

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1986**

**Grand Orator
Ronald A. Sherod
"MASONS HAVE AN IMPORTANT STORY TO TELL"**

Most Worshipful Grand Master and My Brethren of this Grand Lodge

During the first several months of this Masonic year, I searched for the appropriate topic for this Grand Oration. I read many of the Grand Orations of my predecessors and I began to fully realize the unique opportunity I had been given to address California and Hawaiian Masonry and, hopefully to make a contribution to its great future. I carefully listened to the Masters and Wardens and, above all, I have listened to our members throughout this great Jurisdiction tell of their special programs, their concerns and their hopes for Masonry. When you carefully review the Orations and Grand Masters' messages of prior years and read the speeches that agonize about reduced membership and the lack of attendance, you would think they were publications of today! Our problems are not new to Masonry by any means!

While preparing orations for Grand Lodge ceremonies, I have always been mindful of the importance of telling the audience something of Masonic history as it related to that particular community or ceremony. I would tell them of the great Masons of history who forged our great nation, who signed our Declaration of Independence, of the Masons who formed our Constitution and defended our country in times of need. I told them of the selfless Masons who crossed our great land in discovery of new horizons, and opened new territories to trade and commerce, and of the many great Presidents of our Nation who were Masons. I told them of the opportunities for an education we all have and the responsibilities we have as a Nation to properly educate our youth and how Masons endorse and promote free public education. I told them the story of Masonry, and I told them we were a continuing "key stone" in the development and progress of the greatest democracy this world has ever seen. The making of America!

In return, these Masons and their families told us much about them-selves and what they thought Masonry really represents. The one thing that was very apparent was the Lodges that are most active, the most enthusiastic and demonstrate the greatest vitality, are those Lodges working as a family unit. The Eastern Star prepared the food, the Youth Groups served and the families of the Masons attended the function as an important and integral element of that Lodge's Masonic life. MASONRY IS A FAMILY EXPERIENCE.

As Masons throughout this great Nation, and as Masons in the Jurisdiction of California, we have been experiencing, for more than two decades, a decline in membership and a decline in attendance at Lodge meetings. We have discussed the cause and we have proposed solutions. Some of the suggested solutions have certainly helped. It is important that we continue to fight this problem. It is most critical that we immediately overcome our growing negative attitudes. As we visited the smaller Lodges and communities in the remote areas of California and Hawaii, we found a strong and positive attitude towards Lodge attendance and about Masonry in general.

Their attendance is reasonably good and their families are an integral part of their Masonic life. The smaller community senses the importance and need to experience "family unity" and to utilize the Masonic Lodge as the catalyst for bringing them together in a social environment as well as the ritual side of Masonry. The larger Lodges, on the whole, nestled in crowded communities, are not fully recognizing the critical need for the social and family environment and rely heavily on the concordant Bodies of Masonry to attract and retain membership growth and interest.

As a professional, in my business life I have always been required to search out the weaknesses in a system and to look for ways to overcome adversity. Even though many times I looked upon a problem as an impossible situation, I soon learned that all problems approached intelligently and with a positive attitude are soon resolved. I became a believer in the axiom "THERE ARE NO PROBLEMS - JUST OPPORTUNITIES." We must look upon this growing

pessimism in our great Fraternity regarding the decline in Masonic membership as our OPPORTUNITY to show our-selves and our families that we have the will and the skill to match the wisdom, courage and fortitude of our early Masons who built our great nation and at the same time built Masonry on a strong foundation. We must stop listening to the "doomsday" story and start believing that we can, and will, develop a growing interest in Masonry, not only within our existing membership but from within the communities in which we live. The natural tendency of man is to take for granted that which is serving him reasonably well: his Country, his politics, his religion and his Masonry. We cannot take for granted any of these great cornerstones of freedom. If we do, we will one day find that we have lost one or all of them.

