

The Membership Crisis in Freemasonry

Part 1 – The National Picture

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I am indebted to M. B. for providing details of the membership trends in Freemasonry.

From 1900 to 1960 there was a steady growth in membership of the Craft, apart from brief periods of decline during World Wars 1 and 2, and during economic recessions. In the early 1960s, some 20,000 Grand Lodge Certificates were being issued annually to new Masons; by contrast, in 2007 only 8,103 certificates were issued and this downward trend continues. The 2007 figure, equates to around one new member per lodge per year.

The effect of these numbers on Freemasonry can be seen from the number of new Lodges consecrated. Between 1900 and 1914 about 60 new lodges a year were consecrated. During the periods of both wars recruitment levelled off but following both wars the rate increased dramatically. During the 1920s the average was well over 100 new lodges a year and between 1945 and 1950 the average was over 180. The rate slowed down in the 1950s but was still over 60. There is now a net decline in the total number of Lodges year on year and the total is now 403 less than it was in 2000. It is commonly assumed that the large increase after the wars was due to a wish on the part of the survivors to continue the comradeship they experienced during the war. Whether this is true or not we should make more of the masculine need for comradeship.

Here in Surrey our membership has dropped from 19,500 in 1967 to 9,000 today. This is a reduction of some 50% and yet the total number of lodges in Surrey has hardly fallen. Clearly a consolidation of lodges **must** take place and it seems axiomatic that this downsizing will be enhanced if it is managed. The fact that lodges are independent does not diminish the case for producing a schedule of Lodges at risk and making that list available to those Lodges on it. Clinging to the wreckage seems, to me, to be a very inferior option.

I have requested data for the above issue from our official visitor - but so far I have not had an acknowledgement of my three emails.

It would also help the process of retrenchment if Provincial Grand Lodge would hold a list of Lodges that are interested in amalgamation and make it available to other Lodges on application. This would enable discussions on amalgamation to start before it is too late. We should not underestimate the problems of amalgamation – such as – which lodge will hand in its warrant, who is going to be master, secretary, DC and all the other offices. Provincial Grand Lodge could assist this process by providing informal guidance.

While on the general area of matters outside the control of the Lodge – Provincial Grand Lodges do – from time to time – get applications for membership directly from the general public. There should be a transparent method by which these potential

new members are passed to Lodges – with priority given to stable local lodges in need of new members.

The membership crisis poses many questions, and the first one, which must cross every enquiring mind is, “So what? This is the market in operation. No organisation can keep growing and a cull of the weaker Lodges was inevitable sooner or later.

If we accept this view and enjoy our Masonry we need only sit back and become one of a more select few. But, and it’s a big “but”, what if unknown socio-economic factors are at play which will one day sweep us away too. In that case we must examine our Freemasonry and see what – if anything – can be done to ensure the survival of our lodge.

In the past – when I have undertaken research – I have looked through the available research data to form a view before extending my researches into interesting areas. On the subject of Masonic membership, the available data are very thin on the ground. This is a remarkable observation about an organisation, which spends a quite inordinate amount of time and effort collecting and collating membership data.

There are a few despairing letters in Masonic magazines, noting our falling numbers, none of which appear to have been followed up by the commission of proper analysis. Indeed, the only academic quality research I have identified is in the magazine of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of the USA, Heredom, Volume 9, 2001:

Masonic Membership Myths Debunked
John L. Belton, P.M.

John is a Past Master of the Internet Lodge No 9659 and has a similar paper available in that lodge’s library.

