

Rev. Terry L. Tilton, PGM-MN 2002-2203, FPS
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MORE LESSONS THE CHURCH CAN TEACH MASONRY

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for being invited to address this bi-annual meeting of the Iowa Research Lodge No. 2. Every couple years my family makes a pilgrimage down to Gowerie and Jefferson Iowa for family reunions and like tonight the hospitality and warm reception is outstanding. As many of you know, I hail from the state of Minnesota - the state with the largest per capita Scandinavian population in America. I was delighted to learn that when some of my native Minnesotans come to live in Iowa they are addressed as Iowegians. (Iowa Norwegians).

Though very politically incorrect I thought I might begin with a short story about some of my northern Scandinavian neighbors.

LARS WAS STAGGERING HOME AFTER A NIGHT IN THE TAVERN.

But this night a Lutheran minister saw him and offered to help him get home safely. As they approached the house, Lars asked the minister to step aside for a moment. He explained, **“I vant Lena to see who I have been out vith tonight.”**

For over 32 years I have been proud to be out with my friends in the Masonic fraternity. For 35 years I have served under appointment in the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church as a pastor to the local church. I have often commented that the church and the lodge share many similarities. For example, both are volunteer not-for-profit associations and both acknowledge faith as foundational to their teachings. Both have long histories as significant institutions which have helped shape our society and values. Both are person-centered in their services and outreach. Both have enjoyed a peculiar place of honor but occasionally disrepute and indignation in their histories. I think it is equally accepted that the lodge and church no longer shape the character of our nation as in former years. Both are also struggling to find relevance in a post 9-11 world. And both have found issues of membership and renewed vitality as the most vexing problems to their continued existence.

Here's a little story that rings all too true in some churches and will serve as an introduction to my talk.

THERE WAS A FEUD BETWEEN THE PASTOR AND CHOIR DIRECTOR of the Hicksville Southern Baptist Church. It seems the first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached on *“Dedicating Yourselves to Service”* and the Choir Director chose to sing: **“I Shall Not Be Moved”**.

Trying to believe that it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on *“Giving.”* Afterwards, the choir squirmed as the director led them in a hymn: **“Jesus Paid it All.”**

By this time, the Pastor was losing his temper. Sunday morning attendance swelled as the tension between the two built.

A large crowd showed up the next week to hear the sermon on *“The Sin of Gossiping”*. Would you believe the Choir Director selected the song: **“I Love to Tell the Story”**?

There was no turning back. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed, he was considering a resignation. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in: **“Why Not Tonight”**?

Truthfully, no one was surprised when the Pastor resigned a week later, explaining that Jesus had led him there and Jesus was leading him away. The Choir Director could not resist: **“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”**.

LEARNING FROM THE CHURCH

Tonight I want to share a talk titled **“More Lessons the Church Can Teach Masonry.”** The genesis for this title came from a presentation I made at the 59th Annual Midwest Masonic Education Conference held this past March in Kansas City. But there is so much more which can be said about the Church and the Lodge and that is the subject this evening.

Perhaps of all the institutions in America none have been more studied and evaluated as to their effectiveness and program design than the church. And some truths have emerged which I think can be directly applied to lodge.

For example, it has been known for many years that on average it is seven times more difficult to revitalize a dying church than it is to start a new one. Seven times more effort will be used to find the way forward than to begin over again new. That seems like a startling statistic but it shows just how difficult institutional revitalization can be.

Or perhaps have you ever wondered why it seems so difficult to find a successful lodge program? The answer comes directly out of studies from the church. If you put up a new program each year for four years, statistically there will be only one that is deemed successful – successful being that it will be repeated a second year. If you know that you realize you have to try more and different ideas before you will find the one that works for you. And of course the kicker is that it is not possible to predict which one of the four will be successful.

Resistance to change is fundamentally a part of all tradition-bound institutions but I would argue more especially the church and the lodge. Each is struggling with issues of outreach to a younger generation. Each finds the vast majority of its buildings in small cities and rural settings. Each has an aging population base (at least from a main-line church perspective) and is having extreme difficulty in reaching out to the new population centers in our increasingly more urban society.

