

## **Re-Setting Our Masonic Compass**

*A. William Bodine, Ph.D. – 2004 Lecture*

While this past year our great leadership in The State of New York broke new ground with the one day Grand Master's Class to become a Mason and we are experiencing renewed growth in Masonry, we must also face the question of what led to our decline for so many years. Without knowing the answer to this question, we will be unable to focus our efforts in such a way to sustain growth and maintain the health of an otherwise remarkable worldwide fraternally.

### ***Why Have Masons Experienced A Declining In Their Membership? Many Reasons Seem Obvious***

At the outset, without a reasonably sophisticated survey to collect, analyze, and interpret data from inactive Masons and those that simply dropped out, one can only theorize about what led to the decline of Masonry. Some reasons seem obvious: (1) We are all living much more demanding lives and the argument becomes "I simply don't have the time."; (2) As suburban life presented an appealing alternative to New York City, core groups of brothers found other Lodges or simply took up new activities in their new communities; (3) Since the 1960's many young people have developed different values and have become more self-centered and less interested in participating in charitable fraternities and giving free time to anything; (4) The emergence of a meritocracy approach to careers rather than reliance on school ties, club associations, and "good old boy" networks; (5) A long standing policy by Masons of no recruiting of new members [Each candidate must take the initiative to become a Mason.]; and (6) Masons orientation to protecting its secrets has resulted in a lack of public awareness. Perhaps, also as the World War II generation that first experienced brotherhood in wartime and upon returning home found it in fraternal associations, whether Masons, Elks, Lions, or Rotary, are passing on without a concerted efforts to find their replacements. I am sure other reasons might be suggested but these five or six seem especially relevant.

### ***Why Have Masons Been Able To Add New Members Recently? Good Programs Can Work Well***

While I can only offer observations from my own experience in New York City, it seems clear there are several reasons new men are joining the ranks of Masonry. First, committed, focused, and highly effective leadership of the Grand Lodge of The State of New York has made a tremendous effort to renew its membership growth. Such programs include the TV advertising, an aggressive public relations effort, the "One Day Mason Program", new handout brochures, the availability of well-done video tapes, public tours of Masonic Temples, and waiving back dues obligations of inactive members.

Exceptional, steady, and carefully planned new member programs have also been well executed by certain lodges. In these instances, certain approaches stand out as especially effective: (1) regular monthly open cocktail parties to include invited candidates of the Lodge; (2) regular monthly open luncheons to include invited candidates to the Lodge; (3) individual efforts by Lodge members, especially the Master, to bring their friends to Lodge; (4) open Lodge events where invited guests can get a feel for what Masonry is all about; and (5) superb degree work, even highly skilled teams, whose work is so impressive and inspiring that members want to bring their friends into the Lodge and let them enjoy the Masonic experience. A few other Lodges seemed to have rediscovered the real purpose of Masonry, that is a character building focus where the Lodge helps all their members become good men and works to help their good men become even better. In these Lodges, it seems not only that the quality of the leadership has been good and effective but that it has reached out to all the brothers in the Lodge in involve them in the process of character building activities, including a superb program of regular lectures involving as many brothers as possible.

### ***What Do Our Brothers Most Yearn For? All of Us Have Great Spiritual Needs***

This past year, I was privileged to be invited to participate with the leaders of an outstanding Lodge in Manhattan who were seriously searching to find answers to what was missing in an other successful Lodge. In particular, the Lodge enjoyed a strong and growing membership, healthy finances, and great fellowship among the brothers. The purpose was to have a candid discussion about what was missing in their Lodge. The group was fascinating in its composition: especially accomplished professionals, very bright and insightful, previous

high-level leaders in both the Lodge, District, and Grand Lodge. The group was also well selected and balanced among various age groups, backgrounds, and professions. The setting was most pleasant and comfortable with drinks and good food available in abundance before a serious hour and a half discussion. Predictably, some used the occasions to make speeches. Others, made speeches to be seen. Nonetheless, in the end there emerged a realization that while the membership was strong, finances were healthy, and the spirit of brotherhood was wonderful, all ultimately realized that the Lodge had been solely focused on attracting first rate members, providing them with an exceptional ritual experience in each of the three degrees of Masonry, and then making them feel welcome as brothers in the Lodge. No attention had been given to our central mission: BUILD CHARACTER. No lectures, other than those required in the ritual work, had been given in years. And, certainly no character building messages or words of inspiration to live better lives had been delivered in years.

In all this, it was clear that the essential fact is that we all have a spiritual dimension in each of us. It needs to be fed just as we eat each day. Some of us try and read the Bible or other scriptures from each of our various religions. We try and be diligent in our prayers, both individually and with our families. Still, in our busy lives, we often fall short in these responsibilities and in time we feel spiritually empty. It is here at Lodge that spiritual messages become even more important and that character building becomes our most important work. For if we fail here, we are failing in our central duty: Build Our Brothers.

### ***What Kind of Character Building Programs Work Best? Whatever Is Need for Your Lodge***

The answer to this question is whatever meets the needs of your Lodge. What we have done is develop an approach to our work that allows each brother to offer a 3 to 5 minutes Character Profile on some great Mason from whom we can learn. The Mason may be George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Harry Truman, and Gerald Ford etc. These profiles alone have brought focus to our work and inspiration to our brothers. As we held Memorial Night this year, we not only read the names of each departed brother but we also selected several of them for individual comments about their great light and contributions to the Lodge, their community, and the nation. In our lecture work, we have included lectures on Ethics, Masonic Etiquette, and Masonic Architecture & Its Meaning In Our Lives. Other targeted topics include Living A Masonic Life In Your Community; Maintaining Good Character In Dealing With Bad Behavior; and Being A Good Husband, Father, and Leader In Your Family. Other Lodges in our District have also begun to discover the extraordinary benefit of having a good lecture program to complement the inspiring ritual work of each degree. Attendance is up. Membership is growing. And, most of all our brothers are feeling a sense of personal growth that has not been satisfied alone with good social events and otherwise good work in the Lodge.

### ***What Is The Secret In Keeping & Growing Our Membership? A Lecture Program on Character Building***

None of us have the data available to us to determine whether the reasons suggested in this lecture are correct in what has caused our decline in the past. However, what is undeniable is that our central mission in our work is to build character. It has been from the beginning. And, in today's world, there is no more important work for us to do at this time. As we look ahead, what seems clear is that our brothers each have great spiritual needs that can often only be met by a well conceived, well planned, and well executed lecture program. This can be the feast that fills this hunger. At a minimum, if we do work lecture work well, we will be doing what we are obligated to do and do well. A good character oriented lecture program also can provide the real content to a Lodge meeting and becomes the core reason we came to Lodge and just to observe or participate in the rituals, enjoy the brotherhood of the Lodge, and have a few drinks together before or after the meeting. In this respect, I believe we will find the great secret for maintaining and growing our Masonic Brotherhood as do we this work well and re-set our Masonic compass towards our core mission: Building Character in a few good men who are among us and can change the world.

May we each remain faithful in our Masonic obligations and to the Great Architect of the Universe. May we retain our hope in a eternal reward for the legacy we each can earn in this life for our good deeds and service to others. May we keep true to our God in our hearts and exhibit a most holy characteristic, even charity in all our comings and goings. Most of all, may we each continue to work to refine our inner soul as we keep our Masonic compass in an exact position to chart the course of life that will bring us peace, honor and exemplify the best that is in each of us as Masons, I pray. Amen.