The Heredom paper can be found at -
<http://www.lodgehope337.org.uk/lectures/belton%20L2.pdf>

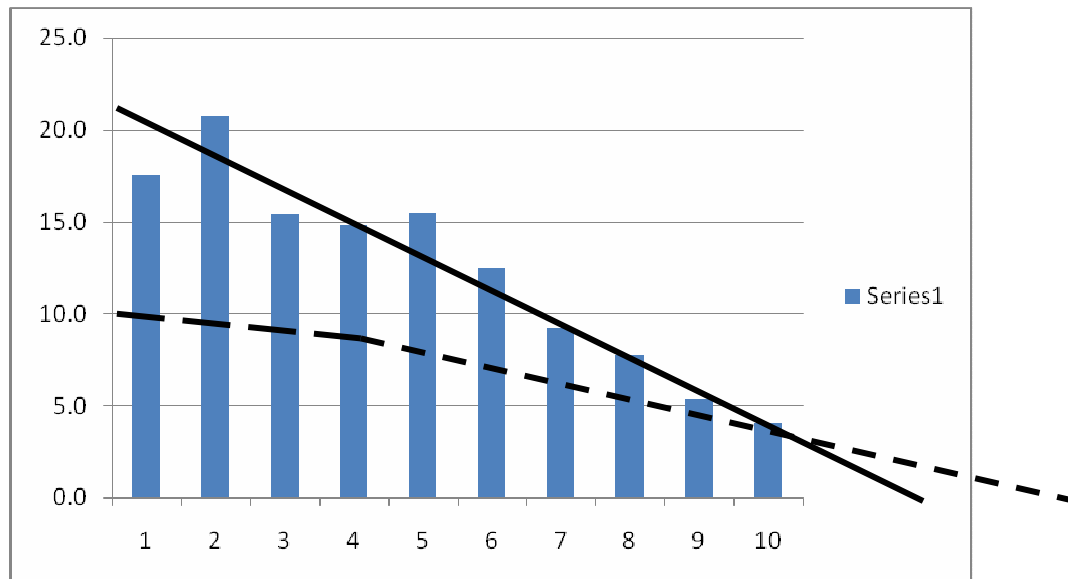
Its conclusions are:

1. After WW2, a 12% smaller share of the male population, were choosing to be Freemasons, than after WW1.
2. After the two World Wars men started joining Freemasonry in ever smaller numbers soon after the end of the wars.
3. It is not the death of older Freemasons that threatens the survival of Freemasonry but those who join and leave soon afterwards.
4. It is not the general climate of anti-masonry which is to blame for the decline in membership but the shorter length of stay of new Masons.

John Belton produced some astounding figures concerning lengths of membership:

Year	1945-49	1950-54	1955-59	1960-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94
Length	17.5	20.8	15.4	14.8	15.5	12.5	9.2	7.8	5.4	4.1

This rate of attrition is almost a straight line pointing to an average length of stay of zero years by around 2005. Now we must acknowledge that the sample of lodges was very small at 8. However, we must also be concerned at the similarity of the data across the eight lodges and the fact that 3 of them are English.



5. The final conclusion of this research is that – while a few lodges do “buck the trend” – they are exceptional and the trend of falling numbers is universal.

The message from this research is unequivocal. We must make our Freemasonry more attractive to new members – so that they will remain active – or Freemasonry will die out.

There is a caveat, which must be mentioned about this research. If you look back at lengths of membership from a single point in time then the earlier memberships will always be for longer periods because the newer members have only been members for a few years. I have drawn a dotted line on the graph based on corrected figures and it points to the same outcome – an average length of stay of zero years by the later date of around 2015. I have discussed this inbuilt bias with John Belton and this was his response:

I did stop doing any calculations nearer than 5 years from the date - because the figures were clearly not representative of anything much in such a short time scale. The case was 'proved' when I was getting high levels of leaving between 5 and 10 years. Of course the actual final 'dwell time in Freemasonry' gets bigger the longer one goes on with the study - but that is always going to be the case. The challenge was to find what I could do with data from individual lodges - the result is what my research showed. Sadly the problem of access to data is the perennial problem with this sort of research - one learns to make do!

Publication of the results produced many differing responses, initially much denial (I simply threw out the challenge - prove me wrong - please do try), then general acceptance. Has the work changed anything? Probably not, most Freemasons are allergic to change and they will try and stick to "we've

always done it that way" until there is no way back. That dislike of change can be found at Grand Lodge, Provincial Grand Lodges and Lodges alike!