I hope that I might point you to you some of the significant findings from the institutional studies of the church in our society and ask the question, **“Does this not also help us to understand and demand the attention of the lodge as well?”**

CHANGE, CONFLICT AND COMPETITION

I want to begin by introducing you to some C-letter words which are necessary to help us understand where we are at today. The words are: **change, conflict, and competition.**

“...the natural side effect of change is conflict,” reflected Dr. Robert Sloan as he announced his resignation from the office of president of Baylor University. **“We moved quickly and boldly to implement the vision (of a new era for the university) and found that Baylor is not immune to the discomfort and insecurity generated by change.”** (January 21, 2005)

The central theme of Dr. Sloan’s reflections could be used by dozens of parish pastors every month as they explain their decision to choose early retirement or resign from the ministry. In my own Annual Conference with over 320 ministers under appointment, it is one of the reasons that I (at age 58) have only less than one dozen colleagues who have been in ministry longer than myself.¹ Change resulting in conflict could be cited by any public school superintendent or the chief executive officer of any profit-driven corporation or the chief of police in any large American city or a church denomination executive or a city manager or the spouse who is explaining to his or her parents the shock of an impending divorce. A common consequence of change is conflict!

1 *Official Journal and Yearbook, Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 2007, 321-366.*

None of us in the lodge have been immune to the tensions which are caused when change takes place. The resistance of Lodge Secretaries and Past Masters to change is proverbial. From a macro perspective of change, I am reminded of the gut-wrenching story of the guest speaker at the Annual Philalethes Feast and Forum in Washington D.C. this past February. Most Worshipful Brother Frank J. Haas, Past Grand Master of West Virginia (2005-2006) was summarily expelled from all the rights and privileges of masonry this last November without trial by the current sitting Grand Master.

What were the changes Most Worshipful Brother Haas brought to the Masons of West Virginia? Essentially they were all clarifications or enlargements to the existing Grand Lodge Constitution to bring it more in line with mainstream masonry. All were overwhelmingly voted into law at the 2006 Annual Communication. West Virginia masonic law did not allow masonic youth organizations to meet in lodge rooms or lodges to give financial support to these organizations. The Brothers voted to change this. Language was voted in declaring it to be unmasonic conduct to refuse to seat a visitor in lodge if race was a reason. The brothers voted the option of saying the Pledge of Allegiance at lodge meetings and also allowing handicapped candidates to petition for degrees. Being the only Grand Lodge in the United States not to recognize the DeMolay, Rainbow Girls or Job's Daughters; the only grand lodge which are not members of the Masonic Service Association; the only grand lodge not belonging to a regional conference of grand masters; and the only grand lodge to order the Scottish Rite *not* to perform the Washington/Arnold 20th degree; the brothers voted to accept all these changes, none of which were precedent-setting among Grand Lodge jurisdictions in the United States. The consequence of change - conflict. In this case a concerted effort by a few determined Past Grand Masters to go back to the future.²

DR. LYLE E. SCHALLER, pastor, sociologist and author of more than 60 books on religious life in America, has summarized the theme of what he sees going on in American religious life today in the title of a new book, **“From Cooperation to Competition”** (*Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006*). He puts into context the changing dynamics of the institution of the church (and I would argue the lodge) in ways which help us to understand what is happening and what responses are most helpful for us to act creatively. He writes, “A common consequence of **change** is **conflict!** But rather than focus on whether that conflict can and should be avoided, a more useful discussion can begin by expanding the subject from these two C-words to four. One common consequence of change is **conflict**. A second common consequence is **change** frequently alters the ranger of **choices** available to people. When **change** reduces the range of

2 Paper by M.W.B. Frank J. Haas, MPS, “Masonry Through the (Rearview) Looking Glass© The Philalethes Society, 2008.

attractive **choices**, that may generate feelings of resistance, hostility, alienation, and anger. That is one reason, whenever feasible, to introduce **change** by adding to the range of attractive **choices** rather than proposing changes that will reduce the number and variety of choices. **Make change by addition, not subtraction.**”³

