

Five Practices of Growing Masonic Bodies

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Introduction

The idea for this paper has been germinating in my mind for several years. I have been appointed to Long Range Planning Committees in Grand Bodies, some of which have been active, and others which have not met. Either way I have thought about how we can identify ways to help Masonic bodies grow and prosper. Some of the ideas laid out in this paper may have been tried in some form but with undocumented success.

A few weeks ago I was in a leadership development session at my church and the presentation was based on a book titled The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Bishop Richard Schnase. It was during this session that my thoughts gelled and this paper was born.

Bishop Schnase's five practices are Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity. I adapted Passionate Worship to Passionate Masonry and Intentional Faith Development to Intentional Masonic Development.

In his introduction Bishop Schnase says that most churches, and I believe many Masonic bodies, practice some level of hospitality, worship/masonry, faith/masonic development, mission and service, and generosity. What makes a fruitful congregation or growing Masonic body is in the adjectives. With this in mind here are some thoughts on being more radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking and extravagant.

Radical Hospitality

All of us have attended Masonic meetings where we felt welcomed and included. And unfortunately many of us have attended meetings where we felt like complete outsiders. It is these meetings that I feel have led to low attendance and increased levels of dimits. So how do we fix this? We practice Radical Hospitality at each meeting and every day.

This means that at every meeting everyone greets everyone else warmly, and by name if they know it. If a visitor arrives, the first member to meet him introduces him to everyone else there. Every meeting should have some sort of fellowship time, either dinner before or dessert after, or both if possible.

How we treat our petitioners and new members is also important to developing a lasting relationship with them that encourages them not only to be regular attendees but to join degree teams, officer lines, and to invite others to join. It is my feeling that first line signers of petitions should agree to be that person's mentor through all their Degrees

and Orders and for the entire first year of membership. It is their job to encourage the petitioner as he goes through the Degrees and Orders, answer questions about the Degrees and Orders, and once through to encourage the new member to attend regularly.

But it doesn't stop there. The presiding officer or his representative (membership committee for instance) should make personal contact with each petitioner within a week of his taking each Degree or Order to be an additional resource if there are questions.

Longer term members cannot be neglected either. This includes both local and out of state members. Keeping them informed of activities and events via trestle boards and email notices is a good first step, but that shouldn't be the end all. Local members who are not attending should be personally invited by the presiding officer at least once a year. Perhaps their membership month is a good way to remember this. Out of state members should also be contacted once a year just to check in. This should prevent any notices from families that "Brother Smith died three years ago, why are you sending him a dues notice?" Again I would use their membership month for this contact. By personal contact I mean a phone call or a personal email, not a bulk email notice, by the presiding officer. Another method of annual contact which is personal to the member is a birthday card from the bodies each year.

Passionate Masonry

This was a little more difficult to translate from Passionate Worship but the intent is the same, to connect members to each other and to God, and to create a spirit of expectation in our members so that they want to attend every meeting.

Since Masonry is about fostering brotherly relationships – one of our tenets is Brotherly Love – this seems to be an area that real emphasis is needed. It is our duty as Masonic leaders to change our Brethren's lives and behaviors so that they think less of themselves and more about their neighbors, their Brothers and the world.

The best way to do this is through presenting ritual work in such a manner that people seeing it are encouraged to focus on and better understand the lessons being taught each time they see it. In other words, it means presenting Masonry passionately, not just by repeated lines learned by rote.

Intentional Masonic Development

This is an area of great weakness in most Masonic bodies. Some Brothers take it upon themselves to delve deeper into the esoteric meaning of the ritual, the history of the fraternity, or other areas of personal study and improvement. However, I think that one of our duties as leaders is to make this Masonic study and development more intentional and more focused. After all another of our tenets is truth and what is Masonic study but the search for light and truth.