I am sure you will all agree that these are depressing conclusions, but what I find most surprising is that this research has been around since 2001, I wonder how many here today were aware of it.

John Belton looked at other sociological research to try and identify what changes in society were causing the reduced popularity of Freemasonry. He concluded that, what John Galbraith called the "Culture of Contentment", has a negative effect on Masonic membership. That is to say, the richer a society thinks it is (I said "thinks" because this theory is about perception rather than reality) then there is less need for anyone to become a Freemason.

This hypothesis suggests that Freemasonry is perceived by non-Masons rather like a Friendly Society in which case we can probably substitute the growth of the UK Welfare State for John Galbraith's "Culture of Contentment". Galbraith was American and they do not have a welfare state as we know it.

John Belton contends that his theory fits the swings in Masonic membership growth from its peak popularity in 1933 – after the Great Depression – to the present. His findings indicate that Freemasonry is cost sensitive and – more importantly – reward sensitive. That is to say, modern man will want to know what's in it for him. This is a very non-Masonic sentiment but one which we will need to work with, if our order is to survive. On the plus side, in a year's time we will be emerging from another deep recession and men may – once again – be looking for sanctuary.

I would like to make an important point. It appears, from John Belton's conclusions that new masons join because they perceive there will be an advantage to them. The problem, for us is that Freemasonry's benefits take time to permeate into new brethren. It follows that during the early days - if they feel that there are no obvious advantages, they will leave.

We have to find ways to retain new members during those early days.

So, armed with some knowledge, where do we go from here? I believe we should start at the top.

I invite you to imagine yourself in the position of wanting to become a Mason, but you are not sure why. In this technological age you would probably turn to the United Grand Lodge of England's website. There you will find the following comment:

Its [Freemasonry's] constitutions and rules are available to the public. There is no secret about any of its aims and principles.

You would probably search the website to find out what these "aims" are; every organisation has "aims". If you look hard enough you will find this statement – the nearest I could find to a set of "aims".

Freemasonry is a society of men concerned with moral and spiritual values. Its members are taught its precepts by a series of ritual dramas, which follow ancient forms, and use stonemasons' customs and tools as allegorical guides.

I invite you to put yourself in the position of considering joining a Lodge and pose this question, "Would these words inspire you to go further?" You could delete "Freemasonry is" and insert "Cistercian Monks are" and no one would raise an eyebrow.

If, like me, you consider that Freemasonry has so much more to offer, then Grand Lodge must take a lead. What about mentioning:

Friendship;
Loyalty;
Companionship;
A peaceful sanctuary in an ever more threatening world;
Charitable giving;
A way to keep your mind active;
A chance to act – for aspiring thespians;
Male company and a good meal;
Research Lodges for those interested in Knights Templar, Rosslyn Chapel etc;
Self awareness;
Self improvement.

Just a few of the tangible and intangible benefits that I have personally experienced and gained from Freemasonry, you must all have others. Perhaps we could create an "explanation of Freemasonry" that we can show to anyone who shows an interest in our order. Let **us** at least behave as if we do want others to join.

In the next section of this paper I will discuss the abovementioned issues, which might form the basis of an introduction to Freemasonry.

Let me start with friendship:

I have not been able to source research material for the UK, but Americans are quite close to us sociologically. According to a study in American Sociological Review; in 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide on matters of importance. By 2004, that number dropped to two, and one in four had no close confidants at all. Americans have a third fewer close friends and confidants than twenty years ago — a sign that people may be living lonelier, more isolated lives than in the past.

Why is this important?

There is a mounting body of evidence pointing out that all close social bonds are good for health.

Recent medical research has shown that while men tend to conform to the accepted "fight or flight" model in reaction to danger, isolation or anxiety - the release of the

hormone oxytocin by women causes them to adopt a different strategy: they "tend and befriend".

