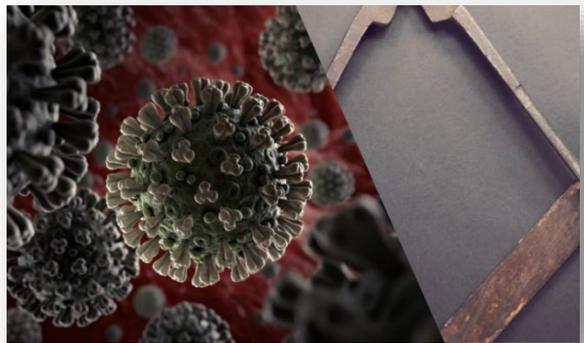


COVID-19: The Change Freemasonry Needed

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By now, everything in your world has been shifted upside down. You can't go out to eat where you used to. You can't take your significant other out to see a movie or on a fancy date. You can't send your children off to school at 7:00 am and pick them back up at 3:00 pm. You most likely can't even hop in your car and commute to work, unless you're classified "essential."



The Coronavirus, more commonly known as COVID-19 has completely wrecked your world. It's also more than likely thrown a significant wrench into your Freemasonry. If I had a dollar for every "I miss lodge" or "wishing I was at lodge" I've seen on social media, I'd have enough to buy an island in the middle of nowhere. We're all missing Freemasonry and all the fun and education that comes from it. This is a "peak" season for most of us, and what I mean by that is Scottish Rite Reunions, District and Grand Lodge Meetings, Outdoor Degrees and much more are typically going on. Springtime brings an influx in Masonic activity, yet we're all sitting here wishing 2020 could just start over.

We're all familiar with this virus and you know better than I do about your own jurisdiction's Masonic shutdowns, so I won't go down that path today. While some have been suspended through the end of March, others such as the UGLE are suspending all Masonic activity through the end of summer. What we know is that this will not be over soon, no matter what you read online. As of the writing of this article, in the United States, there are now almost 141,000 reported cases with just over 2,400 deaths and those numbers will only continue to rise. Let's put that into a Masonic perspective, shall we?

- Est. Population in the U.S.A.
 - **333.5 million**¹
- Est. Population of Men 18+ in the U.S.A.
 - **129 million**²
- Est. Freemasonry Totals in the U.S.A.
 - **1.07 million**

¹ United States Census Bureau, U.S. and World Population Clock, retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>, accessed March 2020.

² United States Census Bureau, Decennial Census by Decades, retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade.html>, accessed March 2020, estimate based on average of 12% increase in male age bracket of 18 years and over between 1990 to 2010.

- U.S. Grand Lodges 940,000³
- U.S. Prince Hall Grand Lodges 130,000⁴

First, let us jump into some data and numbers (it's what I enjoy). The population data shown here is a rounded up figure based on data from the United States Census⁵. The population of men over 18 years of age is my best guestimate for 2020 based on a consistent 12% increase shown in the US Census from 1990 – 2010. Secondly, the membership totals of Freemasons in the United States are estimates as none of us really know how many members we have, including our Grand Lodges. Considering the Masonic Service Association⁶ hasn't updated their membership totals in three years now, I'm assuming we're still losing around 45,000 members nationally, per year based on the average loss since 2000. That would give the United States Grand Lodges a membership of roughly 940,000.

My estimate for Prince Hall membership totals come from reviewing Prince Hall documents from 1988 that reference 300,000 members (formal totals are not available at this time) which is 11% of the membership reported for Grand Lodges. Considering this, I would estimate Prince Hall loses around 6,050 members per year (matching the annual loss trendline for Grand Lodges) which would be a loss of roughly 170,000 members since 1988. In total, I'm guessing there are around 1.07 million Freemasons in the United States in 2020.

If we consider these numbers, then 0.83% of men in the U.S.A. are currently Freemasons (shocking right, considering that number was almost 4.0% in 1960). The New York Times published the article *Worst-Case Estimates for U.S. Coronavirus Deaths*⁷ on March 13, 2020 and it states "Between 160 million and 214 million people in the United States could be infected over the course of the epidemic...As many as 200,000 to 1.7 million people could die." Let's just assume 40% of those numbers are men over 18 (we're guessing here, right) so between 64 million and 86 million men over 18 could be infected and as many as 80,000 to 680,000 men over 18 could die. This potentially means that between 531,200 and 713,800 U.S. Freemasons could be infected and as many as 664 to 5,644 U.S. Freemasons could die as a worst-case scenario (considering the 0.83% from earlier).

Woah. Stop. Take a minute. Read that last sentence again and then think about your lodge, your Grand Lodge, your Appendant Bodies and those Brothers closest to you. The reality here is that someone you know will be infected with COVID-19 before this is over and you may even know someone who passes away due to the virus. It's a harsh reality, but it's one that I too am thinking about daily. The average age of membership is typically well over 60 and that alone makes our membership high risk to this virus. The best thing we can all do – practice social distancing.

³ Masonic Service Association of North America, Masonic Membership Statistics 2016-2017, <https://www.msana.com/msastats.asp#totals>, accessed March 2020, estimate based on average loss of members in the United States of 45,000 per year between 2000 and 2017.

