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The Future for Freemasonry in New Zealand.

There is a notion that has been doing the rounds for a while now that Freemasonry is a dead duck. Some say we got things wrong in the 70's and 80's, lowered our admission standards and as a result we're paying the price now by having a generation of members that perhaps weren't fit to be freemasons, and that somehow that is affecting our ability to introduce and retain high-calibre freemasons now.

What utter twaddle. What Freemasonry is experiencing now is the same as almost every other organisation in the world is experiencing. Rotary, Lions, Toastmasters, The Country Women's Institute, the RSA are all reporting sharp downturns in both membership and attendances. Churches built in the 1950's and 60's were built to accommodate 300 – 400 people; new places of worship these days rarely architect for more than 100 people.

So the phenomenon that has seen Freemason numbers drop from more than 60,000 in the 60's to less than 7,000 today has impacted numerous other membership-based organisations.

There has been extensive research undertaken worldwide on what has caused this phenomenon. The detail would fill a number of volumes, but in essence society has changed dramatically in the past 75 years. The breakdown of the extended family, both parents having to work; changes in traditional parenting roles; less than 30% of the population claiming a belief in a God are all nails in the coffin of traditional clubs, societies and churches. Add to that the internet; the advance of technology; improved mobility, the advent of social media; the emergence of a generation that expects "instant gratification"; and you can, like me, see that the world is a very different place now. Worse, it will continue to evolve – and if we are honest with ourselves – the pipedream of increasing membership within our organisation is a perverse trick. It simply isn't going to happen. That's not to say that we shouldn't shine a light on our retention issues; it's not to say that we shouldn't be proactively managing aspects of the Craft that we know are causing us to bleed members – but few of us believe, in our heart of hearts, that our numbers will increase much from where we are today.

For Freemasonry this phenomenon is twice cursed. Not only are we suffering from the issues mentioned above but the nature of our institution requires a purpose-built building – and the costs associated with insuring and maintaining it. The last time our membership was at the current level was 1904. You might be surprised to know that in 1904 we had exactly half the number of Lodge Buildings we have today. The burden of maintenance and insurance on an aging portfolio of buildings is simply unsustainable. Most Lodges now spend more per annum per member on accommodation than they do on capitation. Be under no illusion there is no silver lining to this cloud. The silver has been sold to pay for the insurance and the maintenance.

It gets worse.

Recent research out of Victoria (Australia); Germany and England tells us (within a few percent) the same story. Men become a Freemason because someone they admire is a Freemason. Men continue to be a Freemason because of the fellowship they derive. In fact – here is what the statistics say:

- 70% of men rate fellowship as the reason they remain in the Craft
- 10% are attracted by our rituals and ceremonies
- 10% are attracted by the educational and self-development opportunities; and
- 10% are motivated by our charitable and philanthropic principles.

So what does this really mean? To understand how these statistics impact on our future let's take a look at the "average" Lodge in New Zealand. Based on Grand Lodge records (as at June, 2016) we have around 6800 members spread across 229 Lodges. That's around 30 members per Lodge. Again – analysing monthly Lodge reports – the average attendance per meeting is 20 members. If we apply the off-shore research to our average attendances it quickly becomes clear that 14 men are there for the fellowship (70%); 2 are there because they love the ritual or enjoy delivering charges (10%); 2 are there because of the education and self-improvement opportunities (10%); and the last two are there because of their philanthropic interests (10%). In reality, it's never likely to be quite as 'linear' as my example suggests. For instance we know that a lot of Masons like to bask in the reflected glory of the great charitable works we do – but when the rubber hits the road there's probably only 2 or 3 blokes in your Lodge that constantly involve themselves in your fund-raising and charitable endeavours.

Knowing that only 2 or 3 blokes in your Lodge genuinely attend because of the ritual or ceremonial might also help explain why you're having difficulty filling your officer's chairs each year; or why you have to recycle the same guy's month on month delivering the same charges.

Over the last 5 years I have introduced 8 guys into my Wellington Lodge (Empire Fergusson). 1 left after his first degree as it "wasn't for him" another has since resigned because "delivering charges was way too stressful – but that it was the only way to the Master's chair". The remaining 6 continue to attend regularly and enjoy the masonic "value proposition". However, of the 6 remaining 4 have made it clear that they have no interest in delivering charges or taking office. They come for the fellowship and the "feel good" factor they get from being around good men.

For a while I thought I had failed; that somehow these rough ashlar weren't capable of being smoothed – and yet they all seemed to really enjoy coming to Lodge.