In the church, this change by addition, has seen the rapid rise of more non-denominational or independent churches, often tailored to reach out to a younger generation. The concept of mega-churches did not exist before the 1960's. Today there are more than 7,000 churches in the United States which have average worship attendance of over 2,000 and many with over 3,000. Fully twenty percent of all church members in the United States belong to these churches. Perhaps, no greater conflict over the number of choices has been brought to the church than that of worship styles - coffeehouse, contemporary, traditional, or blended to name only a few. And speaking from my own main-line denomination, this range of choices (which my own denomination has found difficult to embrace) has been the reason why the average age of our membership continues to climb, the average worship attendance continues to fall and total membership has continued to decline at a rate of one to two percent each year for the past forty years. Does that sound a little bit like North American Freemasonry?

And still, overall the average worship attendance in American churches has been growing each year. Weekend worship attendance in American Protestant congregations sets new records year after year.part of the answer is in the 50% increase of population in the US from 1965 to 2005. And another part has been described as the fourth great religious revival in American history.

This is the trend of larger non-denominational mega-churches, thousands of new churches reaching out to serve immigrant communities, and the even larger total impact of American religious bodies including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, the Baptist General Conference, the Evangelical Free Church in America, the Seventh-Day Adventist, the Church of Christ, and scores of other movements, associations, conferences, conventions, and denominations that have opened new churches and multiplied worship opportunities. **“Come and help us pioneer the new”** often has more appeal than **“Come and help us perpetuate the old.”** As Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and others cut back sharply on organizing new congregations, the resulting vacuum in the ecclesiastical free market was filled by others. Sam Walton and his colleagues invented a new way to do retail trade with younger generations. These non-traditional religious bodies have been inventing new ways to do church in an exceedingly competitive ecclesiastical marketplace. The fourth

3 Lyle Shaller, *From Cooperation to Competition*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006) 1.

C-word then is **competition** and this **competition** has brought **conflict, conflict** has brought **change**, **change** has increased the number of **choices** available today.⁴

Though it is my observation that Freemasonry in America is much slower to react to change than the local church, the reality is that we are seeing the nascent pangs of a revival as there has come this increased competition in our Fraternity. Right Worshipful Brother Tom Jackson, Past Grand Secretary of Pennsylvania and Secretary of the World Conference of Grand Lodges, has stated that the greatest threat he sees to regular mainstream Freemasonry today is the dramatic rise of irregular or clandestine grand lodges. He obviously sees these irregular and clandestine grand lodges as being in direct competition to historic mainstream masonry. In the United States today there are more than 200 grand lodges operating outside the regular mainstream and Prince Hall grand lodge system. Many of these, of course, have been breakaway groups of Prince Hall Freemasonry but increasingly we are seeing attempts to form new grand lodges or groupings of breakaway constituent lodges into new organizations.⁵

Being the Vice-president of the Philalethes Society, America's oldest premier research and education group, it was with some concern that their came the announcement last May of a new education and research group called **The Masonic Society**. Their first publication of The Masonic Society magazine just came out last week. This is a new movement which says it is **“interested in education, research, and fostering the intellectual, spiritual and social growth of the modern Masonic fraternity.”**⁶ I personally know many of the founding members and many already have membership or are Fellows in the Philalethes Society. Quite frankly many are unhappy with the direction of the Philalethes Society and have decided that they cannot wait for changes to be made.

How are we to react to these developments? As an officer of The Philalethes Society, a knee-jerk reaction would be to say that they are in competition with mainstream masonry and the historic and venerated traditional venues of communication. Is this competition? Does it give more choices? I think there can be no doubt! Whether they will be in conflict depends on how we see them. If we believe they are simply taking resources from an ever shrinking pie then these new groups and programs represent a direct threat to our existence. On the other hand, if they spur us to be more pro-active, tailor our message to a well-defined audience and encourage us to

4 Lyle Shaller, *From Cooperation to Competition*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006) 7.

5 Paul Bessel, retrieved 04/15/2008 from <http://bessel.org/gls.htm> (All Masonic Grand Lodges with website links)

6 Chris Hodapp, an email invitation recovered April 24, 2008.

improve our methods of outreach and communication, they may just be the impetus for change that will bring about renewed vitality.

