FREEMASONRY IN A CHANGING CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

I had never imagined that I would write an article or an opinion paper that required an Introduction, yet here we are. In fact, this Introduction is actually an afterthought. It was the feedback I received in the first round of peer review that suggested it might be good to include some type of introduction to explain the purpose (intent) of this article and how it evolved into such a large, all-consuming effort of 20+ pages; I assure you that was never my plan or my intent. A large "data dump" without context is merely a pile of information and I believe this introduction will provide the reader with some necessary context permitting them to go forward and digest the mountain of information I am providing in this article.

Perhaps it is my life's work and the career from which I recently retired that imbued in me the practices and methods that I bring to my opinion pieces. I spent the final 15 years of my Air Force career and the following 23 years in defense contracting as an intelligence analyst responsible for researching and gathering information, evaluating sources, analyzing and assessing information and related factors, and then preparing informative reports for military users, intelligence community users, and for policy and decision makers in the U.S. Government. Throughout my career I continually refined and improved my research and analytic techniques to ensure, to the best of my ability, that I was being as meticulous and accurate as possible at every point in my collection, analysis, and writing (production) process. I did not include this biographic information as a means or justification to say my opinions or positions are therefore correct or above challenge because of my process and research practices, rather I shared this bit of my background to share with the reader that as I develop my ideas and opinions, I put serious thought into them and try to base them on a career-long practice of careful, thorough research. I can easily still be wrong because my final conclusions and opinions are only ever as good as the information that was available when I did my research *and that's okay*. The bottom line on my extensive data gathering for this article is this – the large amount of data I researched and included is intended to support my opinion and show how I arrived at my belief - not to prove that I'm right; some might refer to it as showing my homework.

In January and February this year (2022), I was involved in several discussions in various places at various times regarding membership in our fraternity and ideas on changes we might make to our initiatic process to attract and keep new masons. We've all heard various changes being discussed and

considered here in Texas and across the country (where we see some of them actually being implemented), but in these conversations this year what really caught my attention for the first time was the way in which we discuss "today's man", and "the men of today" almost as a specific demographic. We have reduced our pool of ideal petitioners and future members to an ill-defined group we refer to as "today's man". As I tossed this over in my mind, I tried to formulate what this demographic generally looks like. There was a time after both world wars where the pool of eligible and qualified candidates was comprised of a type or specific demographic composed of traits that were easily transferrable between members of the group – age range of 20-something to about 45, military service, family oriented, fraternally oriented, spiritually/religiously oriented, and perhaps a few other characteristics. But the more I pondered "today's man" and tried identifying and transferring common traits between large numbers of men within that theoretical group, the more trouble I had defining and giving shape to that demographic.

The general 9 – 5 workday is gone, replaced by so many variations of a "workday" that it would be impossible to list them here. The family model or family unit we knew is no longer a singular, templated model of a family. The spirituality and reverence for God that was very common among men and their families has changed and diminished over time. Politics has undoubtedly created divisions between men of all social and economic strata, and fewer men are seeking out fraternal organizations where they can share time and common interests. These apparent shifts in society and our culture led me then to question whether a singular demographic called "today's man" actually exists. This question then led me to another question, "are we correctly analyzing the meaning of the fluctuations in our membership numbers"? I then landed on the question "are the fluctuations in our membership numbers actually an indicator of bigger changes in society that will eventually, permanently impact our fraternity through our membership process"? Finally, I was confronted with the question "are we debating changes to the fundamental and historical structure of our craft to attract and appease "today's man" who may actually be nothing more than a fictional, composite character that represents a non-existent demographic"?

I realized that even though I had touched on several of these questions in some of my previous papers, none addressed this full set of questions as related issues and the impact of those collective issues on our fraternity. As I began gathering my research material on the elusive "today's man" in effort to identify him and define his actual demographic, I realized the amount of information I needed to sift through was growing to an unmanageable level. I also realized I was not going to be able to "box this problem" and, therefore, narrow the amount of information I needed to understand the emerging question(s).

Once I realized the scope of my question was way beyond what my original approach would address, I developed a framework which allowed me to "bin" my questions and the related research efforts and then organize my information gathering and subsequent analysis. Since I seemed to be developing the premise that "*events and changes in society were impacting or would eventually impact the fraternity*", I organized the analysis and data gathering according to what I refer to as the "*Four Cornerstones of Society*": Religion/Spirituality in Society, Family, Education, and Law and Order. These four cornerstones

are mutually complimentary, meaning when one is strong, it can strengthen the others, but, when decay damages and diminishes one, the decay eventually spreads to the others, weakening the entire foundation of our society.

As I re-started my research in earnest in the end of March, the magnitude of the task continued to grow and I eventually had to add two informal categories which are "*What about the pandemic*" and "*Who else is feeling these effects*" because the information and research in those questions was so directly relevant to the questions we face that I felt I would be remiss if I left them out. Plus I believe those two questions (posed as topics) are logical extensions of the discussion that a reader would likely pose themselves while or after reading my article.

So, it's been a long time coming with much time and attention invested. The results of my labors are provided here for your consideration. While I do make recommendations on how we might address certain problems and issues, the true intent is to identify for members of the scope and nature of the true problem we face going forward as one part of an evolving culture with emerging and challenging societal trends and norms. It is my hope to lift our eyes and open our minds to these significant changes that will necessarily affect our fraternity and which, in terms of scope and impact, far exceed that of membership numbers and trends. It will take many "big heads" to come up with solutions and methods to confront the challenges coming our way and I hope this article at least provides our leaders with a bigger, more complete picture of the coming storms along the path of masonry's journey. Here begins (finally) the original piece for your consideration.

PREFACE

Sometimes we are so profoundly struck by a clarity on a question or issue that we are temporarily frozen while the implications wash over us and sink in, opening our eyes to an entirely new way to understand a question or a previously understood truth. For me, that clarity arrived in April this year and I've been pondering the meaning of it ever since. It landed on my doorstep in the form of another simple question: "*what if masonry is fine, pretty much exactly the way it is*"?

As a craft, we have been struggling with the question "how do we adjust masonry or what can we change to appeal to the modern man; how can we accommodate his time and his many competing requirements"?

I have struggled somewhat with this article due to its length and subject matter. I wanted to avoid a textbook style document that can be difficult (boring) to follow while I also wanted to challenge the readers' imagination and lead them to ponder the greater point which I would summarize as "*perhaps the truth is that society and our current, modern culture require us to bring the principles and discipline of true masonry to our communities and our society in its original form*" and – I might add – "*before it's too late*".

