

# A CALL TO ENGAGEMENT

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**A**s Master of William O. Ware Lodge of Research, one of the co-sponsors of this event, allow me to extend my welcome to this 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium of the Masonic Restoration Foundation. For our out of state guests, please also allow me to welcome you to Kentucky. If this is your first time here, welcome to the Bluegrass. If you have been here before, welcome back.

I'll begin with the usual disclaimers – the opinions expressed in this presentation are mine only. I do not speak for any Grand Lodge or appendant body. Further, please be aware that my perspective is based entirely on my experience as a Kentucky Freemason. My observations may be unique to Kentucky and may have no application outside its borders.

It seems a bit strange to speak to this assembly of men with respect to the topic of engagement. Where in the United States could you possibly find a group of men more engaged in Freemasonry than those present here this morning?

It is intimidating to talk about engagement to a group that includes the author of the most significant book on Freemasonry in the last century – I'm speaking, of course, of Worshipful Bro. Andrew Hammer, whose *Observing the Craft* is an eloquent and persuasive call to engagement.

So, since the fact that you are here means you are already engaged in practicing Freemasonry, or at least that you are becoming engaged in the practice of Freemasonry, I'd like to spend some time this morning looking at general levels of engagement across the Fraternity and addressing different ways in which to engage.

Why do we care about the topic of engagement? One answer is because the vast majority of our Brethren simply aren't engaged in any meaningful way in the practice of Freemasonry. Since the overwhelming majority of Freemasons aren't engaged in their own Fraternity, why are we? And what happened to that overwhelming majority that caused them to so demonstrably disengage?

## Just How Dis-Engaged Are We?

William O. Ware Lodge of Research engaged in a project beginning in the summer of 2018 collecting surveys in which Kentucky Masons identified the characteristics that they felt would be found in an ideal Lodge. Our goal was to collect 450 responses to the survey. That level of response would represent over one percent of the members on the rolls of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky and would be, we thought, a representative sampling. We collected the first 75 or so by visiting different Lodges and asking members present to complete a survey. When it became obvious that we needed a wider means of distribution, we began to mail the surveys to Masters and Secretaries. We mailed to such Brothers the survey, a cover letter explaining our project and a postage paid return envelope. Our rate of return was slightly less than 40%. We ended up collecting about 480 surveys, but to collect the last 400 or so surveys, we had to send out nearly 1,100 pieces of mail.

In the world of marketing and advertisement, I'm told that a 40% rate of return is remarkable. In the context of Freemasonry, I find the rate of return to be remarkable as well, but for entirely different reasons.

Remember, the surveys were sent initially to Masters and Secretaries – men who, presumably, would be the most engaged members of any Lodge. Later, when it became obvious that we needed to cast a wider net, we expanded the pool of recipients to other Lodge officers, Grand Lodge Committeemen and any Brother that we felt would take the time to respond. The actual results of the survey notwithstanding, perhaps the most significant thing that we learned is that a majority of our Brothers, even those in leadership positions, simply aren't engaged enough in the Fraternity to take the time to read a one-page letter, respond to a survey and put the return envelope in the mail.

The survey's low response rate led to a second project – that of measuring, as much as possible, the extent to which Kentucky Masons are actively engaged in the life of their respective Lodges. Using a formula to identify a random sampling of Lodges in Kentucky and using the information available in the data base of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, the results indicate that 56% of all men who are currently on the rolls of subordinate Lodges in Kentucky have never meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having been raised as a Master Mason. The percentage would have been higher, but we deliberately left out of the survey all Brothers who became members within the last three years. The remaining 44% are men who, at some time in their Masonic careers, have served in some capacity as a Lodge officer or committee member.

Obviously, we do not have a current participation rate of 44%. Anecdotally, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky confirms this in the establishment of its criterion for an attendance award at annual District Meetings. To obtain an attendance award, a Lodge must have ten percent of its members attend the District Meeting. The thinking of the

Grand Lodge officers is that the number required for the attendance award mirrors what they see in the subordinate Lodges in terms of attendance.

This information provokes several immediate questions:

1. How did we manage to lose the 56% that have never actively participated in the life of their Lodge?
2. Of the 44% that have actively participated, where are the 34% that are currently missing in action?
3. What motivates the ten percent that are currently actively engaged in their respective Lodges?

In examining this last question, there is some additional data to consider.

In 2018, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, the Ted Adams Lodge of Research and the Rubicon Masonic Society entered into a joint venture offering a series of one-day seminars around the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The focus of the seminars was the history of organized Freemasonry from 1717 to the present.

