issue your Lodge may be facing from financial issues to lack of new members most likely tracks back to your participation problem.

If you think I'm wrong, ask yourself a couple questions:

- a) how many members show up for your meetings? How many members does your Lodge have? I'll bet there is a dramatically larger percentage of members who don't attend than do. Why is that?
- b) How many of your newer members are attending? How many have dropped off? Why? And now for the big question
- c) What is the point of continuing to add new members to your rolls when you can't keep your old members or your brand new members involved?

I'll answer that last question for you--it's pointless to keep adding members to your roster until you figure out why you can't keep the ones you already have. And I'll tell you the most common reason why Lodges challenged with these issues can't keep members involved. It's quite simple actually: **Your meetings are boring!** Sorry to be so blunt, but it's true, right? If you fix that problem, you'll go a long way to fixing all your problems. As one Past Master so frequently says, "when they stop having fun, they'll stop coming." It really isn't any more complicated than that.

I have six things you can do to improve your meetings--I have many more, but let's start with six. Let me be clear - all these things are well within the constitution of our Grand jurisdiction. And make sure they do not counter your Lodge By-Laws, please do not go against your By-Laws on any of these suggestions and say "oh the DDGM said it was ok" ...as I can get in enough trouble all on my own. Do not feel you have to do any of these suggestions, as this is merely what they are suggestions. But if these suggestions are within your by-laws and you try a few of these suggestions, I think you'll find your members will find much more enjoyment in your meeting than they do currently. Those meetings may even become something the Brethren look forward to attending again.

And here they are:

1. Reading of the Minutes

The purpose of reading the minutes is to make sure your Secretary is doing his job correctly. That he is recording things accurately and to ensure he hasn't left anything out or gotten anything wrong. That's it. I was in a meeting a few days ago where the Secretary spent fifteen minutes reading the minutes of a meeting that only lasted an hour the month before, right down to who sat in what chair. And all fifteen Masons sitting in that room knew exactly what happened in that meeting the month before, because it was the same fifteen guys. I sit through that every month, and it's dreadful every month. I did the same thing as Secretary in my Lodge (although I only hit the highlights in my Lodge to try and keep it short). But it's the 21st century folks! Secretaries could print those minutes and have them available for preview prior to the meeting, or some Secretaries email the minutes of the meeting to members right after the meeting concludes. The minutes should take minutes.

2. Treasurer's Reports

It took the Treasurer ten minutes to give his report in the same mind-numbing detail as the Secretary (right down to the check numbers). Same thing. Why not print the report and hand it to the members or email the report to them prior to the meeting? Most members don't even listen to the details of how much the power bill was, and how much they charged to fix the vacuum sweeper. They tune out. They'll be more likely to look at the treasurer's report if it's printed than they are to listen to one.

3. Announcements

Announcements often go on so long they actually refer to them at the end of our meetings as "the dreaded announcements." You'll have three or four guys usually that will stand up in turn and list off one event after another after another - a degree here, a pancake breakfast there, a golf outing here. We had a degree in my Lodge last week, and I glanced at the clock--announcements took a full fifteen minutes. I'd been to four meetings/degrees in the last couple weeks and I'd heard the vast majority of those announcements over and over again. And, of course, you have the guy that has to ask three times "what's that date again" or "what time did you say that starts again." It's without question my least favorite part of any meeting, and I'm not alone there. You'll see very few Masons writing things down during announcements.

There are better ways to do announcements. First of all, social media and the internet are far better means to get the word out about events. In my own Lodge, we have a tool called "Callout List" where I can call every member of my Lodge in about two minutes to remind them of an event using a recorded message. One of the best ideas I've ever heard, however, is a little more old school. One Lodge Secretary told me that for years, they've had no announcement (or very few) during their meetings. He hangs an old fashioned desk blotter calendar on the wall of the Lodge - two months at a time with a box of markers next to it. Members and visitors of the Lodge write their events on that calendar prior to the meeting or degree. When, where, and what time. They don't do announcements during the Lodge meeting. He said many of the members just photograph that calendar on the wall with their phone when they're leaving and update their calendars at their leisure. In my opinion, that's the best idea I've heard in years, and that Secretary is deserving of the highest Masonic honour that can be awarded a Lodge Secretary! What a fantastic idea!

So Now What? Lets say you do these three things. You've cut down dramatically three areas that the vast majority of Masons dislike intensely. That's just saved a good forty minutes that we can now put to better use. Perhaps since we now have a little more time we could do one or two of the following.

4. Education Every Meeting

Education can be anything you want it to be. My suggestion is to share inspired articles from the Grand Lodge Education News Letter or the Protocol and Etiquette Newsletter, and then discuss it. If you have a Lodge instructor or somebody good with ritual, you might have him go over a point in the ritual that everyone gets wrong. Test your Masonic knowledge. Have somebody put together some trivia questions and perhaps elected officers can compete against appointed officers. Whatever you decide to do, have fun with it.

5. Invite a Speaker

One of the best meetings I recall was one a few years ago. A lodge helped a young woman go on a trip to Germany as part of an exchange program. She came and talked to the Lodge when she returned. The Lodge went to refreshment, we invited her in, and she gave an excellent talk about her adventures--she even brought the Lodge a gift. It was a wonderful evening. Speakers can be members of your Lodge, or somebody from the Shrine. Perhaps a WWII vet with a great story to tell. Got a local Masonic author, scholar or researcher--from experience I know they're very often more than happy to come and talk to your members for fifteen or twenty minutes.

6. Topic For Discussion

One Master I spoke to said that each month he announces a topic of discussion for the following month. Maybe it's about a

historical event, or a famous Freemason, or the meaning of a certain symbol. The Brethren have a month to think about it. He tells me their discussions are extremely entertaining. That's a great way to spark a little discussion in your lodge. As a matter of fact, he says sometimes they announce the subject on their Facebook page and they get guests from other Lodges interested in taking part in that discussion.

Sometimes Masons get so involved in the business of Masonry we forget why we became Masons to begin with - to learn, to serve, and to become better men. Business is an important part of a meeting, but so is learning, discussion, and fellowship. If you want established members to keep coming, and new members to get involved and stay involved, your Lodge has to engage them. You have to give them something they'll look forward to. They have to feel like they're getting value from that time they spend in the meeting, and the only thing dull meetings provide are reasons for Freemasons to stay home and watch the game. If you can build a Lodge like that--they will come. And they'll talk about it and invite their friends to join as well. A lack of petitions won't be your problem, scheduling all the degrees will be. And that's a problem every Lodge would like to have.