I have chosen to attempt a conversational tone that will permit me to propose my various supporting points in a style which might also prompt the reader to think about, answer, discuss, or even counter my points as they read. My objective is to advance our common discussion of whether we should and/or how we might adapt the craft to an ever changing clientele with various needs and interests. I am not suggesting this article will "solve our problem" (if such a problem exists). I want to add a new perspective to the greater discussion on the future of masonry to ensure we are adequately and accurately identifying our problems and, therefore, possible solutions. If you are incorrectly diagnosing your problems, you will *never* come up with appropriate or workable solutions.

Collectively, we have been self-examining our craft in a serious fashion for at least a decade, possibly two, trying to come to grips with how we might adapt our craft to appeal to the current and succeeding generations of adults. What do we need to do to attract the good men we desire as brothers and that we need for the continuation of the craft itself? Do we need to modify or eliminate our memory work? Do we need to host "one-day degree festivals" where we confer all three degrees on 10's or 100's of candidates at the same time using exemplars as representatives? All of our questions seem to revolve around the (perhaps incorrect) diagnosis that our fraternity is ailing and we must infuse new members, as many and as fast as we can if we are to save the craft. I have written previously on this topic and I think anyone that has read my work knows my thoughts on this matter. My recent epiphany (expressed through this article) hardens my reserve against major changes to our craft in order to find and chase this illusive "modern man", however I did find a point of the debate on which I can now agree after years of unyielding opposition even to acknowledging the particular question. I am grateful to the brother who reviewed the draft of this article and presented me with a question that forced me back to my analysis and my many notes where a new perspective became clear and I was able to see the problem (or issue) within the context of this new, extended body of work.

For the record my position continues to be that I can always agree to some changes or modernization that might improve how we deliver masonry to our communities and society, but I resolutely oppose changes to the structure or the foundation of masonry itself. Yes, I might support efforts that improve (lessen) the burdens in the administration of our subordinate lodges, but no, I will likely never agree to changes to the form or delivery of the degrees and catechisms. Perhaps we can improve the catechisms or consider more efficient timelines or instruction methods (such as via Zoom or MS Teams), but no, I cannot agree to dispensing with them or providing them through written study material.

The premise of this particular piece is this: "we are beating ourselves up over a self-diagnosed crisis in our fluctuating membership numbers. We tell ourselves that today's man doesn't have the time that men had 20 or 30 years ago to spend at lodge; we say they don't have the time to memorize volumes of material; we say that men are now [rightly] putting families above the craft to explain why we may be experiencing a drop off in lodge participation; we speculate that perhaps we can improve our membership numbers through one-day degree classes (festivals) and our new brothers can learn the rest at a later time; we propose written study guides for the catechisms to make it easier to learn the

work and speed things along; and we occasionally say that catechisms aren't as relevant today and that it's the obligations that every mason must take and must learn".

What worries me about all of these examples is that "*today's man*" – as I described above – probably doesn't actually exist except as an *idea* of the man we *believe* society has created or is creating. Yes, I will grant you there are men out there that would individually benefit in some individual ways from certain major changes to the craft, but we are talking about the possibility of implementing some deep structural changes to masonry as potential solutions that will theoretically attract *many* more prospective candidates in the future. Do we really want to alter the intent, design, and form of masonry to benefit "*today's man*" who may turn out to be nothing more than a *composite <u>idea of a man</u> within a completely fictional demographic*?

As I have privately pondered the challenges we face as a fraternity in finding and attracting those prospective new members to continue our craft and promulgating it to succeeding generations, I have become increasingly alarmed at the potential scope of the actual problem that is growing and looms large in our future. I am also afraid that we are seriously misdiagnosing our situation and therefore considering incorrect, inadequate, or inappropriate solutions for these challenges; we very well could be considering solutions that could result in deeper, irreparable damages to the craft that will not provide *any* noticeable improvement in our membership numbers – including the *retention* of current brothers!

We have watched – sometimes patiently, sometimes impatiently – while society around us has almost completely reconstructed (some might say "deconstructed") itself over the last fifty years, deeply damaging some of the very cornerstones or guardrails of our society and breaking many of the ties that originally bound us in our national motto "e pluribus Unum". I believe the changes in our culture have been of such a magnitude that leaders of our craft sense and feel the tremors throughout the fraternity and are rightly concerned about the impacts, but may not be able to precisely identify or label their genesis.

Perhaps, my brethren, the craft in reality is being called to take up our working tools and the collective knowledge we've gained through our work in the quarries to repair our damaged society and to rebuild our common foundations and societal cornerstones. Is it in fact the time for us to rise up and employ these working tools for the betterment of ourselves and our communities, or will we lay our skills and values aside and adopt the very attributes and morays of a damaged society that actually needs our principles and our leadership?

I will lead the discussion off with four "premise" questions to use as a basis in assessing the issues I think we face as a craft. Please refer back to these questions as you proceed through the following sections where I will discuss the issues I believe we face going forward as society's builders and craftsmen.

FOUR QUESTIONS TO SET THE PREMISE:

1) What if we are considering changes to masonry to entice new members based on new societal norms, but in reality, our understanding of the "cause and effect" is wrong and those new norms are the actual problems?

2) We all talk about what "men of today are looking for" based on our own observations and suppositions, but what if "the guy" we want to cater to, to change masonry in order to attract, doesn't exist as an identifiable demographic? What if we are talking about introducing changes to the craft to catch the attention of a completely fictional man of a non-existent demographic?

3) Are we missing or misidentifying societal trends that are influencing our prospective members? What if the trends and changes to our culture and society are already so severe, that our efforts to enact modernization and changes within the craft would actually damage or break the craft itself, or change it to something unrecognizable and completely detached from both the teachings of masonry *as well as* society at large? (Short version: what if our changes make things worse for masonry, then what?)

4) What if masonry – in its historic form and construct – is actually an important answer to the problems emerging in society and our culture? What if our course of action should actually be to aggressively locate those good, service-minded men in our communities who can influence others and entice them with our masonic values and ideals?

ISSUES FACING AND CHALLENGING THE CRAFT:

In my analysis, I have addressed the "premise" questions according to individual but simultaneously emerging cultural issues that are bearing directly on the functions and the future of society and our craft. To do this, I first considered and then identified what I believe are the four critical cornerstones of the foundation of our society; "Belief in God/Spirituality", "Family", "Education", and "Law and Order".

These "Cornerstones" as I have named them refer to the four critical elements upon which I believe the foundation of our society was built. Historically, when one cornerstone is strong, it can lead and has led to strength in the other cornerstones. However, I believe it is also intuitive that when decay appears in one of the cornerstones it can and will spread to the others, weakening the very foundation upon which our society rests.