In this manner learning is done in community, either as a body whole or in small groups. This allows for the opportunity to share multiple ideas for topics, multiple methods for learning and allow multiple people to be in charge. This in turn builds closer relationships and develops better personal accountability. Using small groups will allow for Brothers with like minds and desires to learn and interact with each other. From talking to several new members this is what they are looking for from Masonry, not boring business meetings. Many of the business duties, which are necessary, can be done outside of the actual meeting. Several bodies email the minutes to their members prior to the meeting so they can be approved without reading. Likewise, bills can be handled by approving an annual budget and allowing a Finance Committee to handle the routine ones.

One of the things we need to do better is use new technologies, such as Facebook, blogs and websites. We also need to eliminate the fear of failure and try new things. If someone asks to get involved, LET THEM. By shutting people out we tell them they aren't worthy and we hold open the exit door for them. This is not always easy to do because it gives up some level of control but it must be done for the sake of the future of the body.

Another thing that should be done is to recognize people for their work. This could fall into Radical Hospitality or Passionate Masonry, since all of these practices are interlinked but I list it here. A Brother who leads a book study or takes charge of setting up and tearing down the room for meetings and Degrees or coordinates the dinners and refreshments should be publicly thanked for his efforts. This will lead to more Brothers wanting to get involved.

Risk-taking Mission and Service

This was another difficult topic to translate from church work to Masonry, difficult but not impossible. All we need to do is find ways to create life-changing engagements with other people. We can do this by doing something for the good of others. My thought is that we should start at home with our own aged or infirm members and widows. This can be as simple as shoveling snow, offering a ride, assisting with home repairs, etc. Looking for opportunities to help involves some level of risk, hence the adjective chosen for this topic.

This used to be a priority for our local bodies but somewhere along the way we lost this focus and began to donate to local and national charitable endeavors as our sole means of mission and service. More on this in the next topic.

We need to find multiple opportunities so that each member can find something they can do, and if possible we should involve families. The focus of these efforts is more than just doing the job that needs to be done it is on building relationships.

Sometimes a project may need doing that is beyond the capability of the local body, so collaborate with other Masonic bodies or other local fraternal or service organizations.

In addition to building relationships with our members and widows in need we grow relationships between the Brothers working on the project and in the case of collaborative projects between organizations that could also serve as an entry point from which new members can be drawn.

Extravagant Generosity

Since I work for a church and am the chair of the Stewardship Committee in my own church I hear and read a lot in terms of fundraising and getting members to give more. One of the most profound to me is this – what we spend our money on is what we value. We can expand that to include our time and talents.

I looked at this from two points of view, giving to the body and the body giving to the world. Both need to be equally extravagant. How do we get our members to support our charitable desires? I include a line on the dues notice marked gift to the body, and one for the Grand Charity. This allows members once a year to give. This is not extravagant.

We can add opportunities throughout the year via the trestle board or a special request. In my church work I have found that local needs are better supported than national or international. With this in mind we can link these fundraising efforts to specific local projects identified in the Risk-taking section.

This is not to say that we should not support our Grand Charities (RARA, CMMRF, KTEF and Holy Land Pilgrimage) because we should, but we need to remember those closer to home as well.

In terms of fundraising we can learn from service organizations like Rotary and Lions. Their fundraising efforts are in the community, not always from among their members. A few years back the Grand Lodge coordinated an effort to do pasta dinners all across the state to raise funds for the Make a Wish Foundation. We can do the same thing locally for a sick child, or a local school, or a disabled local veteran.

One of the many efforts the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts has developed is the Masonic Angel Fund. Local Lodges raise money for this fund to be used to assist local children in need. The needs are generally identified by schools and might include a child that needs a winter coat, or school supplies.

Finally we need to be most generous with our own members in need as that is another of our tenets – relief.

Conclusion

It is my intention to try and implement these practices in the three York Rite bodies that meet in Darien. I will track their implementation and successes or failures and write a follow-up paper for others to use as a blueprint for growth.