At each seminar, participants were given a brief quiz to measure their knowledge of the history of the Fraternity. One of the questions included in the quiz was the following statement which required a true or false answer:

**The only aim and purpose of Freemasonry is for men to learn to subdue their passions and improve themselves.**

Sixty-three percent of the participants in the seminars gave the answer, “false” to that question.

Compare that to data gleaned from the survey that I mentioned just a few moments ago. Survey responses indicate that roughly three-fourths, almost 75%, of the respondents believe that a characteristic of an ideal Lodge is an emphasis on public charity and fund raising.

Taken in context, these responses about the aim and purpose of Freemasonry and the focus on public charity and fund raising indicate that somewhere between two-thirds and three-fourths of our active Brothers do not understand the difference between Freemasonry and the attributes of Freemasonry; and, further, concentrate their focus on what may be the least essential element of all of our activities.

The ultimate conclusion drawn from all of this information is that somewhere around three percent of our currently active and engaged Brothers possess an accurate understanding of the aim and purpose of Freemasonry – that is to equip men with the self-discipline necessary to lead successful and rewarding lives. The remaining 97% are at

various levels of disengagement, with by far the most of them being, for all practical purposes, members in name only.

Physicist and historian Derek John de Solla-Price formulated what has become known as de Solla-Price's law -- that 50% of the work in any given organization is performed by the square root of the number of members in the organization. In the instance of Kentucky Freemasonry, we say that we have about 30,000 Freemasons. The square root of 30,000 is roughly 174. Looking at the participation results of our survey, the attendance expectations of our Grand Lodge and the misplaced focus and energy of the majority of our Brethren, one might conclude that the application of de Solla-Price's law might be overly generous when searching for Kentucky Masons who are genuinely engaged in the work of the Fraternity.

Anecdotally, the extent to which active Kentucky Masons have disengaged from the practice of Freemasonry is illustrated by our sloppy dress at Lodge, our ridiculously low dues and our sporadic attendance at Lodge functions. Grand Lodges, generally, are reluctant to address this matter to any significant degree. As long as our disengaged Brethren continue to pay their dues Grand Lodges will continue to receive their annual assessment for these Brothers. One of Kentucky's recent Grand Masters euphemistically referred to this group as "sustaining members." I suggest to you that as long as the annual assessments continue to be paid, the Grand Lodge is quite satisfied with these Brothers' level of engagement. Leadership has no appetite for any discussion of the disagreeable reality that our level of disengagement reflects the harsh fact that most Masons simply do not much care about Freemasonry or what happens to it.

## **What Is Our Response?**

It is at this point that the issue of our level of engagement becomes critical.

Where does engagement begin?

At William O. Ware Lodge of Research, this past year we've taken a closer look at the man for whom our Lodge is named: Most Worshipful Bro. William Of. Ware, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1957-1958. Following his installation as Grand Master on October 17, 1957, M. W. Bro. Ware posed three questions to the Craft assembled:

- What is Freemasonry?
- What does Freemasonry mean to me?
- What do I mean to Freemasonry?

Those are intriguing questions and can be viewed from several different

perspectives, but I suggest to you this morning that the issue of engagement is at the heart of each of those questions and consideration of these questions marks the beginning of engagement with Freemasonry.

All crises are also times of opportunity. At this low ebb in the tide of our Fraternity, we have a wonderful opportunity to engage our Brethren in a conversation based on the question, "What is Freemasonry?" After getting past the stock answers about being the world's oldest and largest organization for men, we can talk with our Brothers about their individual experiences, their expectations and frustrations with organized Freemasonry. The Entered Apprentice Degree poses the question, "What came you here to do?" Engaging with our Brothers with regard to the nature of Freemasonry includes (and perhaps requires) posing the question in this manner, "Why are we here?"

The joint venture to which I referred earlier is an example of the type of engagement that our Lodge of Research attempts to practice. We, along with our partners, sought to take a proactive approach to Masonic education and initiate conversations with our Brothers about the aim and purpose of the Fraternity (and to correct a few misperceptions along the way). If you are a member of a Lodge of Research, a philosophical society or an educational group, I ask you to consider getting your group outside of the confines of its comfort zone and engage with those who do not participate in such endeavors.

At William O. Ware Lodge of Research, we have not come anywhere close to answering Grand Master Ware's questions, but the conversations that we have had addressing those questions has helped us focus our direction and planning for future endeavors.

Members of our Research Lodge have gone back to their home Lodges and have engaged with Brothers there about the topics discussed at the Lodge of Research.

There is a young man here this morning who has been a Mason for about a year now. He began to attend our Lodge of Research and has since affiliated with us. His home Lodge does not have a history of promoting Masonic Education. Because of his enthusiasm for Freemasonry and his desire for more light in Masonry, when he told his Lodge about this symposium, they voted to sponsor his attendance here by paying his registration fee.