There is no doubt that changes in the ways our Grand Lodges have responded to the pressures of a different economic and work environments for men in North America have brought dramatic conflict to Masonry. Even twenty years after of the first mid-west Grand Lodge allowed one-day classes we have not reached a consensus on their value to masonry. It is evident that they are not the panacea to remedying overall membership losses. But on the on the other hand, survey after survey has shown that these masons are no more likely to demit from the lodge than those brought in by the conventional ritual degree system and some studies have even indicated these “one-day” masons have taken a more active role in leadership. No doubt, this is because they represent an untapped segment of men in our society who share the values of masonry but were unable to join through our traditional degree programs.

We live in a world of increasing **competition**. Just think back to when the discount stores arrived in the 1960's, they created new competition for the five-and-dime variety stores on Main Street. But when Wal-Mart began to sell clothing, shoes, auto supplies, jewelry, prescription drugs, and groceries, that created a another level of new competition for many other retailers on Main Street as well!

Last year's Midwest Masonic Education Conference focused on some of the new North American recreations of masonry in the traditional practices or European-style lodge model. Though my initial reaction was to write off this “philosophical” model of masonry as be too narrowly exclusive with its pre-requisite high level of commitment, membership standards and defined size, I am becoming increasingly convinced that it serves an important niche in American Freemasonry. Quite frankly it offers another choice which we can either view as competition to our historic low-commitment membership model of declining North American Freemasonry or as a catalyst for needed changes, perhaps, being the leavening which will help to leaven the whole North American system.

As the church has learned ever so dramatically the level of competition for the time, attention, energy, money, allegiance, and participation of Americans stands at an all-time high. The level of the quality of our programs must be competitive with the secular world.

THE PLACE OF TECHNOLOGY

In the church one of those areas of competition has increasingly been in the use of technology. To reach out to a new generation who has grown-up in a media saturated environment we must use every means of making a connection. In many of our churches

this has meant massive investments in audio-visual projection equipment, computer-generated graphics and sophisticated sound and light systems. It has also meant the use of the web in advertising and giving access to a generation who would never consider buying a newspaper or reading a printed book. Historically, I suppose we could liken this development to the popularity of the Scottish Rite in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries whose degrees which were staged in some of the most expensive venues and theatrical trappings – the media of their day.

I mention this because just the other day I was reminded of the significance of mass communication through the internet in helping us to draw the attention of new members. Some estimates are that easily half of all new candidates for masonry come to our lodges today through interest and research of our fraternity over their computers. Here is a typical note from a prospective candidate picked up on the masonic-ed blog:

Thank you so much for getting back to me. I want to just learn more about the history of the masons. I first got interested in the masons after seeing a show on the History channel. Very interesting, and after seeing that I knew I wanted to be part of something very historical. Then after talking to some masons and after reading the Freemasons for Dummies book I was even more shocked on the history and the brotherly love and fellowship of the masons. I am so excited about starting my journey. John⁷

In John's case it was a two-hour History channel program produced with the cooperation of the Grand Lodge of Washington D.C. that peeked his interest. When "National Treasure" was released in 2004 the Masonic Information Center and many grand lodges reported a 30% rise in hits by persons seeking more information about Freemasonry.⁸ I have personally talked to many new brothers who joined Masonry because of this communication tool.

I want to quote an article published in the May 18th issue of Los Angeles Times titled **"Freemasons in midst of popularity, membership boom"**

IN LOS FELIZ, across from a 7-Eleven on North Vermont Avenue, a few dozen men in their early 20s to late 80s share a dinner behind closed doors. Some wear full tuxedos with bow ties and jeweled cuff links, some have shoulder-length hair, and others wear open-collared shirts that reveal the slightest filigree of tattoo arching across their chests.

