

A Matter of Membership

by Sir Knight R. William Perkins

Commandery membership begins with the first knock on a Lodge Room Door

Almost from the time we begin our Masonic travels, we are reminded about membership and the need to increase our ranks. Often at our Lodge, at the conclusion of a man's Third Degree, he is given; in addition to his Bible, apron, and lapel pin; two petitions, one to replace himself and one to grow. We see our own mortality as we attend funerals for family, friends, and Brethren. In these we are reminded, not only of the frailty of our own bodies and to live a just and upright life, but of the need to help make good men better by increasing our ranks. It is not a contest of who can be the better recruiter but rather having a sincere desire to create a better community for our families by getting others constructively involved in the things that lead down that path, or the familiar adage of "making good men better."

Membership is a problem in nearly every organization in our country today from fraternal organizations like ours to civic and community targeted organizations such as the Lions, Optimists, and Rotary Clubs. Even the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts have problems with getting and keeping members. Those that seem to have little problem with getting and keeping members are those with few membership requirements or vague standards for membership and they generally serve alcohol. It is as if people have little or no interest in belonging to anything or desire to expand their horizons beyond the end of their driveways unless it includes being around people who tend toward vices and excess.

Of course, many will say that the problem rests with computers, video games, and a general apathy that permeates our society, and they would be partially right. However, this is not a new malady, as it had its birth years ago. I believe that the roots of this cancer can be found in the late 1960s. Many of us remember those times. For those who don't, it was a time when it was "un-cool" to be a part of the "establishment." To be a part of what our fathers and other adults held in such high esteem was not for us. The idea of a husband kissing his wife on the cheek as she said "have a nice time at your meeting dear" was not for us. It wasn't "what was happening." We had found the way. We were going to save the world through peace and love. We were going to commit ourselves to helping others who were less fortunate by giving of ourselves. Sounds rather familiar, doesn't it?

Remember the battle cry of the day? It was "peace, love, and ban the bomb." Yes, we had all the answers, or so we thought. Well, it has been over forty years since those days. That's right, almost forty-three years since Woodstock. If a reunion concert were held today, it would have to include handicapped parking and Depends dispensers.

Since that revolution, those of us who didn't succumb to its excesses and debauchery have pretty much settled into conventional lives. For many, what we remembered most was the idea of our fathers kissing our mothers, of running amuck at the reception after

an installation, of the elegance and solemnity of what we experienced that we remember, of seeing our neighbor taking his Commandery uniform and sword out to his car, or an uncle wearing his Fez while riding some contraption in a parade. It was then that the Masonic seed was planted. It is a seed that is in others we talk to everyday. It just needs cultivating.

Of course, there were a good number of us who looked beyond the turbulence of those times and wondered what would become of the world and of the organizations that so many men held in such high regard. Knowing, to some degree, the good that these organizations did, the pleasure that these honorable men experienced, and the pride they took in their efforts while seldom saying so, many of us wanted to join them and be a part of it.

This concern and admiration naturally bled over into the Eastern Star, the Amaranth, and a host of other organizations under the umbrella of our fraternity. Many members of our families had belonged to any number of them, worked hard at maintaining them, and enjoyed themselves. A good number of their issue joined DeMolay, Job's Daughters, and Rainbow, wanting to be like their parents or their friend's parents. In the process, they learned of civic responsibility, family unity, and service to God.

Have you ever spoken to your son about membership in the Lodge or to your daughter about the Eastern Star? Does your wife belong? Have you mentioned it to your son-in-law or grandson?

If your response to these questions is any of the following: "Well I haven't been very active myself and as a result he doesn't have an interest," "I haven't found the time to sit down and talk to him about it," "He's never expressed an interest in it," then you are at fault! Your failure to be active, to take sixty seconds to incite their curiosity, to talk to your children and know them is your fault!

We have to set an example, an example that others will want to follow and to emulate, or there will be no "others." This all starts with our families, the people that we would give our lives for, the ones we spend so much of our time with (or should), and the ones that we want to make the world a better place for. We should want to share with the ones we love our passion and joy for our Fraternity and show them the good it does for society.

I see the same problems and the same apprehension and lack of involvement in other organizations to which I belong, all which have tighter membership requirements than the aforementioned "drinking clubs." I am vice president of our union local which has ninety-one members, and we average ten members at our monthly meetings. I am a past Commander of my VFW Post, which has approximately 1300 members. At our monthly meeting we average twenty-five members present. Even our VFW Post Ritual Team that marches in the local parades, performs dedication ceremonies, and renders honors at funerals for veterans lacks attendance. There are thirty-one members on the team, yet at our every-other-month meetings, less than half show up. By the same token, our monthly Ritual Team fish fry will have seven to nine show up to work it. Then there is the exception. This is the local Marine Corps League Detachment, of which I am a Charter

Member. The Detachment has ninety-five members, and we average between forty-five and fifty members at our monthly meetings. We will easily get twenty to thirty volunteers for any project or fund raiser, and we have members that will also help the other Veterans' organizations.

Then of course, as most all of you reading this are fully aware from your own experiences, when the food flows freely, the members seem to come out of the woodwork. Our union local has a yearly party where we will average sixty-five to eighty people in attendance, which is roughly thirty-two to forty members and their guests.

Our VFW Post has three such events each year, and we will average 130 to 150 people or 65 to 75 members and guests. On the other hand, our Marine Corps League Detachment has two such events each year and averages 170 to 185 former Marines and guests in attendance.