After identifying the four cornerstones, I simply binned or matched the issues to the cornerstones as appropriate and then studied them for their effects, linkages to other cornerstones, and then their eventual effect on the craft; please know that this exercise is primarily to organize the discussion. Having now identified the premise questions and a structure to organize the information and discussion, I am ready to begin.

CORNERSTONE ONE: BELIEF IN GOD / SPIRITUALITY

A belief in God or a supreme being is so central to masonry that we _must_ understand what is going on in our culture regarding our fellow citizens and their spirituality and religiosity. If we get this analysis wrong, meaning if we don't understand this aspect of society today, we will _not_ be able to correctly address our future membership needs and issues.

Gallup reported as recently as May 2, 2022 that belief in God among adults in the US is continuing a decline they originally reported in earlier polls. Obviously as we seek and identify prospective members, this trend could eventually affect our ability to attract and keep new members.

A Pew Research Organization study from December 2021 indicated that self-identified Christians made up 63% of the US population, _down from 75%_ ten years prior*. The study went on to report that up to **_30% of the adult population in the US is now (2021) completely unaffiliated_** when it comes to religion. While it doesn't address whether this is due to affiliation to personal belief systems or non-traditional churches or religions, it is the trend that should catch our eye – in this case the trend is not our friend.

Gallup Polling reported in May this year (2022) that 81% of adults in the US professed a belief in God, down from 87% just five years ago in 2017. When measured in 2011, the percentage of Americans stating a belief in God was 92%. It dropped to 87% in 2013, and it has continued its fall to 81% so far this year.

We see from these independent research and polling agencies that faith-based, traditionally denominated religion is on the _decline_ in our society. If society's population loses faith and forgoes a belief in God at an average rate of 10 percentage points every ten years, it will not take long in terms of generations to show up in our membership numbers (if it hasn't already in some jurisdictions).

Masons, living a life dedicated to the craft, practicing faith, hope, and charity in our communities, and also being able to explain both their belief system and masonry to the uninformed might be one way to slow or even reverse the decline over time, but it requires us to be active with our fellow man, demonstrating the value and virtues of a personal relationship with our Supreme Grand Architect. I would offer the suggestion that our degrees are indeed meaningful and impactful, but it is through the learning of the catechisms that we gain understanding and learn of the biblical lessons and allegories contained within. These catechisms also provide us the knowledge and tools to discuss the bible and its application to our everyday lives and to perhaps illustrate the meaning of the biblical lessons to our less spiritual fellow citizens and community members who may be in search of meaning.

(*_this study did not indicate a percentage that may have re-affiliated to a different denomination_)

CORNERSTONE TWO: FAMILY

I'm sure we've all heard the term "the breakdown of the American family" or perhaps some even more drastic sounding description, but many of us may not have thought deeply about what that means in

general, and what it could mean for the craft specifically. This section will be the lengthiest section of this article because, in my mind, the family is such a critical element or cornerstone of society and plays such an important role in the growth and stability of society and in the future, the continued growth and perpetuation of our fraternity.

Up through the end of the 1960's and into the mid 1970's, the typical family tended to be a "templated" cohesive unit (theoretically representing an ideal family) and, more often than not, was headed by both a mother and a father. The family environment is where a child first learns basic manners and socialization skills and where that child typically learned roles and relationships – mother, father, sibling(s), extended family members (uncles, cousins, etc.), and even friends and neighbors. A child born and growing up in that model learned expectations, right and wrong, yes and no, and respect for others, at least at a rudimentary level.

As American society closed out the decade of the 1970's, the family structure had begun irreversible change and the former idea of a templated family model began to fade and families were taking on various forms with unique parental structures and new representations of what a "family" and a "head of the family" might be. A child growing up today will enjoy a family structure almost entirely based on circumstances unique to that family, *yet the role and influence of that family on a young child remains as central as it has always been*. The child will watch and take their cues from the older family members and will still learn their early socialization and roles in – and based on life – in that environment.

While much has been written by psychologists and academics on both the family and on child development, my concern here is the impact of societal changes to the family structure on the growth and sustainability of the craft. So I will address specific points I think we should consider in our discussion and diagnosis of the health of the craft.

Perhaps the most direct effects on masonry from the change in the family structure might be felt through two specific factors; a young child's early exposure to God through family visits to church and perhaps enrollment in (some form of) Sunday school, and a child's early exposure to masonry through a father figure and other, older men in the family. As the family has changed, a growing number of families have no male mentor figure in the household and no family tie to a local church. To me, these two aspects of the old family unit were fundamental to preparing a man for the masonic fraternity.

Some will say I've over emphasized the father influence on a child's masonic future and point out that many men of the fraternity never talked about masonry with their families – and that is true. However, in most of those families where the father kept his masonic activities close and shared very little, the family at least knew of masonry and that they had some type of familial tie to it, perhaps just enough knowledge to stir some curiosity. With the change in the family structure and lessening availability of a male in many family units, that previously available early exposure to masonry is gradually vanishing.

Without delving into any professed pros or cons of past or current family structures, I just want to touch on some issues we see emerging in society from changes to the family and that might impact the future membership of our craft.

Views on starting and having a family are changing at the same time the fertility rate in the US is dropping. From a scientific and mathematical perspective, a replacement birth rate of 2.1 percent of current population is necessary to sustain the national population. Official US birth data for 2020 revealed that births in the US have been falling continuously for more than 10 years. In 2007 the birth rate was 2.12 and has fallen steadily through the year 2020 to a rate of 1.64. This accounts for those physically able to conceive and measures the results according to confirmed birth rates. This is a separate calculation than that of those in child bearing years who are choosing for or against having a family, a separate measure that is *also dropping*. One measure of this is the age of a birth mother at the time of her first birth and here we see a rise in the average age from 22.7 in 1980 to 24.9 in 2000, and then to 26.9 in 2018. These numbers show a growing number of women deferring their first birth to later years. The decrease in the replacement rate combined with the (average) increase in the mothers' age for first births show us that the overall population of the US is probably declining at a fairly steady rate. If these trends are true, and if they continue, the effects of this decline will eventually begin showing up in our membership numbers within one or two decades. I would offer this question to ponder: "what if they are *already* showing up"? Are we recognizing them? Or might we be misattributing those effects to other "assumed" and more observable factors?

Another possible concern for the future of our craft is how children are (or are not) socializing with friends and peers. I think we all know there has been a vast change in how, when, and where children and teens socialize. How many children get home from school and rush out to spend time with their friends playing ball or any other form of team sport where a child might experience healthy exercise, leadership, followership, and rule-following? How many children and teens today are getting together to build tree forts or maybe boxcar racers, or perhaps form a garage band? All of these activities teach and familiarize children with relationships among friends, teamwork, roles, competition, project management (organizational skills) – don't laugh, "back in the day", you could put four 12-year-olds together and give them some planks, hammers, nails, and plywood, and point to some trees and ask for a tree house and let them go, one of them would soon emerge as the "project manager", displaying imagination, vision, organization, and leadership qualities. They would all develop talents and skills in critical thinking – a valuable skill or trait used in understanding allegory and symbolism, and they would experience working in a "craft", applying rudimentary skills including math and carpentry.