7 Recovered from <http://masonic-ed.org> on April 21, 2008

8 Reported by M.W.B. Richard Fletcher, Executive Director, Masonic Information Center, at a meeting in February 2005

Meet the millennial Masons. As secret societies go, it is one of the oldest and most famous. Its enrollment roster includes Louis Armstrong and Gerald Ford, and it has been depicted in movies such as “The Da Vinci Code” and “National Treasure.” Once more than 4 million strong (back in the 1950s), it has been in something of a popularity free-fall ever since. Viewed with suspicion as a bastion of antiquated values and forced camaraderie, the Masons have seen membership rolls plummet more than 60% to just 1.5 million in 2006.

“For a time it looked as if Masonry was going into sharp decline, if not the death throes,” said UCLA history professor Margaret C. Jacob, who has written extensively about the fraternal order. “But it looks like it may be making a comeback.”

That’s because the Freemasons, whose tenets forbid soliciting or recruiting members, have enthusiastically embraced the Internet as a way to leverage curiosity about an organization with its roots in Europe’s medieval stonemasons guilds. Freemasonry today sees itself as a thinking man’s salon, a learned society with a philosophical bent.

“We had a record number of new members last year,” said Allan Casalou, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of California. “We added 2,000 men, which is the most since 1998 and our seventh straight year of membership increases.”

The article goes on to speak about Santa Monica-Palisades Lodge No. 307, one of the youngest and most diverse lodges in the state (the average age of active brothers is just 33). The lodge’s senior deacon, Jim Warren, calls it “ ‘Star Trek’ without the chicks.” He goes on to say, “We have every possible national origin, ethnicity and religious denomination you could imagine.”

Warren credits the Internet. “We were one of the first lodges in the state to have a website up,” he said. “That led to a huge spike in membership.”

Other lodges followed suit, putting up their own sites and drawing a crowd. That’s how prospective Mason Johnny Royal ended up at the door of Elysian Lodge No. 418 last month. “My generation wants to be part of something beyond itself,” Royal said. “I want to learn; I want to participate.”

THE INTERNET hasn’t only made it easier to learn about the Freemasons, Casalou says, it’s changed the type of men coming forward. “There is so much information on the Internet that by the time someone comes to a lodge to seek membership, they already know a lot about Masonry. Which is a big departure from previous

generations. And it means they are more likely to be active participants.”

The article concludes by saying that California’s contingent of Freemasons is expected to grow, as the average age of its members, once 71 is now 65, and is expected to drop. The Grand Secretary predicts that in ten years the state will be awash in 55-year-old pre-retirement Masons.⁹

At a recent meeting of the Masonic Information Center in Washington D.C. we discussed the proposed third film by Disney’s Dreamworks Films in the National Treasure series. Although National TreasureTwo: Book of Secrets did not nearly have as much masonic history as the first film interestingly it grossed more income and was seen by more people than the first film. The Scottish Rite Southern Jurisdiction assisted in some publicity for this second film by opening up the Scottish Rite Temples in six locations across America for a Geocache scavenger hunt promoting the film. It is anticipated that they will be requesting this help from all the Valleys in the United States this coming year hoping to piggy-back on the geocaching craze among young men and giving them an opportunity to learn more about Freemasonry by visiting their buildings and talking to the Masons who are sharing the story of our Craft, through its symbols and meanings.

Being more welcoming. Being intentional in your outreach efforts to attract new members. The mainline church, like the lodge, is learned that it is not enough to open the door and expect new members to come in. Internet, and new media venues, can attract and piggyback on the interests of today’s generation. Programs of education and outreach into the community intentionally seeking persons of color, differing ethnicity, creed or life-style are basic to any successful program today.

RELATIONSHIPS AND MEASURING SUCCESS

Here is another set of statistics from the church that I believe have a direct bearing on our lodges. In the 1950's life in America was still organized around functions and

9 “Freemasons in midst of popularity, membership boom,” Los Angeles Times, May 18, 2008 story in Lifestyle features.

respect for authority. Today far greater value is placed on relationships. For example, in the church we have known that longer pastorates tend to show the greatest growth and stability – longer pastorates being at least ten to twenty years in length verses those of only 2-7 years.

But the pastor cannot do it alone. The church has had to learn and relearn the importance of personal invitations to build the bridges to get new members. The most effective inviting-bridges happen between people who already know one another, not between church members and strangers.