Scientists now believe that the "tend and befriend" model could be one of the reasons why women consistently outlive men.

Marla Paul, author of The Friendship Crisis says: "Friends are not a luxury. They are essential." This should come as no surprise, we are brought up within the protection of a caring family and when we leave home there is a large hole in our lives and we need to find a substitute.

In other research, when people were asked "what gives meaning to your life"? The top answer was "friendship".

It is no coincidence that everyone who responded to my questionnaire answered "friendship" or a synonym, such as comradeship, to the question, "what do you most like about Freemasonry"?

If you doubt the therapeutic value of Freemasonry to your health – enquire what are the requirements to live in one of our old peoples' homes? When I asked, on behalf of my grandmother, some thirty years ago, it was having the ability to feed and dress oneself and be at least 85 years old.

The next item from above, is a peaceful sanctuary in an ever more threatening world.

In including this item I am drawing on my own experience. Before I retired, I would set off from Leicestershire – for a Lodge or Chapter meeting - sometimes after a very stressful day. I would spend the drive down to Surrey questioning my sanity for adding a 250 mile drive to my workload. The drive back was always the same. I would feel relaxed, happy and contented; it was as if I had journeyed down to a Surrey health spa for relaxation therapy.

Recent research suggests that this might also due to the "tend and befriend" hormone, oxytocin, but whatever it is, surely we can find someone who can put it in a bottle for new members.

Next is charity

I am one of those traditional Masons who miss the old days, when we did our bit for charity and basked in the knowledge that no one else knew what we had done. I know that we began to publicise our charitable work as a response to those who wished to denigrate our order, but I'm not sure that in making our charitable works public, we have accrued any benefit. It will certainly not attract new members, who have been brought up to believe that the state will take care of everything. There are other organisations, such as Rotary and the Lions, which concentrate more on charitable work than we do and they are losing members every bit as fast as us, supporting the conclusions of John Belton's research.

In expressing a personal view, I do not believe that we can ever return to the past, I wish simply to say that highlighting our charitable aims is not the way to gain new members. However, mentioning it gently, in passing, I suggest says more about us.

Next is a way to keep your mind active

There is so much research to show that the way to stave off dementia is to keep your mind active, that I will take it as read. We have all seen lodge secretaries and treasurers carrying out their duties well into their seventies. Then, because they feel they ought to allow others to serve, they hand over the baton and within a very few years they shuffle off to the Grand Lodge above.

There is a lifestyle pattern emerging which points to Freemasonry being good for longevity. Perhaps Grand Lodge would like to publish the ages at death of our members. I will have a modest bet that it is above the national average and even above our non-Masonic peer group.

The motto, "Join the Freemasons and live ten years longer", would solve our recruitment problems overnight.

Next is a chance to act

It is funny how the most unlikely ideas turn out to have potential. Our use of learned-by-heart ceremonial certainly gives us the confidence to address meetings and builds our self-esteem.

By way of confirmation on this point, I was discussing this paper with a Masonic friend and he said that from his point of view, the self improvement issue is important. He doubted whether he could have done as well in his professional life without the self-confidence he got from Freemasonry".

What I hadn't realized, until I looked it up, was that it is becoming more difficult to get into amateur dramatics. This quote is from the Theatre Research International (2001), Published by Cambridge University Press:

Much of today's state-funded theatre, that ostracises the amateur, has its roots in early twentieth-century amateur/professional collaborations and grassroots activity in the inter-war years.

In other words, the amateur theatre is also suffering from the nation-state, which John Belton suggests is causing Freemasonry to contract. If we could attract enough aspiring amateur thespians we would solve our ritual problem at a stroke.

The repetitive nature of our ceremonies clearly is not to every new member's taste and the pressures of modern work make the learning of large tracts of ritual too threatening for some.

We have made a good start by breaking up the ceremony and involving more lodge members in its delivery. This has not only been welcomed by many lodge members but also commented on favourably by several visitors.

