

RELATIONSHIPS - The importance of empathy and tolerance

by R. W. Bro. Bruce Nation Grand Sec. U.G.L. of N.S.W. & A.C.T.
(The extract comes from the NSW Freemason).

As one of our members Bro Colin Shedden has observed, it neatly encapsulates the problems which now exist because of differences across a generation gap and of intransigence

Some people resist change (or progress, as some would say), irrespective of the need to embrace new ways of thinking to ensure a viable future.

Others seek to initiate change; it seems at times, without any consideration of what they propose to change. Our New Grand Master encourages us to:

- Salute the past
- Seek relevance in the present, and
- Secure the future.

When I listen to masons throughout this jurisdiction, discussing future directions; the lack of understanding of different views surface too often. Differing perspectives can co-exist in harmony, and will remain in harmony provided we work together to define and achieve a shared vision.

Many lodges have both long term members and young men recently introduced into Freemasonry. One of the challenges in such lodges is to ensure differing perspectives are honoured. To illustrate, long established protocols may be in place in the lodge, and newer members want to change them. On the one hand established traditions and behaviours are the accepted norm, but are not favoured by newer members. Any attempt to change anything encounters resistance, and refusal to change causes disaffection of newer members.

It seems to me that a cornerstone issue is 'empathy and tolerance' Clearly we have an obligation to protect and sustain our heritage. Equally, we need to tailor its application to ensure future masons both understand and nurture our core values. For this to happen, the tradition inherited and the contributions of long serving masons must be acknowledged. Younger men must understand there would be nothing to inherit if the enormous and often and silent contribution of many had been missing. On the other hand, practices (as distinct from values) must be open to review to make them pertinent to new expectations and ways of thinking. We sometimes hear that my Grandfather had laid the 'foundation stone' when someone suggests a fundamental change. Clearly there have been visionaries in our past, with enormous contributions made in the name of Freemasonry. Equally, yesterday's vision, as crucial as it was then, may no longer be relevant in this constantly changing world. If we want to pass the responsibility from one generation to the next, we must find linkages that bond and bind, not sever and wither. If we fail to consider where we must go, we stand the risk of travelling down the wrong road.

To optimise our efforts and plans, we must communicate with a clear mind - to try to understand and honour the past, to rationalise where we are and work together to secure the future. This requires us all to accept differing approaches to our own personal preferences. It is worth remembering that Freemasonry is bigger than any individual or even any individual lodge - but - if we fail to consider the needs of each individual and specific lodge, then we also fail to meet the fundamental values of brotherly love, equality and charity.

Another dimension is the need to transfer responsibility for leadership to younger men. Such an action will inevitably introduce new styles and mannerisms. If we desire to hand responsibility from one generation to the next, we must endorse the style changes that follow. However, we equally need to ensure, through good communication and mind-sets based on positive (rather than negative) thinking, a sustainable way forward. Again, empathy and tolerance are vital to secure this future.

In lodges where the attributes I have outlined above apply, there is a strong and cohesive membership. In most instances where it is lacking, membership is ageing and declining. Thus, a clear message is visible to us all, provided we are not blinkered in our thinking. There are signs of a strong upsurge in membership and participation, it is our responsibility to nurture and harness the opportunities available to us all.