If we demonstrate to our DeMolay Brothers that we are interested in them and that they are the future of Masonry, we will have them joining our Fraternity as soon as they turn twenty-one. We don't want them to join just to become a Mason. We want them to first learn the great teachings of our Fraternity and then contribute to the future of Masonry. We must look upon our youth as exactly what they are the leaders of tomorrow's America! Past Grand Master Ingalls, in his "Masonic Social Responsibilities" report to Grand Lodge in 1984, said, "It is a Masonic responsibility to strive with all our strength and intelligence to make certain these young people have the chance to be wiser than we are, better than we are, and stronger in mind and character than we are. They are the ones who must build a new society, plumb the depths of the oceans, and follow the track-less paths of the comets into tomorrow. They are the ones who must take man's final steps toward the fountainhead of all wisdom, all power and all glory." Our young adults of today are intelligent, sensitive, questioning, willing and energetic and those are exactly the "credentials" we need in Masonry today! Those were our credentials when we were their age!

Our Grand Master in his message to our membership throughout this year, has repeatedly said that our youth organizations continually ask for our help, not for money, but for adult guidance. They only ask us to teach them how to run their respective organizations. For the most part, we continue to ignore their plea. We take for granted that someone else will step forward and help them to learn and to grow into responsible citizens. If we demonstrate our willingness to help, and in so doing demonstrate what Masonry is really about, they will join our Fraternity at their earliest opportunity!

The Executive Director of the Southern California DeMolay, Tom Boles, made the statement that has to be a shock to all real Masons. He said, "They have never had to close a DeMolay Chapter for the lack of money or interest on the part of the youth.. they have only closed Chapters due to the lack of adult leadership from within the Chapter" We cannot take for granted that someone else will fulfill our responsibilities as Masons and as parents. The youth of today are different from the youth of just ten years ago. Today, they have the attitude that education is the central path to a quality life and they are now taking the college courses that lead to their goals. I sat in a dinner meeting between the DeMolay Order and the several Bodies of Masonry, where it was obvious that the youth were less than impressed with what they observed of Masons, and for good reason. If we cannot provide a quality image of ourselves as individuals, or as Masons, then why do we think they will take their time to join the Masonic Lodge?

The Rainbow and Job's Daughters Orders display great adult support Like DeMolay, they are enthusiastic and skilled in their ritual work. They demonstrate love and true compassion for one another and they go out of their way to help each other become better members of their Order. The DeMolay will become our Masons of tomorrow... if we set a good example The Job's Daughters and Rainbow Girls will want their husbands to become Masons and their children to join the Youth Orders if they see us setting a good example today. Yes, the youth of today are the Masons of tomorrow but, we Masons of today have to give them good reason to belong. We cannot assume they will follow in our steps in Masonry. We cannot take them for granted!

Masonry is the oldest known fraternal order in the world. Our teachings are of historical significance, found within the Books of the Holy Bible. What Masonry teaches the candidate is the cornerstone of our society of brotherly love, respect, to aid a Brother in distress and to be truthful in all you do and say. These tenets of Freemasonry will never die nor will they ever lose their luster.

Earlier I alluded to our decline in membership as an opportunity and that we must overcome those well-meaning members that can only predict a continuing membership decline. If we allow ourselves to despair, and if we cannot meet this test of our times, then we deserve whatever fate

is in store for us Masonry, like America, was built on the confidence of its people that "if it is worth having it is worth fighting for" I have listened to prior Grand Orators and I have listened to Grand Masters. I have listened to the members throughout our great States of California and Hawaii and, I have listened to our youth and their leaders, and, I must tell you the key to growth in membership, rather than decline, is for the Masonic Fraternity to accept change and then go about making those necessary and orderly changes to meet the needs of our modern day membership. In an article written by our own Deputy Grand Master, Jack R. Levitt, for the California Freemason titled "AFFIRMATIVE FREEMASONRY", he speaks of optimism; and I quote: "Not only is there reason for optimism but we will be better off thinking of solutions than of the problems. We should realize that what we are and how we exist depends to a large extent upon how we think As a poet put it, 'two men look out through the same bars; one sees the mud and the other the stars: The optimist sees order being brought out of chaos and does not allow apathy or negativism to interfere with his endeavors to improve:' He goes on to say that, "change is inevitable and our Fraternity must change with the times...we must have long range goals:" end of quote.