I realise now that these guys simply reflect the global statistics we're seeing from other jurisdictions.

So here's the landscape: Our numbers will halve in the next 10 years; we won't be able to afford our buildings; only one or two members will actively seek office; and no one will be available to deliver charges – because the guys that did that for years, month on month, are dead.

Based on this model – Freemasonry is in the final stages of a terminal illness.

Can Freemasonry rise from these ashes in an enduring and meaningful way?

Of course it can.

What our research also tells us is that our values and principles are as relevant to men today as they have been. In fact – some research would indicate that 60% of boys below the age of 15 don't live with their natural father. Men need good role models more than they've ever needed them before. Men need fellowship and the company of other good men more than they've ever needed it before.

But we must change. That doesn't mean we need to change our values, our rituals or our philanthropic endeavours. We must change the DNA of masonry to survive. But first... some more history.

During the 1980s and the 1990s the highest yielding companies on the Wall Street stock exchange were manufacturing VHS and Beta video recorders, cassette tape recorders and audio cd players.

If you go into any electronics shop today you'll struggle to buy any of those products; and yet the companies that collectively made billions manufacturing them are still, by and large, flourishing – but instead they are making blue ray players, smartphones and computers. These companies all listened to the market; bowed to the evolution of technology and diversified their offerings to meet the market. They changed and evolved to meet the needs of their consumers.

At the turn of the 20th century the “Durant-Dort Carriage Company” was the biggest manufacturer of horse buggies in the world. By 1920 it became so obvious that motor vehicles (and trains) would revolutionise the transport industry that Durant-Dort diversified their business to specialise in the production of leather upholstery. By 1935 – they were the biggest manufacturer of motor vehicle upholstery in the world. They survived solely by diversification.

The Craft can survive (and maybe even flourish) as well – but we MUST diversify. Like the electronics companies of the 80's and 90's we need to look at how our consumers have changed – and meet the market. If we don't we'll end up as the best manufacturer of cassette recorders in the world that nobody wants to buy. Put another way – we risk having a product that nobody wants.

So how do we diversify without damaging our intrinsic “value proposition”.

First we get honest with ourselves on the facts. If our “target state” is having Freemasonry enjoying a resurgence in New Zealand by 2025 then we need to accept:

- Our membership will be around 4,000
- Few will want to actively seek office
- Few will want to deliver charges and perform ritual
- Few will be interested in education and personal development

In fact we know this already – the statistics tell us so!

We must diversify. We must weave into our fabric what is good and great about freemasonry (fellowship, ritual, charity, and education) in a way that is relevant to today's (and tomorrow's) freemason. We can only do that through fellowship – a different type of fellowship – but fellowship none the less.

Here's how we can do it!

Let's assume for the purposes of this exercise that by 2025 we will have 15 Districts (as we currently know them) in New Zealand; and that we have 4,000 members, or around 270 members per District.

Each District will have a “Lodge of Working” (LOW). This LOW will require a purpose-built masonic building like we have today. Just one per district though. The LOW would be registered as a Lodge with the Grand Lodge of New Zealand and would have its own Charter.

We know from our previous statistics that around 10% of masons “live” for the ritual and ceremonial; so we know that each District will have at least 27 brethren (10% of 270) that will actively seek office and actively volunteer for charges. Those brethren make up the core of the LOW.

Existing Lodges in each District would perform their degree workings at the LOW. They can elect to do the entire working themselves; part of the working themselves; or have the LOW perform the ceremony end to end.

Installations would be performed at the LOW in exactly the same way Installations are currently performed.

In conjunction with the establishment of the LOW significant changes would be made to the way that a Lodge would meet, open and close, when not performing a ceremonial degree. The use of Lodge “furniture” (including wands, pillars, pavements, tracing boards etc) would be eliminated; regalia would devolve to a “badge”; and the opening and closing ceremonies would be stripped back to the absolute minimum.

This would enable regular Lodges to meet virtually anywhere. They would not require a purpose-built building and could almost meet in “public”. A simple opening; regular business session, and then simple closing would then become the precursor at a regular Lodge meeting of the commencement of fellowship. This could be a game of ten pin bowls; a snooker tournament; a whisky tasting night; anything that promotes fellowship.

Meanwhile, back at the LOW a tight core of passionate masons are making ceremonies “unforgettable” for candidates because of their precision and attention to detail. Each LOW would perform up to 15 workings/installation per month creating a worthwhile enterprise from a catering perspective. Good quality ceremonial would again become the norm; which would have a natural effect of increasing visitor numbers at the LOW.

