

The Importance of Attending Lodge

Regular attendance has dropped dramatically over the past several years in many Lodges throughout the Grand Lodge of Virginia. What are the reasons for the decline in attendance? How does it affect the vitality of our Fraternity? Most importantly, what can we do about it? These are some of the questions we will address as we discuss the importance of attending Lodge.

A look back in history tells us that Lodge attendance has always been an important part of Masonic membership. In fact, one of the principal charges of the Medieval Craft from which we evolved, stated that “no Master or Fellow could be absent from the Lodge without incurring severe censure, unless it appeared to the Master that pure necessity hindered him.”

That was then. Today, however, we all know there is no minimum attendance requirement, but I think we can agree that every Master Mason has a moral obligation to be loyal to the Lodge, which gave him Masonic Light. He should attend his Lodge on a regular basis, not only to support his Lodge, but in order to partake of the fellowship that is part and parcel of our Fraternity.

We know that a Lodge functions best when there is regular and active participation in the ritual, spirited interaction among the Brethren, and genuine fellowship, both at labor and refreshment. When there are only a few Brethren in attendance, the spirit is dimmed, and the empty seats are a stark reminder that all is not well in the Lodge.

It is my opinion that with the exception of family, job, or medical needs, a Brother should be able to work out his personal schedule to accommodate one Lodge night -- most months of the year.

Of course, if transportation or physical assistance is needed, then we have an obligation to reach out to our Brother to enable him to attend his Lodge. Remember, we have bound ourselves “to befriend and relieve every Brother who needs our assistance,” although I fear we frequently do not do as much as we should to fulfill that obligation.

However, when an able-bodied Brother voluntarily becomes a stranger to his own Lodge, we should not simply shrug our shoulders and ignore the situation. In many cases, the Brother has not made a conscious decision to avoid Lodge meetings, nor does he have a specific issue with his Lodge or with Masonry in general.

More often than not, he is simply distracted by other matters and slowly drifts away from the Craft. Where attending Lodge once was a habit, doing something else on Lodge night has become the new norm, and as time goes on, any discomfort or guilt that he may have felt about missing Lodge gradually disappears. He may remain a Brother in good standing, but he is not reinforcing the spirit of what it means to be a Master Mason. His bond with the Fraternity weakens, and a thin layer of ice forms between him and his Lodge as a result of his lack of personal interaction with his Brethren.

This is less likely to occur if he has a Masonic mentor or other Brother who takes early notice of his failure to attend and encourages him to come back to Lodge before he has lost the habit of attending the meetings.

Clearly, the most effective effort we can make to attract more of our Brothers to attend Lodge is personal contact. A few days before meeting night, each Brother who regularly attends Lodge should contact a specified Brother who is frequently absent, and encourage him to attend the upcoming meeting. Offer to pick him up. Make him feel wanted. Sometimes it only takes a little nudge for someone to make a simple commitment. Don't wait until it's too late to break the ice that has begun to form.

But while we can make the effort to retain more of the Brethren before they have lost the habit of attending Lodge, we need to consider why so many of our members are not more enthusiastic about attending Lodge, because once we understand what is happening, we can begin to direct our attention to the question, "What should we do about it?"

Diminished interest and the resulting lack of motivation to attend Lodge can, in no small part, be traced to dull meetings and poor programs. So we need to start by asking ourselves whether the Lodge and its officers are doing enough to make the meetings inviting and interesting enough for the members to want to attend regularly.

Our modern society provides a host of entertainment and leisure opportunities unimagined just a generation ago. In this environment, it is not easy to lure that absent Brother away from his normal routine at home, or elsewhere, if all we do is open Lodge, read the minutes, announce a few upcoming events, and then close the Lodge.

Dull meetings are not a mandatory requirement, and it only takes simple planning and a little bit of work on the part of the officers to make things more interesting. It is critical to have a program every month. It doesn't have to be complicated or extensive, and there are numerous resources to draw upon, both inside and outside of the Craft.

First, there are the monthly programs, such as this one, which are sent by Grand Lodge to each Lodge every month, and then are placed on the Grand Lodge website. Click on the "Masonic Education" tab on the right side of the home page, and then click on "Programs" on the left side of the Education homepage and then click on "Masonic Education Talks for the Lodge."