If you were to ask the last ten or twenty people who joined your church this question: “Through whom, or by what means, did you first visit our church? What got you on the property for the first time?” You will discover that in the average church 75 to 90 percent of all new members say they came because someone invited them.

Yet, research indicates that, on the average, only 46 percent of church members say they have invited at least one person to a worship service during the last twelve months.¹⁰

What would be the average if Masons were asked, “When was the last time you discussed with someone or invited someone to learn more about Masonry?” I would propose that this is the single greatest reason we have seen a nearly 50-year decline in our membership rolls. Every lodge and every Master of his lodge must at least once or twice a year challenge his members to invite and reach out to prospective new members. I do not know any growing lodge who does not utilize this formula.

As a corollary how do we foster those relationships when lodge leadership changes each year?

Here is another interesting statistic. After a quarter century (some will argue no more than 40 years) of meeting in the same address the natural tendency of churches is on taking better care of the current constituency and their children, than on evangelism. In other words if more than one-half of a denomination’s congregations have been meeting in the same building at the same address since before the mid-1960's, you probably are a numerically shrinking religious body. Is it feasible for churches to move locations every 25-40 years. Probably not! So what is the solution?

In Christianity the solution is plant more churches. As difficult as that may be

0 ⁰ Herb Miller and Lyle Schaller, Co-editors, THE PARISH PAPER -Ideas and Insights for Active Congregations, “Attracting New People: Are We Building the Bridges?” July, 2007.

inviting younger generations to help pioneer the new is the only real solution. We have learned that you cannot expect them to be eager to come and help perpetuate the past.

The obvious implication for the masonic lodge is that particularly in those urban and suburban growth communities we need to plant new lodges. We have forgotten that the greatest eras of growth in the history of Freemasonry were also times when lodges replicated themselves by helping to charter sister lodges. I predict that when Freemasonry gets back to this model we will then truly see a national resurgence and renewal.

FINALLY I WANT TO ASK, HOW DO YOU MEASURE THE VITALITY OF FREEMASONRY? In masonry as well as the church we measure membership to talk about growth but in the church we have discovered that probably a more useful statistic is average worship attendance. I find it interesting that in the lodge our annual reports measure number of members, deaths, demits and those stricken from the rolls, the current assets and annual per capita dues, but no where do we measure the average attendance at our lodge meetings. I would like to humbly suggest that the church learned long ago that who is on the rolls is not nearly as important as counting how many show up for worship and participate in the activities during our principle time of gathering which is usually for Sunday worship. The measure of real growth and vitality in every institution is found in those who act on their commitments, share their time, talent and treasure and experience a sense of worth and well being that helps them make positive contributions to others. Is this also not one of the foundational principles of our Fraternity?

And so tonight I have suggested to you that in many ways the church and the lodge are really not much different. As faith-based, volunteer associations dedicated to self-improvement and service they historically have stood side by side in the building of our nation and society. Today both suffer as whole generations have turned away from the historic values of virtue, integrity, service and commitment. Both have suffered drastic membership and participation declines in this past half-century and both face the daunting task of reaching out to a new generation in ways which attract their loyalty and participation to help these institutions survive. I believe as Freemasons we do not have to go it alone. We do not need to invent the wheel. There is much that we can learn from

our sister the church.

I have suggested that change, conflict, choice and competition are the operative words in our society today. And I would like to believe that as Freemasons we are approaching the nadir of our membership decline and lodge closings and mergers. Time will tell if society swings back to us again. But in the meantime we cannot afford to wait for the future to happen to us, we must shape our own future.

As Lyle Shaller so bluntly states in his analysis of the church landscape: “... **the historical record is clear, given the choice between making the changes required to become competitive or gradually fading into obsolescence, the majority of individuals, voluntary associations, religious congregations, profit-driven corporations, and nonprofit institutions find it easier to adjust to obsolescence rather than initiate and implement the required changes.**”¹

Thank you, my brothers and friends, for allowing me be with you tonight. I think you might agree, surely there are important lessons the church can teach masonry.

1 ¹Lyle Shaller, *From Cooperation to Competition*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006) 16.