

IS THERE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN FREEMASONRY?

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In 1966, the Masonic Fraternity in America was eight years into an annual steady membership loss that has lasted to this day. That year around 155,000 Masons that were on the rolls in 1959, were gone. In another ten years, 477,000 more would disappear from the rolls. By 1986, another 631,000 names disappeared and a total of 1,263,000 men were no longer counted as Masons in America. Although the losses varied in each jurisdiction every jurisdiction felt the pang of the losses. The average loss was 25,250 Masons per state over that 27-year period.¹

While many jurisdictions in this period searched for ways to stop the alarming hemorrhage by tinkering with standards of admittance, pushing the no-solicitation rule to its limits, reducing proficiency requirements and other approaches that proved less than constructive, the leadership of one jurisdiction saw the problem as the deeply embedded internal issue with the culture that it was and that complacency and lack of general instruction was at the core of the erosion of Masonry and its organizational behavior.

The Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Washington, George H. Bovingdon, took a bold step in 1966 following an oration made by a Past Master to the Grand Lodge in 1965. He ordered the oration to be printed at once, in readable type, and a number of copies mailed to the Master of each subordinate Lodge. Whether Masters were in agreement with the Oration was not important. What he directed was that every Master make the oration the basis of specific discussion in their respective Lodges. Moreover, he required immediately thereafter, a written report from each Master on the questions and issues raised during the discussion.



Two things made this step bold. Unlike past practices of Grand Jurisdiction since the late 1700s to send inspectors to assess and examine the work of subordinate Lodges, a strategy repeatedly failing to make a significant difference in ever-expanding number of Lodges and membership, Bovingdon was placing the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of each Lodge to inspect their own internal work, processes, practices, and the appearance of their facilities, and then report the results in writing. This was a unique approach to a tired system and a lack of accountability.

The five-page, thirty-minute Oration declared that “It is now high twelve for Freemasonry,” and time to examine the defects and weaknesses, remove the defects and to improve, strengthen, and enrich the structure of the Order.² And, to “Let that inspection be realistic and our evaluation honest. Let us tell ourselves the truth, even if the truth hurts.”³

¹ The Masonic Service Association of North America, Membership Totals since 1924, <https://msana.com>, accessed November 2022.

² Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, 1966, 3c-7c.

³ *The Masonic Review of Bruce E. Hunt, A Selection of Review Material Published in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, 1962-1977*, edited by Early K. Dille, Missouri Grand Lodge of Research, Volume No. 33, 1977, Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, 1966, 3c-7c.

Bovingdon did not claim complete success with the direction he led, but he declared it fruitful although it was not hailed by all as it was entitled to be. Regardless, a review, 55 years later by the Grand Lodge of Washington notes that Bovingdon's action engendered intense emphasis throughout the jurisdiction at the time on what was critical. The result of the required self-inspection was a volume of Lodge reports containing original but divergent ideas and suggestions. These indicated a revived interest in the Craft that also increased the Lodge attendance. The self-appraisal was a tonic that simulated concern for the welfare of the period.⁴

Another phase of Bovingdon's term of office emphasized neatness and dispatch. He was unfavorably impressed by the poor condition and appearance of some Masonic buildings that did not reflect prosperity or good housekeeping. He therefore issued direction to correct the condition and the submission of photographs of each Masonic meeting place "to the end that Masonry might present a well-kept outward appearance to the world at large."⁵ His influence added decorum, brevity to existing bureaucratic procedures, and a meticulous observance of method and order. Lodges were given an illustration of how to conduct meetings with dispatch and efficiency.⁶

What did that Oration report that sparked this internal review by those most responsible for constructively advancing Freemasonry?

THE ORATION

The Oration was straight talk and contained no flowers of rhetoric or soft soaping of the condition of the Fraternity, noting that however glorious its past, Freemasonry was showing unmistakable signs of decay an pointing out that the jurisdiction had lost more members than at any time since The Great Depression and were accelerating. Moreover, that the reasons could not be all external.