In the last 15 – 20 years, we've watched as our youth entered the video game era and, as broadband internet expanded, they submerged themselves into online gaming – in the house, often alone, for hours and hours at a time. As the "youth demographic" matured they moved from the online gaming world into social media, isolating them even further from person-to-person contact when not in school where human contact is forced. Social media may well become one of the most decisive, formative factors for early teens that are entering their middle school and high school years where they will be

faced with "fitting in" and all that entails. In some instances, a teen's social media persona becomes more important than their real persona and their chosen media application becomes more influential than family members – including parents! In this faux environment, a teen learns they can become whoever they want to be seen as merely by participating in their particular social media forum and typing on a keyboard while at the same time reducing or even eliminating human-to-human interaction. By my personal estimation – and this is just an off-the-cuff assessment – the generation that is leaving high school now and those in perhaps their second or third year of college have come of age in this social media environment meaning the men are reaching and surpassing the age of eligibility for the craft.

On the bright side, schools still offer the team sports that teach and reinforce teamwork, leadership, followership, and sportsmanship, so that avenue is still there as either an alternative or counterweight to the online world of social media and its society of faux fame and artificial influence. Are we as a fraternity looking to see if there might be a role for us in youth athletics? Might that be an avenue of influence for us and for our values? Or are we overlooking this demographic who will comprise a healthy, social, team-oriented segment of high school and college life? Focus on youth athletics tends to be on a lodge-by-lodge basis through various awards programs and scholarships, but as a fraternity, how do we expand our influence and excite the curiosity of the young men in this demographic? Is an occasional scholarship right before the students disappear for college sufficient to influence them in a positive way? What if we were volunteering to coach youth athletic teams and teaching rudimentary masonic principles (faith, hope, and charity?) along with the value of discipline and practice? Are we creating opportunities to mentor and impact the lives and futures of young men?

In 2020, the pandemic swept across the nation and many children were completely cut off from contact with anyone other than direct family and they submerged themselves even deeper into social media where they took on false or pretend persona's, as "influencers" and some even as "trolls" without any feeling of a need for civility or cordiality and intentionally starting online disputes and arguments. Within this new pandemic-created bubble, narcissism has grown among many early, mid, and late teens that are feeling significantly less compelled to act politely, sympathetically, or empathetically towards others; online bullying began expanding at previously unimagined rates. Are we truly willing to change the very nature of masonry to be more broadly attractive to those of this culture and mindset, to make it easier for them to join and ascend to the sublime degree of master mason? Or might traditional, historic masonry be what this generation needs and do we know how to present it in a way to entice and influence?

Might our craft be the answer to the question of what the future looks like for the teens of this new generation? I think we all agree that there is no community in the country where this model describes 100% of the teens and young adults living there, and I am not trying to intimate there is or might be. The question that I think faces our fraternity is how we conduct investigations on future petitioners to spot behavioral traits that result from this environment and how do we determine their qualifications? Not all young men will develop adverse personality traits from growing up in this culture, but some will and

we need to ask the question "are we ready to face these effects and this decision in our lodges"? And this; how might we intervene with masonic principles earlier in the lives of teens and show them the virtues of hard work, empathy, and friendship? To influence a generation, this too will require more presence than once yearly awards or programs (as valuable as they are), it will take presence and leadership by masons.

For many, and I include myself in this statement, the military provides a way up and a way out of an environment that is not feeding the individuals' spirit and need for growth. Traditionally, the military provides the ultimate and abrupt "transition" away from a closed family circle with mostly local social interactions through school and community opportunities. The military has also proven to be a reliable institution that historically has provided a high number of new members who enjoy the comradery among veterans and hope to expand their fraternal networks and continue fraternal socialization after their military careers. However, the Pentagon is reporting this year that all branches of the military are struggling to recruit new members and the U.S. Army in fact will miss their recruiting goal by 22,000 new recruits.

There are many factors contributing to the recruiting problem including a current period of low unemployment and high job availability in the economy, however there are some worrisome factors that are showing up in the statistics.

- The pool of those _eligible_ to join the military continues to shrink, with more young men and women than ever _disqualified_ due to obesity, _drug use or criminal records_. Last month, the Army Chief of Staff testified before Congress that _only 23% of Americans ages 17-24 are qualified_ to serve without a waiver to join, down from 29% in recent years.
- More than half of the young Americans who answered the survey — about 57% — think they would have emotional or psychological problems after serving in the military. Nearly half think they would have physical problems. We should be concerned that these fears might derive from their perception of forced social interaction and working together with people from outside their familiar family circle. Can masonry help these young men break those barriers and grow accustom to increased social interaction? Not if we change the basic structure of the craft and allow them to use study guides at home to learn their work alone, or sit on the side and watch others exemplifying their degree work for them.
- Among Americans surveyed by the Pentagon who were in the target age range for recruiting, only 13% had parents who had served in the military, down from approximately 40% in 1995. The military considers parents one of the biggest influencers for service. Since we see a similar trend within the craft where fewer men today have fathers or grandfathers who were masons, we have been dealing with this same dynamic already. Are we getting better at it? Are we teaching and helping those men become better men? Or are we considering changes to the craft that might continue to deprive them of strong mentorship, and encouraging self-study and working solo?
- In 2021, an Army study found that 75% of Americans ages 16-28 knew little to nothing about the Army. Again, we should be expert at handling new members who know little to nothing about our

craft; are we? What is our success rate at retaining new EA's? How are we meeting their expectations? Do we bother finding out their expectations before we give them a petition? Or will we find it easier to shorten the work and lighten the demand on them so they will hang around and watch from the sidelines?

Finally, within the "Family" cornerstone, I wanted to address one further issue that will impact our craft and future members very soon if it isn't already – the residual effects from the pandemic on the workforce and young-adult demographic ranging from perhaps 18-19 through to maybe 30 years old or so. How many working adults were forced by the pandemic into working from home, and then became perhaps too used to it, maybe a bit too comfortable doing everything from their college/school work to their career, professional work from home with greatly reduced contact with fellow students and workers? How many now prefer work from home and may even now fear returning or perhaps refuse to return to peer-populated classrooms and work centers?

On August 1, 2022, The Hill magazine published an article that provides some fascinating information about workers working from home. Using Pew Research data accumulated from surveys taken between January 24 and January 30, 2022, 61% of 10,000 people surveyed said they were working from home because they chose not to go into their offices and 76% of those said it's simply their preference to work from home all or most of the time.

