



Amalgamation - Is it the Answer ?

Address to the Brethren and Visitors of The Harodim No. 513 on Jan 24, 2019 by R.W. Bro. Robin J. Colville – DDGM Hamilton District “C” on his Official Visit.

Good evening Brethren:

This evening I am going to speak about something many Lodges are talking about, and that Harodim Lodge has recently done I am talking about amalgamation.

Amalgamation and merger are both vague terms in freemasonry and yet the concept of two lodges joining under one charter to derive mutual benefit is not a new one. Amalgamation has been around for a long time, and in the fact the Grand Lodges of Upper Canada and Lower Canada amalgamated in 1859.

There are many reasons for Lodges to consider amalgamation, and probably the most prevalent ones are those of falling membership and/or financial difficulties, but there are several other considerations. Do strong finances guarantee sustainability? Definitely Not. The majority of our lodges are financially sound, however this is NOT the basis for sustainability. Challenges filling key Lodge offices without the continual assistance of Past Masters, low meeting attendance and participation, all make it difficult to run a successful meeting let alone put on a quality degree for a candidate. Members being advanced without proper training and support continue to perpetuate poor quality ritual and degrade the experience of each member at a Lodge meeting. Such reasons are very familiar to many brethren and are as relevant today as they were in the past.

In our Hamilton Districts since 1973 until the present, we have seen a 70% decline in membership, and the Condition of Masonry reports that only 20% of our remaining members are active. During this period:

- Province wide approximately 100 Lodges have either gone dark or amalgamated
- In Hamilton Districts we have gone from 43 Lodges to 36 Lodges
- In Hamilton C, 2 Lodges have gone dark and 2 Lodges amalgamated
- Average membership in Hamilton C has dropped from around 250 per Lodge to 73 per Lodge in 2016 (according to the Grand Lodge Proceedings)



Necessity is not the only driving force for amalgamation, there are also some cases where 2 Lodges have such a strong fraternal relations and like minded members that they want to join together.... just to become that much stronger !

The last few years has seen a dramatic upsurge in the numbers of lodges initiating amalgamation negotiations with 7 new amalgamations in Ontario over the past 2 years. There is no doubt that the process of amalgamation is often a difficult time for all participants and in some instances, the resultant new lodge does not match up to the expectations of the membership. Occasionally, lodges enter into negotiations too lightly without full consideration of all the pitfalls and often with unrealistic expectation as to the benefits to be derived from a melding of two or more unique and different groups.

We must understand that two lodges consolidating are making an entirely new entity. It is not a question of one dominant lodge taking the lead, both must be understood to be equal partners in the enterprise, regardless of how many members one has on the rolls, or how much money the other has in the bank. Neither is worth anything if the lodge does not move forward and the craft is not at labour. The resultant lodge needs to move forward as a new lodge.

Amalgamation alone will not fix our problems, but it may be a significant piece of the solution. Author and satirist Henry Mencken wrote: "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong". If all a craft lodge had to do was to merge under one banner, sooner or later we would be right back where we started. What amalgamation allows us to do is get enough people together to begin to achieve sustainable levels of active participation. It must therefore, be followed up with a plan to fully and completely integrate the brethren into the new lodge, and to devise a **long range plan** to retain active members and attract the next generation of freemasons to the craft.

A Long Range Plan is not the Worshipful Master's program for the year, because that is only an annual plan. A Long range Plan should address at least 5-10 years into the future, and should be used to drive the short term perspective. It should be driven to address future perceived problems, not immediate needs, and



should provide direction for the Lodge to follow. The ultimate objective of the Long Range Plan must be the SUSTAINABILITY of the Craft

Lodges have to look at how they are going to continue to function at their current levels. A strong Lodge can plan and guide, a weak Lodge can only react to influences over which it has no control. Amalgamation may be a viable solution to consider in some cases.

The perceived goal of amalgamation appears common to most brethren with the principal aim being the establishment of a strong lodge possessing a sound financial base, that meets in pleasant surroundings and has a happy amalgam of social and Masonic activities. Most brethren also harbour the hope that the new lodge will preserve at least a portion of the heritage of their own original lodge. However, studies have shown that the true result of amalgamation can be problematic even though the new Lodge formed is numerically strong. Care must be taken to avoid a Lodge where the brethren are unfamiliar to each other, of unknown backgrounds and unexpressed attitudes, which can lead to factions pursuing their own interests and expressing opinion that the amalgamation was simply a takeover by brethren of the “other lodge”. In reality all brethren feel a sense of loss following amalgamation and this may be outwardly expressed by unwarranted criticism of various aspects of the new lodge. It would appear that this behavior is usually transient and in some cases is overcome rapidly as brethren widen their circle of friends within the new lodge. Unfortunately some brethren never adapt to the new environment and will either resign or allow their membership to lapse and thus become casualties of the amalgamation process.

Studies also reveal a variation between the number of members of the constituent lodges prior to amalgamation and membership of the new lodge at amalgamation. On average there has been a loss of 13% of the membership on amalgamation. The loss of members was most marked in lodges with greater numbers of members. In lodges with a total membership in excess of 150 prior to amalgamation, the net loss was closer to 20%. There is evidence that demonstrates that the majority of members who resign from their lodge at the time of amalgamation do not rejoin another lodge and are therefore lost to the Craft.



As an alternative to amalgamation, a Lodge facing the reality that it can no longer operate as an independent entity may consider going dark and handing in their Charter. This happened to my mother Lodge – The Hamilton Lodge No. 562 – when we were running dangerously low on funds and finding it difficult to recruit new members. The Master at the time took the initiative to hand in the Lodge charter and let every member have the chance to join another Lodge. However, things did not work out like that and many of the members did not join another Lodge and instead were lost from the Craft ... very unfortunate. In hindsight I believe that amalgamation would have been a better option than going dark.

In conclusion, while amalgamation does provide lodges with a short term solution to problems associated with declining active membership and dwindling resources, it can come at a considerable cost if proper planning and communicating with all members involved is not done properly. Therefore, when considering amalgamation as part of a long term plan, like a marriage make sure your partner lodge is very compatible and your members genuinely like each other, take time to discuss all aspects of the merger so all parties are satisfied, and be sure that there is an overall benefit to the health of the new Lodge and to Masonry in general. If all lights are green then moving forward is probably the best long term solution for the Lodges amalgamating, and also for the District.

May the GATU give us guidance in preparing the long range plans for our Lodges, and may it ensure the timeless vitality of Freemasonry !

Thank you for your kind attention.

Acknowledgements:

Reference article by Delahunt and Chapman published in the FREEMASON