

Community Engagement

Presented February 10, 2016 at Meridian Lodge No. 687

Brethren, I recently had the experience of going out to Pickering for the mid-term DDGM meeting. This meeting occurs each year with all of the DDGMs attending from all of the Districts in Ontario. The purpose of this meeting is to gain insight into the current events and initiatives at Grand Lodge and its' Districts. Many topics are covered over the course of the day, though a significant portion of the full day event is focused upon the reports from each of the DDGMs of the significant events and notable trends within their respective Districts.

The reports in many ways reflected the written reports which had been submitted prior to the meeting and which I had already perused, though as the reports were discussed by their respective authors, they seemed to take on a different tone. The vast majority of the Districts here in Ontario are in outlying areas where in some cases it may take up to 2 hours to travel one way to an Official Visit. In virtually all of these outlying rural Districts the reports had much the same tone. Membership was maintaining or slightly down, energy was strong, but new member numbers were dwindling.

I was surprised however, when one DDGM stood up and gave the report of his District. He began by saying that his District was again comprised of small Lodges with 1 located in the centre of each small town in the area. He continued on to say that travel between the Lodges took in excess of an hour in most cases. What surprised me about this report was when he reported that virtually all of his Lodges were strong; there were some internal piques and quarrels, but membership was up, energy was up, and most of the Lodges in his District were thriving? He then proceeded on to talk about the various events each of these Lodges were holding in their respective communities. I would propose that this Community Engagement was the key differentiator, and the key driver of their success.

Over the last several hundred years, Churches have stood as pillars within our communities. When our Country was first being settled, one of the first buildings established, before our Masonic Lodges, was the village Church. In addition to a place of worship, Churches formed the physical meeting place for these fledgling communities. As time passed, new community groups would form and each of these groups was welcomed with open arms by the Church. By extension, the Church saw a steady flow of visitors and built a solid foundation of goodwill within the Community. This continued on for hundreds of years, though today we have seen this trend eroding as these giant pillars within our communities are increasingly struggling for membership. Community Groups as a result are increasingly seeking neutral locations where there isn't a push for membership, and even willing to pay a price, to hold their meetings elsewhere.

In contrast however, here are these Lodges in rural areas of Ontario which are thriving within their small communities. They are thriving because they are engaging the public without cost and without expectation of value in return. Simply because, as Masons we are all taught to give generously and to do the good deed, not for ourselves, but for the cause of good.

Our Masonic buildings here in Hamilton all stand in very public thoroughways. New initiatives need only a simple sign to garner a great deal of exposure, yet we as an organization remain largely invisible in our local communities. Indeed, as a kid, I lived just down the street from Dufferin Lodge for 14 years and yet I didn't even notice the building was there until after I had joined Freemasonry. In fact, I went to school with the family that lived right next door to the building and they didn't know what the building was about either. Such is the nature of our institution, though in these rural areas, community events, and hosting of the community efforts of local not for profit groups has helped a great deal in the improvement of their public image. Indeed, we need not look very far to see that just outside of

Flamboro, St. George Lodge No. 243 hosts an annual community Pork Roast where the whole town comes out to enjoy the meal and meet new faces.

Here in Ancaster Temple, Seymour Lodge ran a very successful pancake breakfast for many years within the community and with virtually no advertising. Imagine what some simple advertising would have produced on the main street of Ancaster. Each year, Ancaster hosts their annual Heritage Days with crowds of people on foot just outside the front door of this very building watching homemade soap box races with their kids amongst other activities. Young families with young men standing right outside our very doors. Imagine for a moment if one of our Ancaster Lodges were to host a pancake breakfast on that day for those families. Not as a fundraiser brethren, and not even for any sort of cost. Imagine if the breakfast was free as a way for the Lodge to give back to the community it has been a part of for 100 years. The cost to the Lodge may be around \$200 in pancake mix and sausages, but the lineup out of the front door would be down the block with young families with kids in tow. Families could enter through the front door, and exit through the back door, which would necessitate them travelling upstairs. I have no doubt that several would be quite interested in poking their head into the Lodge room. Such an event would be almost unprecedented here in Hamilton and quite possibly garner a significant amount of positive press attention for Ancaster Masonic Temple.

Now, brethren, I'm not suggesting that we should throw open the doors and begin advertising for membership, nor am I suggesting that membership be pushed in any sort of way at these types of events. Far be it from me to be any such intention. Membership in our Craft is limited to those who ask and approach us.

However, I do believe that we have work to do on our public image and how we are perceived. There was a time here in Hamilton when the new WMs of the Lodges were featured with a photo in the Hamilton Spectator. These days have passed as we have slowly slipped from the collective consciousness of our local communities. Local children's sports registrations, and small community groups are just some of the organizations that have difficulty paying even \$100 to rent space at a local community centre. By giving some consideration to how we might help those around us in the broader community, we can quickly increase the flow of traffic through our buildings, improve our public image, and perhaps we might even see a few new men join our ranks as an indirect benefit.

Thank you,

R.W. Bro. Devin Tuinstra
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Hamilton District C