Emphasizing that few lodges could boast of an average attendance of more than 10 percent of their members, the Oration translated that low attendance in another way too: 90 percent of the jurisdiction's 66,000 men "have voted that our meetings are not worth their time."⁷ The Oration went on to report the reluctance of qualified members to be part of the progressive officers line and that meetings were poorly conducted by many officers who neither know the work well nor propose to learn it." The warning was clear: "If we shrug off the decline [and decay] as "only temporary" we run the risk that we will discovered too late that it was permanent after all."⁸

The problem was identified in the failure of Lodges to fulfill their mission by not effectively competing for men's minds and souls by allowing vague generalities and seldom providing enough instruction to tell those admitted how to reconcile duty to others with duty to oneself and how to practice the principles of Freemasonry in a progressively more materialistic and impersonal society. As the Oration further notes, Lodges have come to treat a man's transformation from candidate to member as an end rather than the

⁴ Compendium of The Past Grand Masters, Grand Lodge of Washington, Grand Lodge of Washington, 2021.

⁵ *IBID.*

⁶ *IBID.*

⁷ *The Masonic Review of Bruce E. Hunt, A Selection of Review Material Published in the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, 1962-1977*, edited by Early K. Dille, Missouri Grand Lodge of Research, Volume No. 33, 1977.

⁸ *IBID.*

beginning of his instruction. Masonic relief for members had also faded, programs were void of vital topics, improvements discouraged, and the Craft was left with a feeling that Masonry is drifting aimlessly.⁹

The Oration asked, “What shall we do to revitalize Masonry? How do we stimulate the interest of members and potential members? How do we give our Fraternity a sense of mission and purpose in the world?”

The Oration did not pretend to have all the answers, but it was vividly clear that what was said was intended to stimulate worthwhile conversation and provoke thought that had long been missing.

The second part of the Oration examined what the ritual teaches and its enduring relevancy. That part too carried a caution that the ritual should not, as apparently proposed, be abbreviated or condensed, and explained why. This part encouraged the Fraternity to advance on the problems of the larger society instead of retreating from them and to foster diversity without being divisive to find the delicate balances required to make Masonry’s social order work. The argument was made to make Lodge forums a place for the discussion of such matters while at Refreshment at Stated Communications, encouraged a revival of the Festive Board, to complete an honest inspection of what Lodges do and have not done, improve ritual work and post-instruction about it, and importantly, let Freemasonry do its job and present itself to the public in a way that demonstrates that the external appearance of Masonic facilities reflect the quality of the doings that take place internally.

The straight-talk in the Oration is a refreshing departure from a mere cursory review of findings of other approaches taken to address issues that faced Freemasonry in the final four decades of the 20th century. The fact that something was done with the straight-talk in that Oration instead of allowing it to wither as just another Oration and sparked a realistic internal review at a time when there was little to no meaningful internal reviews, stands as an example from which other grand jurisdiction could have benefited. Especially those jurisdictions were that were serious about answering the question, *Is there room for improvement?*

The problems and issues facing the Grand Lodge of Washington in the 1960s were not peculiar to that jurisdiction. Another lesson is found in Washington’s reaction and awakening to the fact that American Freemasonry was in period that and could potentially suffer more in the following decades from the current stagnation and decay, was that it demanded something of which there was also an absence: bold leadership. Such confident leadership placed accountability on each Lodge to wake up and honestly examine themselves and not merely rely on a Grand Jurisdiction to resolve long standing, self-inflicted problems.

The examination of issues that has faced American Freemasonry since the early 1800s continue to point to the long-recognized, touted, but in action an ignored fact that Freemasonry is not, nor never was intended for the masses of people. It is a philosophy and a way of individual life. It is designed to progressively upgrade good men into men who become better; but because this is not an easy pathway to follow, there has always been a limited number of men who are interested in its teachings.¹⁰

An active return to the true designs on the Trestleboard there is a higher probability that Freemasonry will find a time in the future when later historians will clearly be able to designate the point in time when Freemasonry came into its prime and remained there.

⁹ *IBID.*

¹⁰ Hunt.

When the majority of members are well-versed on and heed the true design on the historic Trestleboard, Orations like the one given to the Grand Lodge of Washington will not be necessary. Until then, there is more than enough room for improvement in American Freemasonry. A realistic and honest self-evaluation and telling ourselves the truth, even if it hurts, would show that fact.