

Does Freemasonry Have a Future?

**An Address given by VWBro Ken Edney, Grand Lecturer (GLNZ) and
Deputy Master of the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No 305
To the Lodge on November 5th 2007**

The two most commonly used words in Freemasonry today are '*dues*' and '*candidates*'.

Money of course plays a vital part in our lives. It is decidedly not socially acceptable to discuss one's income or the lack thereof in polite society in any part of society. We have little control over fiscal matters, they are usually out of our hands and the constant rises in rates, taxes, costs for ancillary services which are always we are told in our best interests, with how much it is going to save us 'the consumer' and how good it will be for us. Experience has taught us these so-called benefits seldom come to fruition. As costs rise our incomes do not necessarily keep pace and in many instances people on fixed incomes continue to be marginalised even if you have provided for your retirement as often we are exhorted to do it can be depressing to observe the inroads that the tax department can make on even the most modest incomes from investments. Even investing today is a dodgy business, highlighted by the series of calamities recently in the financial world.

Our dues of course reflect the society we live in. Increases in costs to Masonic companies and Lodges of such items as rates, electricity, water etc. are such that they have to be passed on. This domino effect has to stop somewhere, and that somewhere is you and I. Capitation fees to Grand Lodge continue to increase and are aggravated by the fact that, as its overheads increase, the shrinking membership has compounded the amounts we have to pay individually.

The only way it would appear out of this ever decreasing and ever diminishing cycle of return is an increase membership. At this point I am looking only at the problem from a fiscal point of view. If we can't increase our membership we can't meet our financial obligations causing further declines in Lodges and forcing more out of existence. Dues will continue to rise and it would seem that there would be no alternatives to this one salient fact.

Membership remains another vexed question, like the subject of dues it is a self-perpetuating problem. If we don't recruit and successfully maintain our membership levels our dues will rise further. Another alarming factor seems to be coming evident. When we get new members we are not keeping them. Seemingly we are not just getting the mix right. Some Lodges get new members and can't keep them, while other Lodges gain new members and not only keep them but attract joining members. It would seem there is an X-factor at work here. If this X-factor could be identified then I would suggest that this would vary from Lodge to Lodge, and sustainable progress could be achieved and maintained.

It must be discouraging to new Initiates to find on admission that there is an all-pervading pessimism throughout the Lodges he visits. Of course reality must be faced but does it need to cripple our enthusiasm. In some instances new members are placed in office far too quickly, and if a Brother becomes disenchanted with masonry it is often left to the Proposer and Secunder alone to sort out the problem.

It is time to consider that once a man comes through the door of the Lodge, any problems he has with Freemasonry are everybody's problems. There is a saying that if he is sinking, then so are we. Some years ago I was at a function at which a very senior Freemason gave an address to the brethren and ladies. The whole tenor of the address while accurate was delivered in the worst possible venue. The waiters and waitresses were mostly young people and they could not help but hear the comments made concerning our rapidly declining membership and I wondered how many of them would absorb these comments and decide they wouldn't want to join us because we were "a bunch of losers". I should imagine that many of them would have conveyed these thoughts to their families and friends. Their experience of hearing this address would have been less than edifying and would have done nothing to promote a positive image.

It has been said that we have an excellent product but we are not marketing it in a very positive manner. Why not? Increasingly we are telling ourselves that we are a charitable organisation. Is this so? Personally I think not. To do works of charity is a laudable undertaking and is a manifestation of our principles and ideals. However, we are first and foremost a fraternity with a strong and robust philosophy, and capable, if we harness our resources appropriately of having a significant impact in society. We must continue to stress that one of our principle aims through brotherly love, is to promote the brotherhood of man.

Whilst we seek new members are we truly prepared for, and are we going to recognise, that as a

rapidly changing multi-ethnic society many of our candidates are likely to be of different ethnicities as well as different beliefs. For instance, do we have nicely bound copies with the Grand Lodge Coat of Arms on the cover of the Scriptures to present to newly raised brethren of the Muslim, Hindu and or Buddhist faiths among others? Are we prepared to accept that our Christmas celebrations in the refectory may not be able to continue, when for example, one third of a Lodge's membership is Muslim; or are we even ready to accept that brethren of other faiths may wish to celebrate festivals from their own cultures?

It is my belief that until Freemasonry alters its outlook and is prepared to re-examine itself in the light of contemporary 21st century living, its future is bleak. Many things we do at Lodge are custom and usage. It is possible that with discernment and discrimination many outmoded practices could be discarded without causing too much anxiety. The refectory in particular is one place that could do with much examination. The festive board should be the place where we have fun and forge even deeper bonds of fraternity by getting to know each other on a more personal basis. Why do we have toasts and speeches that dominate and swamp the proceedings? Some jurisdictions have no formal proceedings. Surely it is time for change. I am informed that in one Lodge the Tyler's toast is given sitting. This has led to less of a tendency for the brethren to leave and go home early.

Freemasonry is a unique fraternity and almost alone has the capacity to be a great organisation in promoting brotherhood and to assist in breaking down divisions in our society. It has the ethos to become a major movement to promote understanding and tolerance of beliefs and practices. However unless we are prepared to adapt ourselves and to re-examine the way we do things our relevance to the society we live in will cease to be. Our Lodges are ours and unless each one of us asks ourselves where do I stand in relation to my Lodge and my brethren there will be little movement in relation to change.

We have been taught that preparations are both external and internal. We must acknowledge to ourselves that unless we are motivated and start to make adjustments to our proceedings, unless we are honest with ourselves and tell ourselves we can do better, that we can make positive change we will continue down the same road we are already travelling.

Most brethren in Lodges agree that in Freemasonry are on to a good thing. If this is so, how come we have so many empty chairs in our Lodges?

The one bright star in our firmament at this time is 'education'. Every Lodge is encouraged to have an 'Education Officer' whose role it is to distribute specially prepared booklets to our prospective members and candidates. In this way all Freemasons will have received a baseline of knowledge to assist him on his journey. Pamphlets and booklets are now available which assist brethren in learning ritual and prospective Masters how to manage their Lodges.

The booklet *Introduction to Freemasonry in New Zealand* is ideal for prospective candidates and indeed for those of us already in the Craft. This booklet is ideal because it explains in a very succinct manner the outline of Freemasonry and provides a foundation for further discussion. The matter is in your hands. You can choose to do nothing, or you can think seriously about someone you know that might appreciate this booklet. It might be just what he is looking for. I cannot tell you how to acquire new habits; I can only try to awaken your desire.

Final Comment: *Dues we can't change, membership we can.*