⁴ Locker, Nicholas B. (2007). The Restoration of Amity between the United Grand Lodge of England and the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, pg. 2-3, retrieved from <http://www.princehall.org/history/RestorationofAmity.pdf>, accessed March 2020.

⁵ United States Census Bureau, U.S. and World Population Clock, op. cit.

⁶ Masonic Service Association of North America, Masonic Membership Statistics 2016-2017, op. cit.

⁷ Fink, Sheri. (2020, March 18). Worst-Case Estimated for U.S. Coronavirus Deaths. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/us/coronavirus-deaths-estimate.html>, accessed March 2020.

That's not why I'm here today, writing this article though. I'm a numbers and data guy and have probably already bored you to death with all of the data above. If you're still reading though I want you to think about the positive impact this has had on our fraternity (it's as weird to write as it is to say). This virus has forced us into our homes, away from our lodges and for many away from our communities. Freemasons across the country are scratching their heads wondering what they can do now. COVID-19 has almost completely removed Freemasonry from the U.S. and yet, we're still here, still engaged and still learning.

Freemasonry is not something that you get from going to a meeting once a month and hearing the same business being read and approved. Freemasonry is not making pancakes for your community once a month and then donating the couple hundred dollars to a local youth group. Freemasonry is certainly not a social club where you come and hang out with old friends and share stories over a stale cup of coffee. Bummer alert ahead – if you're really, really missing any of those things you probably weren't practicing Freemasonry to start with (shoot me an email and let's debate). If you've found yourself at home reading more, reflecting or meditating, connecting with new and old Brothers via social platforms such as Zoom, WebEx or FreeConferenceCall.com, writing, creating art, playing music or studying then you are now practicing Freemasonry because you're forced to. It's the only way you can.

This virus has pushed many of us out of our comfort zones. We're now being forced by some uncontrollable "thing" to practice Freemasonry differently than we have before. We don't like it. We don't enjoy it. We are missing the "experience", yet we're not bored. We continue to learn, teach and engage with Freemasons. This time, however, we're spending time with Freemasons from around the country (or world) multiple times a week (if not multiple times a day). Facebook groups like Refracted Light⁸ were created solely for the purpose of centralizing and coordinating virtual education and meetings. An entire group, with now well over 2,000 members had to be created just because there were so many events being published – say what??

Lodge after lodge, group after group are meeting and experiencing true Freemasonry. Men have learned more in the last 14 days than they have in the last 4 years. Freemasons that have fought social media and virtual meeting rooms for years are now signing up, pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone and enjoying it!

Castle Island Virtual Lodge⁹ held an educational meeting this past week (untiled and open to all) and had well over 200 attendees. Yes, you read that right. They had OVER 200 PEOPLE attend their education and discussion for the evening. When was the last time your lodge had over 200 people for a presentation or discussion? Yeah – never. This week alone I have 11 educational presentations on my calendar in just 4 days. Do any of them require me to put on a suit, drive an hour and sit through sloppy opening and closing ritual? Not at all. Now, don't get me wrong – I love wearing a suit and bow tie and attending meetings in person, but not just because I feel I "have" to.

While this COVID-19 pandemic is living history and something we'll never forget, we will always remember that it brought us together as Freemasons and forced us outside of our comfort zones. It took men from barely using a cell phone to now dialing in and offering discussion on an important educational topic. It took men who resisted social media to now signing up to watch

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/refractedlight/>, accessed March 2020.

⁹ <https://civlodge190.ca/>, accessed March 2020.

Facebook live broadcasts of The Masonic Roundtable, Historical Light Masonic Podcast and many others from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Let's just say it - it took good men and made them better.

What's next? Well, the reality is no one knows. We don't know if this will last another month, three months, six months or year. We don't know, our Grand Lodges don't know, and our politicians don't know. What we do know, is that more and more Freemasons are connecting. More and more Freemasons are practicing the liberal arts of sciences of our ancient art. More and more men are learning and engaging. We have more men becoming Freemasons, not by numbers but by the quality of their experience. Let that sink in for a moment.

If we're only ever seeing a handful of guys at our lodge meetings or events, but we're sitting on a Zoom call with 50 men to hear a presentation or simply have an engaged discussion, do we really want to go back to the Freemasonry that we've always known? That's for you to decide. A virtual experience is certainly not the same and will never take the place of an in-person experience, however it's not something that should be swept under the rug either. When this is all said and done, more Freemasons will be engaged, educated and enlightened. The future of Freemasonry is now, more than ever in our hands, and that's exciting!



Worshipful Bro. S. Brad Drew is a member of Lexington Lodge No. 1 (KY) where he also currently serves as Senior Deacon. He was raised in 2011 at his mother lodge, Latonia No. 746 (KY) and served as Master in 2016. He is a member and officer of the Maysville York Rite Bodies (Chapter, Council and Commandery) and Valley of Covington Scottish Rite Bodies. He is a member of the Masonic Society, the Philaethes Society and the Rubicon Masonic Society. He has served the Grand Lodge of Kentucky as District Deputy Grand Master for District 18 in 2017-18 and currently serves as Grand Pursivant. He is a lifelong learner and holds a master's degree in Executive Leadership and Organizational Change. He resides in Northern Kentucky with his wife, two sons and two dogs and enjoys being outside, expanding his bow tie collection and a drinking a good single barrel bourbon.