What a splendid example! In the future, it would worth our consideration to identify individuals that we would like to see attend a Masonic symposium, whether this one or one sponsored by a similar organization, and seek to have our Blue Lodges, or our Research Lodges, or other similar groups sponsor their attendance.

## The Specifics

I'd like to offer seven specific suggestions with respect to engagement. The first three of them relate to your engagement at an individual level. They are as follows:

1. Engage with your Grand Lodge. Grand Lodge officers are easy targets. Rather than being critical from a distance (which, I acknowledge, is a lot of fun), look for ways to offer support to programs that enhance the practice of Freemasonry. If no such program exists in your jurisdiction, offer to help develop one. Engaging with these Brothers may require all of us to get outside our particular zone of comfort, but it is precisely that level of engagement that will be required if we expect to have any impact at all on institutional Freemasonry.

It is certainly true in Kentucky, and I suspect in all jurisdictions, that there is more work to be done than there are men to perform the work. If you want to shock your District Deputy, offer to help him with the logistics of his District Meeting. Ask your elected and appointed Grand Lodge officers if there is some chore that you can help them perform. Accept appointment as a District Deputy, a Grand Lodge Committeeman or an appointed Grand Lodge officer. Engaging with these Brothers establishes your credibility. When they learn that you are not dangerous, even though you may have never flipped a single pancake in your life, you will begin to have the opportunity to participate in the conversations that will ultimately shape the direction of your Grand Lodge.

2. Engage with your Blue Lodge. For many of us, this is the most difficult of all. In our respective Blue Lodges, we both know and are known. If the culture of your Blue Lodge is such that it does not include regular Masonic Education, ask your Master to appoint an Education Committee and volunteer to chair it. In many instances, there is less an atmosphere of hostility to Masonic Education, than there is simply no one motivated enough to take responsibility for designing, arranging and coordinating a comprehensive educational program.
3. Engage with Lodges of Research and educational groups. Just as there is always a job to do at the Grand Lodge or Blue Lodge level, Lodges of Research need help as well. At William O. Ware Lodge of Research, we are blessed with a strong group of capable men who hold leadership positions. Yet we all face the limitations of attempting to accomplish our goals with a finite amount of time and other resources.

My greatest reward as Master of a Lodge of Research is hearing men leaving our meetings say to each other, "This is what I thought Masonry was when I joined." My hope is they will take that experience back to their Blue Lodges and begin the process of transforming Lodge culture so that the Freemasonry they seek is in their own Lodge.

Events like the one we are experiencing right now are important and necessary, but all of the information that we share does us little good if we fail, in turn, to share our Masonic Light with the Craft at large. With the permission of your Grand Lodge, organize seminars on state, regional or local levels. Your efforts may begin to bridge the gap between Brothers who understand the historical and philosophical roots of the Fraternity and those having a service club orientation. Connecting with the individual Brother increases the possibility of opening hearts and minds to a consideration of Freemasonry's greater potential.

The next three levels of engagement are conceptual and while they begin at the individual level, they are best practiced in a corporate manner as a Lodge, Grand Lodge, or other group. They are as follows:

4. Engage in comprehensive strategic planning. One of the attributes of any successful organization is a long-term strategic plan. Freemasonry, at all levels, tends to careen from year to year with little continuity in terms of its immediate goals and objective. In many ways, our management reflects the bright idea of the moment. Does your Lodge, Grand Lodge or Masonic Society have a five, ten, or twenty-five-year plan? What is your vision of and for the Fraternity in that time period? Our leadership in 1960 could not foresee, and thus did not plan for, our circumstances today. We have more management resources available than our predecessors had. While none of us can definitively forecast the future, with the information that we have readily available to us, we can certainly do a more creditable job of planning and preparation.

Please don't think of comprehensive planning as only addressing membership and financial matters. Strategic planning should include the philosophical and education grounding of our Brothers. The end result of our strategic planning should be a fiscally sound, viable Lodge, whose members are mentally, spiritually and financially invested (engaged) in its well-being.

5. Engage in a Structured Education Program. Like most other things Masonic, there is no consistency with respect to what men are taught about Masonry, when they are taught and how they are taught. Generally, we wait until after the conferral of the Entered Apprentice Degree before we begin any substantive Masonic Education. The education process should have begun well before that time with pre-degree classes.

At every point in the process of preparing for an receiving the Degrees of Masonry, our Lodges and Grand Lodges should have measurable levels of achievement for candidates. It should be a given that by the time a man is

ready to receive his Master Mason Degree, he knows the rudiments of Freemasonry as determined by the agreed on education plan; and, further, that his knowledge is equal to, or exceeds that of every other Brother who has been so educated.