Gallup conducting similar surveys found 91% of workers in the US working at least some of their hours remotely and hoping their ability to work from home continues permanently.

How will this trend impact future members and their lodge participation? Will we draw them into the craft and give them the working tools to break out from confinement at home and participate in life among their brothers? Or, will *we* instead look for ways to lessen the demands on their time and reduce the need for them to interact directly with lodge members?

We may be seeing some early indications of effects from this "compartmentalization" of individuals in society; how many young, prospective candidates today are simply looking for something to belong to out of sheer loneliness or desire to "belong"? How many young men know what a fraternity is, but do not qualify for most that are either campus/education based or service based (Fraternal Order of Police, etc.) and eventually find themselves attracted to masonry primarily because they found it on the internet and it defines itself as a fraternity? They may have no real desire to learn any deep lessons, or even to improve themselves; preferring instead simply to belong to something? Perhaps masonry has much to offer these individuals and perhaps it can be the answer they are seeking, but are we instead considering making changes to masonry and its lessons and ideals in order to attract those who simply want to belong to something, or, said slightly differently, we may be considering discarding those parts of masonry that might provide the exact value these prospective members want and need?

When we meet, greet, and investigate prospective candidates, do we not only explain what masonry is (degrees, construct, etc.), but do we also look for those clues pointing to needs or loneliness in our

prospective candidates and then explain in great detail why they should be interested in the full package, or full benefit of the craft? We may (and probably do) have many great men searching for a place in society who need the teaching and full offering of masonry, but may not be aware of what those teachings and offerings are and their potential benefits. Are we able to describe for a prospective candidate what it means to "make good men better"?

Family, school, and the work environment provide the adult much of their necessary socialization and interaction opportunities needed to learn and practice valuable skills required to integrate, work, compete, complete tasks, lead teams, speak publicly and much more. I ask you to think in terms of lodge life where we need brothers to work collectively on committees and individually on special projects like education programs. A busy lodge depends on brothers interacting, leading committees, completing tasks, holding offices, speaking publicly, planning and managing projects, and teaching and mentoring new brothers. If society is indeed restructuring itself to expand the "work from home" model across our academic and working worlds, if people are actually withdrawing from society at large, what effects can we expect to see in coming years among prospective new members and candidates? Is masonry in its historic form a better solution for men in the future looking to improve their interactions with their fellow man, or do we want to change masonry to attract and cater to people who are missing, and often rejecting opportunities to work and interact with others?

CORNERSTONE THREE: EDUCATION

We are also experiencing significant changes in our education system running the gamut from pre-K all the way to post graduate studies. Some of these changes may have been good and may have originally been intended to increase or improve the quality of the material being taught, but unfortunately we do not see consistency of standards for that material, or even consistency in holding students accountable to learn and understand the material as they pass from grade to grade or semester to semester.

Pew reported the results of a survey conducted between January 25 and February 8, 2021; in that survey, they found that _23% of American adults had not read a book, whole or in part, in any format (print, electronic, or audio form) in the past year_. Within the total audience surveyed, 26% were men. This would beg the question whether printing our material and providing "study books" to new masons will actually achieve results which I presume are intended to be to get more new brothers to proceed beyond EA and finish their degrees. But in reality, is the problem actually a growing lack of interest in learning and how would the act of changing our model for instruction fix this problem or help this? Could masonry – in its original form – offer them a new world, a new reason to be interested in learning?

We should also be aware of some interesting and somewhat comparable statistics I found when looking at college dropout rates. New York Times, Educationdata.org, thinkimpact.com, and several research agencies study the college attendance rates closely and report hundreds of categories of statistics

according to many demographics and the ones that I read generally agree on some sets of data that may look familiar when looking at our rates of completion (completing the EA work and advancing, and eventually completing the Master Mason's catechisms and post-raising educational tasks). I will provide some bullet points that may show that our completion and dropout rates for our candidates and their advancement are actually similar to rates elsewhere in society and therefore indicate it is not necessarily our material or instruction model that are affecting new masons, instead we are actually observing a societal trend playing out within the craft:

- Up to two thirds of California community college students drop out; they either fail to obtain a degree or to transfer to a four-year college
- The most recent data available (2022) shows that the average dropout rate for college students in the US is 40%, with public universities showing a 50% dropout rate.
- New York Times has proclaimed the dropout rates at colleges to be so big as to constitute a crisis.
- One in three college students drop out due to imbalance between work and college (sound familiar?)
- If a student has not completed their degree within six years, more than 50% give up

While there has been some small effect on these statistics (to the upside) from the pandemic, dropout and non-graduation numbers in the US have been very high for a very long time. Dropping out seems to be a trend that has been growing for many years and perhaps we, as a fraternity should look at the statistics to see how similar they may be to the issue and questions we have been asking about our membership – perhaps this was an indicator we missed over the last decade or more. Attitudes towards making and completing major commitments, even commitments with serious, life-impacting consequences have seemingly been shifting among students almost without notice or attention.

For the fraternity, we must consider that when young adults register for college, they set their own schedules and work load (based on how many credits they want per semester). *With their schedule and work load at their own command, they are still dropping out at a rate of about 40%,* so we need to really think through the idea that shortening our degree and memory will induce more men to join, finish their work, and stay.

For a new mason, learning the catechisms, the symbolism, and the lessons of the degrees can be a daunting challenge if they are not academically prepared (or interested) with at least the basic ability to learn, comprehend, and apply new information. It is as important for a student today to learn *how to learn* as it is what they learn, but many students today are not taught that critical skill. Men coming to our West Gate today may or may not be up to the challenge of learning, comprehending, and applying our lessons and when they are not, it can be highly problematic; for an EA, they can simply stop coming to lodge and participating, for the lodge, they've invested time and energy to interview, investigate, and initiate a candidate and that "sunk cost" time is now wasted. Masonry is a system which includes the degrees, symbolism, and catechisms and the system is designed to work together, using synchronized

processes to impart the valuable historic, allegorical, and symbolic lessons necessary for a man to comprehend and to apply masonic principles and tenants to his life. If he is uninterested or unable to learn, unable to comprehend the lessons, should we change the system to make it convenient to him, or would he benefit more in his life – *become better* – from learning how to learn and how to comprehend the voluminous information available enabling him to gain and apply the discipline and knowledge he will need throughout his life? Are we trying to attract the man that wants to learn and improve himself and has the where-with-all to see it through to the end, or are we trying to attract numbers for the purpose of growing our member rolls and willing therefore to compromise our principles and the heart of masonry to do it?