We should, though, recognise that today's youngsters all want to be TV stars. There appears to be an opportunity to publish, say, the first degree charge, and let interested men know that within Freemasonry, they can learn it by heart and deliver it to an appreciative audience.

This will not solve our recruitment problem on its own but it might encourage a few new members with a thirst for good ritual.

Before I pass to the next subject area, I must mention that not everyone likes performing ritual in public. Indeed, one brother reported that three people with whom he had discussed possible Masonic membership replied that the thought of doing ritual put them off.

We must make it very clear to potential new brethren that they are under no obligation to go through the chair. In addition, we should avoid pressurising brethren to take office if they show reluctance.

There are other ways that a brother can, "make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge", than by going through the chair. New brethren are only encouraged to study "such of the liberal arts and sciences as lie within their compass of attainment". My own grandfather – who, to his eternal credit, brought me into this lodge some 40 years ago - was a fiercely proud Freemason for many years but never took office.

Now we come to male company and a good meal

The good meal is a somewhat English custom. Here in Surbiton we are hostage to the hall and I understand that if we don't eat here we cannot use the temples. The problem with the good meal is one of price or more accurately value for money and I will return to that in Part 2 of this paper.

Male company has been touched on earlier – it is comradeship or brotherhood. These are difficult concepts to articulate without falling foul of our discrimination laws but one explanation which I feel captures the masculine need to find our feminine side is:

Comradeship is the feminine virtues of affection, empathy, and caring transformed into acceptable masculine behaviour.

To me, Masonic friendship has no motive, only friendship for its own sake; and it is not new. The first book of Peter, in the Volume of the Sacred Law says:

Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

The feminine nature of comradeship captures the zeitgeist and should be attractive to modern men, we should not be afraid of acknowledging it.

Next comes the research Lodges for those interested in Knights Templar etc

One of several aspects of Freemasonry – which I find baffling - is its reaction to the Knights Templar and the Da Vinci Code genre of books. When the question "How

and when did Freemasonry start?" Is posed on the Grand Lodge website, the answer is straightforward, "It is not known".

If Grand Lodge really has no idea how we started why not open up the debate. Millions of men find it very interesting.

Perhaps this quote from another John Belton paper – Communication and Research versus Education published in *Ars Quatuor Coronati*, sums up the present position:

There is a big question-mark over whether research lodges consider that part of their remit is the dissemination of Masonic information to the world of Freemasons. All the online evidence is that they see the communication function as irrelevant. This seems oddly in contradiction to their founding ideals!

Self awareness and self improvement

Almost everything I have discussed so far points towards Freemasonry working positively to improve a brother's self esteem and self awareness.

Media stars such as Madonna, spend millions on Kaballah and other self improvement moral codes. Freemasonry has quite a lot of Kaballah built into its ritual and yet none of the attractions of Kaballah seem to rub off on us. There seems to be an opportunity here to raise our profile.

In conclusion

The introduction of mentors – to nurture new Masons – is clearly a sensible step. Modern man clearly needs a helping hand to get him through his early days as a brother, when the rewards are less than obvious.

However, unless there is a "virtuous learning circle" attached to this initiative, the chances of success are reduced. What do I mean by this statement? We all need to continually learn from experience. We need to know what makes new Masons unhappy and the most appropriate course of action to resolve their problem. Put another way, how should we modify our behaviour to reduce negative developments.

Grand Lodge has a 194 page guide for mentors on its website, which says that Provincial Grand Lodge mentors will hold regular feedback meetings to keep Lodge mentors abreast of best practice. This guide was issued in 2007 so it appears that this part of the mentoring initiative is not yet in place in Surrey.

A simpler alternative would be for Provincial or Grand Lodge websites to have a section where mentors can record the sorts of problems they have experienced with new Masons, and what strategies successfully overcame the problems; also, those that failed.