In **Observing the Craft**, Andrew Hammer wrote that when societies cease to value knowledge and no longer have the discipline to attain it, they are in danger of self-destruction. The truth of that statement is self-evident in contemporary American Freemasonry. Structured and consistent Masonic Education is essential to preserve the future of American Freemasonry.

6. **Engage in Establishing Lodge Decorum**. The visible lack of pride that Masons have in Freemasonry is overwhelming. Grand Lodges and Subordinate Lodges can work on re-instilling pride by establishing clear standards for building maintenance, dress and behavior. The simple fact is that we tolerate run-down buildings, sloppy dress and poor decorum because we are afraid that if we hold members accountable for their actions, they will leave the fraternity. We should be so fortunate. Until we understand that it is necessary for us to model the behavior that we want to exist in the men we seek to attract, those same men will continue to ignore us as effective as they currently do. Improvements in surroundings, appearance and behavior will increase morale, will increase Freemasonry's attractiveness to non-members and will serve as an outward manifestation of what we hope are the internal improvements in the lives of our members.

The seventh, and last, specific point that I wish to raise is, in certain ways, the most painful, yet probably the most necessary.

7. Engaging with Freemasonry may require disengaging with certain aspects of it. In short, disengage with those who ridicule your goals and your vision of Freemasonry.

If your Lodge is firmly opposed to the inclusion of meaningful Masonic Education, if it adamantly chooses to remain in service club mode, it may be time for you to move on. If resistance to your efforts to educate the Craft is universal, then there is no need to frustrate yourself and further alienate your Brethren.

If you live in a rural area, it may be more difficult to find what John Bizzack refers to as an "Island" Lodge that practices Freemasonry in its intended form. But such Lodges do exist, and it may be necessary to find one. Affiliation with a Research Lodge, a study group or other philosophical organization may help to fill the void created by the lack of quality education in your Blue Lodge. I



recognize that disengagement may be an emotional and painful process, but it may be the only path to the practice of observant Freemasonry.

I strongly suspect that many of the 56% of Kentucky Masons to whom I referred earlier never engaged in the life of their Lodge because shortly after being raised as a Master Mason they found that they were offered nothing substantive in which to engage and they did not have the means or opportunity to discover an “Island” Lodge that could have afforded them the chance to experience Freemasonry as it was intended.

It may be necessary to disengage with the appendant bodies. In *Observing the Craft*, Bro. Hammer refers to the appendant bodies as distractions. In any event, in this day of shrinking membership it is apparent that our Blue Lodges are in direct competition with the appendant bodies for the resources of manpower, finances and leadership.

Let me quickly point out that I am a Scottish Rite Mason and I am active in my Valley. When you see the same faces, however, at Scottish Rite event, at Blue Lodge meetings, at the Lodge of Research or any other Masonic event, it quickly becomes apparent that our most valuable resource – our Brothers – are spread thinly in relation to all the tasks they are asked to perform. If the appendant bodies are not enhancing the experience of the Blue Lodge, it is time to question the need for their existence.

Our Fraternity’s most valuable assets are its members and the time that they contribute. We must use those resources wisely and where they will be most effective.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the somewhat gloomy tone of this presentation, there is cause for optimism about the future of Freemasonry. Many men in this room are among those most engaged in contemporary American Freemasonry. And Freemasonry needs their engagement. It needs your engagement. It needs a renewed sense of pride from its members. I frequently advise disillusioned Masons not to judge Freemasonry by its members. The philosophy of Freemasonry represents a perfect system of self-improvement. The philosophy of Freemasonry lends itself to optimism and, frankly I don’t believe it is possible to fully embrace the teachings of Freemasonry and be a pessimist. Vince Lombardi is quoted as having said, “Perfection is unattainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.”

I believe this morning I stand before a group of men engaged in the pursuit of excellence. My optimism is not based on a belief that anything that we do or say will cause our disengaged Brothers to be restored to fellowship with us in great numbers (although it may happen on the occasional basis). But, rather, because of the engagement of those present here today, I believe that men coming into our Fraternity will have the opportunity to learn that there is more substance to Freemasonry than that to which they have initially been exposed and they will know how to begin the search for that substance. Because of your engagement, and through your many excellent contributions to American Freemasonry, I am optimistic that slowly, excruciatingly slowly at times, we will begin to see more and more opportunities to practice observant Freemasonry and, in such manner, achieve the aim and purpose of this great Fraternity – to equip men with the knowledge and tools to practice the self-discipline necessary for a rewarding and happy life.

Thank you for your kind attention and I hope you enjoy the rest of the symposium.