CORNERSTONE FOUR: LAW AND ORDER

I've covered much in our society that will eventually impact masonry (if it hasn't already in some form or another) and our ability to find qualified – *and interested* – candidates. I've talked about spirituality and a general belief in God; things that are happening that are changing the family, and the symbiotic relationship between education, spirituality, and our fraternity. I believe a look at the fourth cornerstone of society, "Law and Order", may show us important indicators and symptoms to monitor as we go forward with our del*i*berations on the future of masonry and what, if any changes we may want to make.

Let me qualify at this point in the discussion that I believe we are living in a particular moment in time when many of the various crime indicators are artificially inflated by other societal and political influences and there may be a temporary aspect to many increases we may be seeing and experiencing. I do sense that there will be a reversal of some of those artificial influencers that are driving up some of the statistics. But, having said that, I think even if we weed out some of the influences from a more permissive environment that is more tolerant of anti-social behavior, that it is worth considering that given a certain recent societal permissiveness, previously subdued or private behaviors are now exhibited more openly and publicly. Some who we might deem to be "bad actors" are increasingly willing to act openly on whims fueled by a high degree of narcissism and in protest against the rules of society. So, yes, some urban environments may temporarily seem much more permissive for law-breaking and anti-social behavior, but <u>our</u> concern is that a growing number of individuals also seem ready and more comfortable in taking advantage of that permissiveness. To some degree, "shame" as a behavioral restraint seems to be diminishing (or vanishing) as a control on behavior in some quarters; the question for masonry is "how far and how wide will this decline of shame and loss of inhibition spread throughout society and how and when might that decline affect our future growth and pool of potential members"?

Having qualified my observations, we need to at look at the Law and Order cornerstone at least from this perspective: "perhaps the results or effects from decay seen in our religious, family, and education cornerstones are already being reflected in an apparent breakdown in civil law and order." Rather than

delve into a deep, detailed analysis of crime statistics, I will instead present just a quick list of notable and concerning trends that I think should concern us going forward as we analyze our membership numbers and the health of our craft today and in the future.

- Drug overdoses are soaring – fentanyl overdoses and death are particularly concerning. FDA and DEA estimate 245 – 250 Fentanyl deaths *every day* among 18 – 45 year olds and also report a new drug, more powerful than Fentanyl has emerged on the streets in the Midwest.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2020 Suicide was the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10-14 and 25-34 , the third leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 15-24, and the fourth leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 44.
- Road rage shootings doubled in 2021 over 2020 totals and are again on the rise in 2022

- Domestic violence trends:

  o On average, nearly 20 people *per minute* are victims of physical violence by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men.
  o 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced [some form of] physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime.
  o 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
  o On a typical day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide.
  o Intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.

Regarding Law and Order as a societal cornerstone, it is here we likely see effects from our diminishing spirituality (and belief in God), our deconstruction and reformation of our family units, and significant the changes in our education system playing out. As we ponder our fluctuations in membership that concern us so, it is incumbent on us to look at the whole of the picture, not just the puzzle piece that masonic membership represents. How do we survive as the society changes around us and the nature of our future members change along with it? Do we "change" ourselves to be more attractive to those who are less spiritual, less social, and less interested in education? Or do we take the lead and try to fix some of our cultural failings and influence our communities?

AND WHAT ABOUT THE PANDEMIC?

What about the pandemic and its effects on our fraternity? I did touch on some of the effects from the pandemic we see today in society but I suppose it is the elephant in the room we cannot ignore or brush aside as "just another piece of the puzzle".

It is too early to accurately assess the impact of the pandemic on the fraternity, at least in great depth. But I think we can look at our four cornerstones (Belief in God & Spirituality, Family, Education, and Law & Order) and see some of the effects that will amplify or exacerbate the other problems I have already addressed in those topic areas.

Our "Belief in God and Spirituality" cornerstone suffered some direct effects from the pandemic, depending on what state you live in and what rules were put in place to stop the spread. In many localities, church services were cancelled completely or moved to some type of Zoom session. In these cases, people were either cut off from their spiritual support completely, or cut off from their friends who they joined and socialize with at their weekly religious services. Obviously, the longer the pandemic restrictions lasted, the more severe and lasting the impact from the change in people's routines and habits. How many religiously curious were unable to find and attend a church for the first time during the closures and will they remain interested and follow through in the post-pandemic period? We also cannot overlook those who may have, since the onset of the virus, questioned their faith based on the pandemic itself.

The pandemic certainly had deep and potentially lasting effects on our families. The increased pressure on families from being locked in together for weeks or perhaps even months may have changed the internal dynamics of many of our families – both positively and negatively – for a long time to come. While humans are predominantly social in nature, very few among us want or can be around the same one, two, or even three people constantly (24 hours a day) for months at a time. This type of forced "togetherness" can lead people to create mental and emotional walls and push family members away for varying lengths of time or, in the worst cases, permanently. There are studies under way in academia and the psychological care communities in hopes of understanding the damage done to families by the lock downs and confinement. Specifically, one of the key factors they are studying is an increase in the suicide rate, particularly among teens and young adults.

When we look at our "Education" cornerstone, we immediately see widespread damage from the distance learning response to the pandemic. There are already many studies in academia that show children and teens may have fallen years behind their expected grade level performance because of the mandated Zoom or distance-learning classes. The academic and psychiatric communities are scrambling to assess and understand how deep and how long-lasting the damage may be to both our youth and our education system itself. How large is this segment of our society and how long will it take the damaging effects to "wash out" from the culture in terms of both time and generations?

Finally, in considering the effects of the pandemic on our "Law and Order" cornerstone, I believe it is far too early for us to know what affect the pandemic has had broadly on law and order. Many of the increases we see recently in crime statistics is automatically written off as being caused by the pandemic, but so far I believe the studies are mostly incomplete and inconclusive on this point. If I was asked to speculate on what effects we may expect that might impact our fraternity, I would theorize the isolation and loss of socialization may have damaged the ability of some (or many) to interact well with others. We see an increase in individual behavioral-based crimes involving assaults (random and

otherwise), theft and robbery, road rage, bullying, and random assault all of which I personally believe may have been amplified by the isolation and the decrease or complete interruption in routine social interaction between people.

I would be remiss if I didn't include an indicator that existed before the pandemic, but has certainly expanded because of it – home delivery services. At first glance, one might think the food, grocery, pharmaceutical, and even office supply home deliver services are, on the whole, a positive – and I believe they are. But when we look at the services as an indicator of a worrisome trend in society and the culture, we see a rapid expansion in the use of these services to support those locked down and those of us who moved to a "*work from home*" situation. However, the growth in the services and their use continues today and it crosses demographic boundaries which could further illuminate the issue of a breakdown in socialization and individual participation in communities in particular and life in general. Home delivery in and of itself is not a problem, but I think it would serve us well to watch this as a warning about the direction of a societal trend of isolation that has been made much worse by the pandemic. People today are finding it easier and easier to stay at home and reduce or eliminate social interactions including joining fraternities.