You may ask, "What's the difference? How is it that the Marine Corps League fairs better than the rest? Why do more members show up for and participate in more activities than the others?" It may interest you further to know that nationwide, the Marine Corps League is steadily growing while other clubs, fraternities, and organizations remain stagnant or are in decline.

So what is the reason for this exception? A commonality. Within the League there is a commonality. We are all Marines or Navy Corpsmen or Chaplains that have served together in combat. It is part of what we have in common, a brotherhood or kinship. It is this commonality that we, within the Fraternity, need to exploit to our advantage. Now some may argue, and rightfully so, that there is a commonality within the other organizations to which I belong, and they would be correct.

So what is the difference? The making of a Marine, our rebirth and the esteem in which we hold "Doc" and "Padre" creates a family that often transcends definition.

This same concept can be found in our fraternity. Are we not reborn, raised into a brotherhood, a family that often transcends the ability to offer a definition? We have to look for the commonalities that drew us to the fraternity and that drive our passion to participate and excel in our travels. It is this "common man" theory, the "strength in numbers" idea that we need to exploit. It is by this, I believe, that we, as a fraternity, will survive and grow.

The beginning of the solution of this problem is simple but somewhat costly. In my opinion, a survey needs to be sent to every member of every Commandery. A questionnaire, accompanied by a stamped return envelope, thus reducing the number of non-participants and showing a sincere effort on the part of our leaders at the Grand Commandery level for growth and participation. While it could be nationwide, a more logical approach would be by state or region. An alternative, less expensive way would be to make the questionnaire an inclusion in our magazine, postage paid, and the reader would send it to his respective Grand Commandery. Within this questionnaire we will find our commonalities, enabling our Knights to better target Brethren and those in the

dark by the activities and occupations that are most common among members in a certain area.

It should begin with the usual questions such as your age, when you joined your Lodge, a brief reason why you joined including choices such as family tradition and the number of family members that have been or are members, your occupation at the time you joined, and if you are retired. The same questions can be posed as when you went into the York Rite such as why you went the York Rite. Here again, choices could include family tradition, an obligation to payback, or to expand your Masonic knowledge. What were you looking for, and did you find it? Space should be provided to elaborate and to give a view of commonalities, what impressed you most about the degrees, and what do you enjoy about your membership and activities in the York Rite?

Payback, that was my original reason for going the York Rite. Franklin Chapter No. 8 sponsored our DeMolay Chapter, an organization that turned me around. I am a Past Master Councilor of Alton Chapter, so for me it was a "no-brainer." Then would be a list of questions that one would find on almost any questionnaire such as your present occupation, your educational level, if you are a Veteran, the hobbies and past time activities you enjoy, your church and community work, activities in which you enjoy participating such as hunting or fishing, etc. By honestly completing the questionnaire, the demographics will appear, showing the greatest likelihood for membership based upon the greatest number of commonalities within a particular area. Remember that commonalities within the Fraternity are also common to those without. One can quickly see how this questionnaire would benefit both the Commandery and the Lodge and could easily spill over into the other appendant bodies of Freemasonry. Growth in any one of them means growth within the Fraternity, and this growth will undoubtedly include collateral growth in all bodies. You never know, your gin rummy partner may just be waiting for you to tell him how he can begin his journey. Next door, her grandmother may have been in Eastern Star, but she and her husband know nothing about how to join. The Lodge Brother that works in the bay next to you may be a future Eminent Commander. These are some of the many things that are the commonalities of life, the countless things that have pulled us together as a society and flow over into our Fraternity.

At the beginning of this article, I spoke about the counterculture of the late 1960s. As I pointed out, it was there that I believe the problem originated and became the source of today's membership problems at both ends. A generation that rejected membership has raised a generation that does not appreciate membership which in turn is raising another generation centered on self. No history exists of seeing others off to meetings or participation in children's Christmas parties at a Lodge or Post. There are children who do not experience the thrill of advancing in their own right or the positive reinforcement of those achievements by peers, parents, and other like minded adults. All this is compounded today by the cyber malady of mind-numbing video games and the internet. As you read this, somewhere, another Knight passes on to final formation. You will turn on the news tonight and see a killing or some other act of senseless violence. Like our Fraternity, our society is crumbling from within due to the lethargic mentality of a vast majority of its members and society's unwillingness to look at reality.

If we are to survive, we must be proactive, not only for our family and fraternity but for society!

"To be one ask one." We have all seen the bumper sticker or heard the expression. Well, if you are going to be one, Be One! The age old adage of "I want to be just like him" rings as true today as when it was first uttered. If we are to survive and if our society is to survive, we have to set an example that others will not only want to emulate, but will want to be an active part of. This will be by strength through numbers and the numbers are active, fresh, new ideas and new people meshing with the "old-timers." We need to listen and evaluate in an impartial manner, as fresh is new and very often productive. Think about the Christian Brethren you know, the men outside the Fraternity who you would want at your side in a battle to defend the Christian faith, to protect our way of life, our communities, and our families. Who would you want to help you uphold the virtues of a moral society, to maintain equality and freedom for all, and to halt the moral decay of our society?

It is a battle of mortal attrition within our ranks and a moral war around the globe as Satan himself dances across the landscape duping the people. The clock is ticking Sir Knights, not only for the moral and intellectual survival of our society but for the survival of our Fraternity.

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