Mentors could email in their experiences and Grand Lodge or one Province could collate them into a help page, which mentors will be able to access. I, and my fellow

older brethren, are moving into uncharted waters, we need to be advised of the best practices to help us to adjust to these new challenges.

Most of the points made above will require action at Grand or Provincial Grand Lodge level if they are to reach those who might want to join our ranks. My own experience and that of John Belton suggests that neither Grand Lodge nor Provincial Grand Lodge will do much – if anything – to publicly assist this process.

It is not my role to suggest how they might move forward but I can point to a group of men who can.

In 2007, four lecturers from the University of Wolverhampton Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group and Wolverhampton Business School published a paper entitled - Can Brotherhood be Sold Like Soap...Online?

Finally, is there anything we can do as a lodge?

This paper has so far shown, in painful broad brush strokes, what is most likely to happen to Freemasonry if we do nothing. The way to survive is to recruit new members and to change sufficiently to make them want to remain active members. As I have just mentioned, the likelihood of practical support from above is remote and so we are on our own. This should not stop us from asking for help but the harsh reality is that the future of this lodge is probably entirely in our own hands.

How we might change our lodge will form the Part 2 of this paper, when I will present the findings of the questionnaire. This will not uncover any golden bullet – rather our need to constantly identify, remove or diminish the obstacles to new members joining and remaining.

It is, though, a fact that there are already obstacles which stand in the way of any Mason bringing in a new member. To start with, it is generally understood that any brother who introduces a new member is responsible for his subsequent behaviour. This clearly originates with the charge-after-initiation, from the words;

“... and by refraining from recommending anyone to a participation of our secrets unless you have strong grounds to believe that by a similar fidelity he will ultimately reflect honour on your choice”.

This can be a deterrent for anyone – especially a younger Mason – to introducing anyone. If they get it wrong there is the fear that their reputation will be damaged. If they get it right no one will remember that they introduced the successful brother. We must make it clear to all younger brethren that once the lodge votes on a potential new member and takes steps to initiate them, then from that moment, the lodge accepts responsibility for the new member and his future behaviour within the lodge. In other successful organisations, members who bring in new members get rewarded not punished.

Furthermore, we give little guidance to our younger brethren on what to say to someone who expresses an interest in the craft. Perhaps this paper might form the starting point of a written presentation that could be given to a potential new member

to read. Let's be honest, we have no secrets that aren't already available on the internet, and there is everything to be gained from being more open.

We clearly need to make our meetings more interesting and we need to introduce more new members. Yes, a number will leave early but our presence here today confirms that some men do find Freemasonry compelling, even in its current form.

In short, we need to find ways of identifying people like us.

That may prove impossible and so we must reconcile ourselves, initially, to a larger throughput of new members; quite a few of whom will leave early. If we continue to insist on "quality" over "quantity" – whatever that means - we will slip gently into oblivion. I have seen hundreds of new Masons and in my experience some of the most unlikely candidates turn into the very best Masons and vice versa.

In making this suggestion, I am emphatically not proposing that we drop such tenets as the requirement to believe in a Supreme Being; rather, if a Mason knows someone about whom he is not absolutely sure, he should allow some leeway and give the potential Mason the benefit of the doubt. Freemasonry is – as we now know - self selecting. If a new member does not like us he will leave.

Freemasonry is about altruism. Modern social pressures are creating harder, harsher and more selfish men – we simply have to take a pragmatic approach to new members or there will be no suitable candidates left.

If we seriously believe that Freemasonry is a force-for-good then we should trust its teachings to turn a few more rough ashlar into smooth ones.

ACTION POINTS

		YES	NO
1	Request Grand Lodge and Provincial Grand Lodge to make their websites more inviting to potential new members, and to distribute new applicants fairly.	✓	
2	A help page should be set up describing mentors' experiences in alleviating the problems faced by new members.	✓	
3	The barriers to introducing new members should be removed.	✓	
4	An explanation of Freemasonry should be prepared emphasising the benefits to potential new members.	✓	