I suspect that in most cases, the pandemic will prove to have been a significant amplifier or multiplier for other symptoms that were already at play in our society and were already impacting masonry in terms of interested and eligible prospective members.

WHO ELSE IS EXPERIENCING THESE EFFECTS?

Just to see if the effects on our membership that we seem to be experiencing are affecting other types of organizations, I did some research on veteran's organizations – specifically the VFW and American Legion. I found a good article in Military.com published on April 8, 2022 which discusses this very topic. I am going to include some excerpts from that article for the reader's consideration:

The VFW had a record 2.1 million members in 1992. By last year, that number was just a shade over 1 million, meaning it has lost half its members in one generation.

Quote from the article: *"The aging membership rolls continue to lose veterans, and the generation of retired service members from two decades of combat this millennium haven't shown up to fill their shoes. "We've seen a few Iraq and Afghanistan guys come in, but they're young, and they're starting families," Barger said. "We need them."*

The reader may notice the reference there to the potential members being young and starting families; how often do we cite those same factors as causes of our own membership concerns?

Further from the article:

"Hardin says his generation of veterans, ones who fought in the post-9/11 wars, have found community in other places, and they often prefer experiences like participating in marathons and going kayaking versus sitting in a "dark and dank bar to congregate." NOTE: We might ask ourselves if this generation views our lodges as "dark and dank"? This is just a passing thought, but could a similar view of our lodges be driving the attitudes of those who visit our lodges and perhaps start their work?

"Both groups (VFW & American Legion) saw their membership peak in the 20th century. The American Legion boasted more than 3.3 million members at its height in 1946, according to an article from The Wall Street Journal, and the VFW had a record 2.1 million members in 1992.

As of today, those figures have been cut nearly in half."

And more from the article:

"John B. Raughter, a spokesman for the American Legion, said there were 1.76 million members in 2020, the latest data available. Randi Law, a spokeswoman for the VFW, said the organization has just over one million veterans as of last year."

"This isn't a new problem. It's one the American Legion and VFW organizations have been facing for years. A 1972 article in The Wall Street Journal warned that the American Legion was "fading away," noting that Vietnam veterans were not joining the organization at the same rate as those from World War II."

"But the decline in American Legion membership is happening at a much steeper rate in the 21st century. In 2005, the organization boasted 2.65 million members. That number decreased by nearly a million in 15 years."

I will close out this comparison with one further extract from the Military.com article. In this last excerpt we read that the VFW is considering entirely new membership eligibility requirements in hope of increasing membership.

"Skinner told Military.com that he needs to fill eight seats on his (VFW) post's board; if he can't get enough, he'll have to relinquish control of the group to the district post's leadership, effectively closing the building. He speculated that changing the membership requirements might give smaller posts a boost.

"About eight years ago, it started to decline, and since then it's been constant," Skinner said. "I don't see how changing [the eligibility requirements] could make things any worse."

So the view of a key member, likely a senior member of one of the VFW's posts takes the attitude that changing eligibility requirements probably can't "*make things worse*"; I notice a sincere lack of enthusiasm for such a change and something less than a hope or belief that it will help. And here we are, one of the oldest fraternities on the planet, also considering changes to our very structure in hopes of appealing to the very same demographic that the VFW and American Legion cannot seem to attract.

I will grant that our situation is not identical to that of veterans' organizations, or even the same as colleges that would like to experience much higher completion rates. I will re-emphasize that the purpose of including these examples is to point to the overall change that seems to be happing within our culture and our society that is affecting the desire of men to join organizations and complete set/stated requirements for qualification or advancement. What is happening in the hearts and minds of men 18 – 45 or even 50 years old that their interest in fraternal organizations has diminished and continues diminishing? Whatever the problem or the evolution is, it will not be changed or fixed by masons changing masonry and its initiation and instruction model.

WHAT CAN WE DO – HOW SHOULD THE CRAFT CONFRONT SOCIETAL & CULTURAL CHANGE?

What can we do? I've painted what might seem like a dire picture of what we're facing. But, I would never count us out and I will never suggest we give in to the cultural forces gathering against us. Here are my recommendations for confronting societal and cultural change, increasing our membership, repairing some of the cultural rot, and ensuring masonry's place in the future.

First, we must _stop_ making our existential decisions based on membership numbers which should instead be used as merely one indicator among many to alert us to changes in culture. And we must certainly stop "tinkering" with masonry in effort to get those membership numbers up! I think I've laid out the case that what we are facing is a much larger problem that will _not_ be fixed with one-day degree festivals or printed study guides.

Second, we ourselves _must_ understand masonry, its lessons, and how one might apply those lessons in one's day-to-day life. We – _each of us_ – must learn and absorb masonry into our very being. We must make ourselves experts on the subject of masonry and its principles and tenants and we must publicly live the life; not through artificial external attributes (such as flashy bling and mysterious and dark, symbolism), and _not_ through _over-emphasis_ on our supposed secrecy, rather positively through our public acts of charity, empathy, and faith, and through living a good, positive life. Pins, caps with the square and compass, jackets with our fraternal symbols automobile emblems and plates are great, but we must be ready to explain the lessons they represent to the curious! Yes, take pride in our craft, but equip yourself to explain and discuss the symbolism! As I always say, symbolism is the language of masonry! We must move from a state as a fraternity of men who _read about_ masons and masonry back to our original state where we have been initiated and have _become_ masons!

Third, we have got to learn how to talk about masonry to the curious and the outsider. Yes, we should all have what the business world calls an "elevator speech" where we can tease a person with a 1:00 dissertation on masonry, but we all need to be ready when the questions come! What is masonry? Where does it come from? How would I use it in my life? What do masons do? We have to be able to talk conversationally with a curious person without it sounding like an advertisement or TV commercial. When you go to buy a car, you can tell immediately if you are talking to a salesman who wants to make a sale, or a car enthusiast who loves cars and is devoted to buying, fixing, owning, and showing cars in their best light with all of their beautiful highlights and benefits. Give the questioner substantive

answers! This may be the most important "solution", but it cannot stand alone. I placed it as number three, but this really compliments and works in conjunction with my other recommendations.