Standards at the LOW would be similar to what we expect currently in a high quality Lodge. Ceremonial would be as per the blue book (incorporating any approved local customs). At the LOW the same dress standards would be expected as currently operate; all brethren would be required to wear regalia; the furnishings of the Lodge would be as at present.

Fundamentally, the LOW would be an exemplar Lodge that would deliver excellent ceremonies by masons motivated by wanting to get it right. It may well have a Lodge of Improvement attached to it – and may also be attached to a Lodge of Research.

Each Lodge would continue to have an Installation each year and would continue the practise of installing officers. The Installation ceremony would be held at the District LOW and be run in the same way as they are now.

For Lodges choosing to have LOW officers perform their ceremonies; being an office holder in a regular Lodge would become much more symbolic. With a much simplified open and closing ceremony for non-ceremonial meetings – the focus of Lodge Officers moves to fulfilling the masonic “value proposition” which is essentially about promoting fellowship amongst men with a sound moral compass.

Because ceremonies conducted at the LOW would follow all of the current ceremonial principles the Grand Lodge of New Zealand constitution is not compromised. None of what is being suggested would compromise our status in the eyes of other constitutions or jurisdictions. In essence all that is happening is that the protocols for non-ceremonial meetings are being significantly relaxed.

Removing the onus of ritual will enable capable men to take office and take a greater role in the running and administering of the Lodge. Many good men elect not to move through the chairs as it can be onerous from a time perspective; and requires a reasonable level of competency in delivering ritual. Neither of these requirements should be barriers to capable men advancing in the Craft. The measure of a man’s ability to contribute to the future of freemasonry shouldn’t be determined by his ability to retain and deliver ritual.

Those brethren reluctant to introduce their friends to Masonry either because of the quality of the ritual in their Lodge or the appearance of their buildings can now introduce their friends knowing that the ceremonies will be exemplar; the building will be fit for purpose; the quality of catering will be high. The “cringe factor” that so often plagues Lodges will be considerably diluted by reducing opportunities for such influences. Non-ceremonial meetings effectively become social opportunities for fellowship – optionally involving partners, friends and spouses. This would enable prospective masons to form a favourable impression of the institution well before electing to join.

As well as the elected officers, the LOW would maintain a list of brethren willing to give charges to ensure that those brethren who wish to continue to deliver charges but who don't wish to seek active office in the LOW can still do so.

So what are the barriers to introducing a District LOW. Depending on whether you see diversification as a barrier or an opportunity will depend on how this question is answered. From a governance perspective there is a lot of detail that would need to be worked through. Some of this would be onerous – but diversification is rarely easy. In fact... it is ALWAYS hard.

Change is born from acceptance. If we accept that it will be increasingly harder to fill our “chairs”; if we accept it will be increasing harder to find brethren to deliver charges; if we accept it will be increasingly harder to maintain our buildings – then change is inevitable. The greatest challenge will be separating what we need to do going forward to be enduring; from the way we've done it in the past. Masonry has never been very good at this.

So how do we bring about this change? The key is evolution – not revolution. Take two current Districts and implement a 3 year “proof of concept”. Use this time to expose the challenges; develop interventions and iterate the solution. Be open, transparent, collaborative and honest. This will not be easy. We will lose some people along the way. Be sure that we know what success looks like. Be brave – have courage.

The current ‘generation’ of freemasons may be the last unless we diversify. Without diversification freemasonry in New Zealand will devolve to maybe 20 affluent ‘city’ Lodges that have the wherewithal to ‘limp’ on for another 50 years.

I am a 5th generation freemason. I have a 24 year old son who is now asking me questions about becoming a freemason. I have a 5 year-old grandson who believes his poppa when he is told that ‘real men’ wear aprons – not capes. I am hell bent on leaving this organisation that I am so proud to be a member of in a better state than I found it. The key to a sustainable future is repackaging our timeless value proposition in a way that is relevant to the current generation. Our “product” is as marketable today as it has ever been – but our “packaging” is well past its “use by date”. We are being “left on the shelf” all around the world. So let's keep the “product” the same. Let's retain the values and principles intact. Let's repackage it in a way that is relevant to men today.

We aren't a dead duck. We are from it. We stand on the precipice of something special. But when a prospective member asks us for an ‘experience’ akin to a shiny smartphone let's not give him a cassette recorder.

What do you think?

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