In addition, program resources are available through your District Educational Officer, your District Deputy Grand Master, the Masonic Home Ambassador, or a representative of one of the outreach programs we sponsor. Of course, you could also invite someone from the community to present a program of general interest. Many organizations in your area would be delighted to share their stories, and this would not only help to strengthen our ties to the community in general, but also provide our neighbors with a better of understanding of Freemasonry.

One simple program idea is to plan a "History Night" at your Lodge. Have one of your members give a presentation on the history of the Lodge. Include some interesting anecdotes, unusual incidents or events. Dig up some old relics or memorabilia and explain them. I'm sure many of you could tell some great stories about your Lodge. The important thing is to have some fun with it – don't just recite a lot of forgettable dates and boring statistics. In fact, invite others on the sidelines, especially some of the long-time members, to add their personal recollections. This would be quite educational for many of the newer members, who probably know little about the rich history of their Lodge. A program of this sort, properly publicized throughout the district, would likely attract visitors from other Lodges as well.

Of course, for those who particularly enjoy the ritual, there is motivation to attend when a degree is being conferred. For these Brethren watching and participating in a degree is what Masonry is all about, and being with the candidate and sharing a sense of engagement and Fraternity on these occasions is important to them and worth their time.

This brings us to another important ingredient that determines whether a Brother will continue to attend Lodge – that is the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way. If a Brother has a part in a degree, he has a reason to attend. If he has other specific responsibilities in Lodge, that again is a reason to attend. When he is not given something useful to do, he does not feel needed. When he does not feel useful, he is not engaged, when he is not engaged, he does not feel he is accomplishing anything, and he starts to lose his sense of identity with the Lodge.

We can heighten a Brother's sense of purpose through committee or project assignments. In many Lodges, almost all of the business and activities of the Lodge are done by a handful of Brethren, and often our committees have a chairman but no one else. This is especially true in the smaller Lodges. But this does not have to be the case. There is always work to be done, or matters to deal with, in the areas of Building & Grounds, Kitchen, Publicity, Contacting Widows, Mentoring, Transportation, or other project functions that might be uniquely appropriate to your Lodge. If the Worshipful Master will delegate these responsibilities and get more Brothers involved, the Lodge will surely benefit and the Brethren will feel a greater sense of ownership and accomplishment.

I hope you will find some of these ideas and suggestions useful and that you will put them to work for your Lodge. They will help to turn new Masons into dedicated Masons, keeping the bonds of fellowship alive in our Lodges and help all of us to realize our Masonic potential.

That potential and what it really means to be a Mason is captured in the following passage from a book called "The Builders" by Joseph Newton. This particular verse was spotlighted during 2012 by Grand Master Ellison in his travels around Virginia.

What makes a man a Mason?

When he can look out over the rivers, the hills, and the far horizon with a profound sense of his own littleness in the vast scheme of things, and yet have faith, hope and courage, which is the root of every virtue.

When he knows that down in his heart every man is as noble, as vile, as divine, as diabolic and as lonely as himself; and seeks to know, to forgive, and to love his fellow man.

When he has learned how to make friends and to keep them... and above all, how to keep friends with himself.

When no voice of distress reaches his ears in vain, and no hand seeks his aid without response.

When he finds good in every faith that helps any man to lay hold of divine things and see majestic meanings in life, whatever the name of that faith may be.

When he knows how to pray, how to love, how to hope.

When he has kept faith with himself and with his God. In his hand a sword for evil, in his heart a bit of a song. Glad to live, but not afraid to die!

Such a man has found the true secret of Freemasonry, and the one which Masonry is trying to give to all the world.

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I think these words come very close to capturing what it means to be a Mason, and these values are reinforced through regular attendance at Lodge and through personal interaction among the Brethren. Thus, it is critical that each of us do what we can to promote Lodge attendance and help to fill those empty seats. By stoking the fraternal fires that give us light, and warmth, we keep Freemasonry strong and vibrant from generation to generation.



'The Winding Staircase – A path to improving yourself in Masonry'
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