Fourth, find and educate the fraternally inclined, service-oriented men in our communities. How many volunteer firemen are in your community and how many of them has your lodge approached? How many volunteer EMS technicians are out there serving their communities while they work their way through school? Does your local police station have an auxiliary or volunteer program with civilians helping with traffic direction, crowd management, and other such support activity? How about men volunteering at local charities? When I drop off donations a local charity donation center, there is always one or two young men working behind the reception desk; granted you need to exercise caution with this suggestion because many charities allow men to serve court-ordered community service with volunteer organizations – but this might not (and probably won't) disqualify a man who might typically be a minor or a first-time offender. (Perhaps in these specific cases, masonry might have something to offer to someone inclined to self-improvement!) The point is, the men are out there, but we're going to have to root them out and go to them! How about hosting a volunteer firefighter dinner at your lodge – or even go to the fire station and cook it? How about dropping hot food off at a local police station? Find the service-oriented, fraternally inclined men out there in your community – and be ready to make your sale!

Fifth, seek out the influencers among the service-oriented men in your community! Have you or has your lodge ever met the chief of the volunteer fire department in your community? What if your lodge presented him an award of some sort that has the square and compass on it? In Texas, we have the Community Builder Award – an excellent conversation starter! If you recognize the chief, you may spark the curiosity of his volunteers! Have you visited or met the team that runs the local Animal Shelter? How about the local Red Cross or homeless shelter? The people running these organizations are community and service minded people who may have never heard of masonry. When was the last time your lodge volunteered with one of these agencies? If they have never heard of us, they will never seek us to learn and perhaps join!

Sixth, we must demonstrate our tenants in action. When your lodge is engaged in a community effort or charitable activity, wear your square and compass or lodge polo and be ready to have those discussions! Be ready with answers from the curious, and to show the community your masonic values! Speak truth, not in an evasive manner, but put it out there for the uneducated. We have plenty we can say without even getting close to anything we actually consider as being "secret". The key words you are listening for are "So what is masonry and what does it do…?"

Seventh, we must be unique and we must be elite! We must exude that aura of being a cut above and that we are an organization that is worth the time and effort of good men to prepare and qualify for. In the 1700's and 1800's the highest honor for many men was to be known as master mason and it is up to us to learn and maintain our standards! It would be interesting to learn how many men nationwide were rejected for the degrees of freemasonry in 2021 for reasons OTHER than false information on petitions, felonious behavior, or other obvious disqualifiers? Are we really enforcing a standard that makes us

elite? I would suggest that it may be more difficult for a college student to be selected and approved for membership in a college fraternity that it is in many of our lodges across the country.

Eighth and lastly, when we look at the society around us and we look at the turbulence that is churning and probably shrinking the pool of qualified and interested men, we probably need to ask if we are approaching the point in time where we will have to examine how many lodges are competing for those prospective petitioners. I have long resisted this as a separate discussion, viewing it as the business *only* of the individual lodges and the brethren they serve to make appropriate decisions to continue, move, or merge. I steadfastly refused this topic even as an issue until my study and analysis for this article showed me the context in which this idea must at least be considered. There is no one answer, no correct or incorrect answer, no perfect number of lodges, but logic alone tells us we are starting to spread and strain our experience, our talent, and our resources very thin while spending more and more of our hard-earned dollars maintaining buildings and properties possibly to the detriment of our masonic and charitable programs.

Brethren, it is not my place or my desire to tell or even suggest lodges merge into other lodges, and I am definitely _not_ advocating or calling for any formation of any type or version of "mega-lodges" where some brothers could be lost and overlooked in the crowd. What I *am* suggesting is that we may be approaching a point where the cost of maintaining so many buildings and properties is draining the manpower and the funds of many lodges – funds that could otherwise support their lodge education efforts, their programs to help their brothers in need and widows, or their community outreach efforts.

Ultimately, the question may come down to this: "is it better for a lodge to demise, surrender their charter, and go dark, or to join forces with another lodge and improve the strength of two lodges at the same time"? I am not suggesting this is a or the magic bullet or the miracle cure we have been seeking, but I do (now) believe this is an idea we might – *at the individual lodge level* – look at more closely. When we say that "masonry must change and modernize if we are to attract and keep new members", are we truly considering _all_ of the changes that might or should be considered? Or are we just looking at certain changes that we believe match or that *appears* to match cultural and social trends and lifestyles of the day?

IN CONCLUSION

My goal with this article is not to win an argument, and not to provide the definitive solutions to issues facing masonry today. My goal is to make sure we are seeing the whole picture of everything that is impacting and shaping the men of today's generations and to show that those factors are now or soon will be affecting us and our fraternity in terms of membership and the decisions we make on the form and presentation of masonry. My unequivocal goal is to plead with my brothers to consider all of the factors I presented in this article before we make irreversible changes that will forever redefine the craft. As one who is opposed to major changes to the structure of masonry, I felt it to be my

responsibility to lay out my case and provide not only my opposing arguments, but my own ideas for solutions and improvements. This article is the vehicle for my case.

As I gathered, analyzed, and came to understand the information, I discovered my real concerns lie in the Spirituality/Belief in God numbers, and the college dropout numbers. The fraternity may be in for some rough times in the future if the general belief in God continues to decline at the current rate and if the college dropout rate continues to increase we will be facing a growing number of eligible future members who do not complete work they start, even when it is work of their own choosing and under their own control. Together with the other numbers and trends in the other categories may portray significant issues regarding the number of available men who are qualified, interested, and able to petition and complete the required work. We have our work to do in educating not only the public, but our own members on our history, symbolism, and role of our craft in society.

When it comes specifically to attracting and initiating new members, we are not and should not be fishing. We shouldn't throw bait in the water and then keep changing it when there are no nibbles. We will quickly and completely lose our identity if we continually change the definition of whom and what we are in order to attract those who don't know us anyway. Let us not change ourselves to attract the uninterested and unqualified in our culture by becoming or by replicating what they are used to and comfortable with. Let us instead challenge them and offer them the path to their own highest ideals as well as to our fraternal hopes for mankind that we illustrate brilliantly through our beautiful degrees and allegories!

My brothers, fluctuating or poor membership numbers are _not_ our primary problem. They are actually the alarm bell warning us of large, cultural and societal problems with roots that may go back as far as the 1960's. They are our call for our attention and a call to action, to deliver our principles and values to our communities in an efficient way and begin a national effort to confront the decay we see in the cornerstones of our society. Let us first master our craft and then take it – in its complete and historical form – into our communities, cities, and towns and provide the shining examples and lessons of faith, hope, and charity to our countrymen who need the help and inspiration that perhaps _only we can provide_!

Brethren, we are a philosophical and spiritual association, charged by history to find and elevate the best men among men through disciplined pursuit of excellence and constant improvement to lead humanity into a better future. We cannot elevate men or mankind by reducing of our standards.

 -BroBill
"_A Mason's Journey_"