I would like to offer a modern day Masonic example of how times force change in order to accommodate need. When our Fraternity in California founded our Masonic Widows and Orphans Home in Decoto in 1891, it was to serve members and widows without financial means and orphans. Neither of these original requirements for admission to our great Homes are of paramount importance to us today as the justification for admission. If we held fast to our admission requirements of 1891 and said these were our requirements of today, we would not be serving our membership properly. Today, the primary need for admission to Union City is for the security it provides and the companionship available throughout our great Home. Financial need is only one of many factors taken into consideration when we approve an applicant for admission. Our children, with very few exceptions, are not orphans but simply victims of a modern society of a broken home. If we were to limit our entrance requirements at either Home to the original prerequisites for admission, we would not be operating at Covina today and our Union City Home would be serving only a small percentage of our aging membership's needs for housing and health related services. To the contrary, we are continuing to expand our services and facilities at Union City and Covina to accommodate our growing and constantly changing needs to serve our elderly membership. We have one of the finest programs and facilities in the United States and all without cost to our residents. Where else can you, for the price of the annual dues of your Lodge, become a resident if your need and qualifications so dictate and receive all the care you will ever need without cost? Where else can our children receive the love and attention they need, provided by caring professionals and then attend a college of their choice when they graduate from high school? All without cost to them. These two Homes are in constant change and adjustment to meet the needs of today's changing society. If they were not, they would not survive. As a Trustee of those fine Homes, I am proud of every Trustee for his willingness to believe in the future of Masonry and to not accept the premise that Masonry is going to continue its decline.

There is no "quick-fix" for our loss of membership and the solution is certainly complex. Better ritual performances by our Lodge Officers in the Degree work will certainly enhance attendance, but it will not bring in new members. Ritual alone is not Masonry. No one denies its importance, but it is only a means to an end. The foundation of Masonry is the family as a unit. Observe the Lodge that invites the wives to the Stated Meeting dinners and provides entertainment for them while the husband is attending his meeting and you will see a Lodge that flourishes in both attendance and leadership. Look at the Lodge that supports a Youth Group and you will see a progressive and dynamic Lodge. Look at the Master that knows how to be an administrator; that can lead his Officers; that can guide his candidates and members, and you will find a Lodge with great vitality and above all, a Lodge that takes in new members and knows how to make them feel wanted and needed. A very good friend recently pointed out that even the Holy Bible has been modernized to meet the needs of today's society. The simple fact remains that to interest a person you must first be interesting to him.

Our Masters must not continue to take for granted that by holding twelve Stated Meetings everything else will fall into place for the year. Each Lodge is a business that will either grow or die. Nothing stands still. In all my discussions with Lodge Officers this year, I never once heard

the subject of Long Range goals. How will the Master and Wardens know where they are going? How are they to get there? And how will they know when they have arrived if they have not set goals?

You cannot blame a Mason for not going out at night to attend Lodge if the ritual is of questionable quality. You cannot expect that Mason to attend Lodge if it is poorly organized administratively and the Master and Officers do not extend a feeling of friendship. You cannot expect a Mason to attend his Lodge just to see the degrees. You must look to your social programs as the foundation to build interest, support and membership growth. You must always include the family as a unit. If you don't, your Lodge is in direct competition with the member's wife and children for his free time and you will surely lose. A very positive example of what I say is displayed in the attendance at Scottish Rite meetings where the wife is a central consideration in the many social activities.

Ritual alone is not Masonry. It is not being an Officer and it is not totally the degree. I submit that Masonry is applying the tenets of our Craft outside the Lodge room, brotherly love, relief and truth. Masonry is really caring about each other. When we do not take the time to inquire of a Brother why he is asking for a dimit or why he has not paid his dues, but simply violate the Code and issue him a dimit without a proper investigation, or suspend him for non-payment of dues without proper inquiry, we are not deserving to be called Masons.

Our Grand Master, on several occasions this year, has told his audience of the fact that our decline in membership can be reversed simply by remit-ting dues when a Brother has a genuine economic problem and finding out why a Brother is asking for a dimit.. .he will probably tell you, as many have already said to him when he asked,... "nobody seems to care about me" Let me tell you... every Mason counts! How can a Master of his Lodge be too busy to ask his Brother if he can be of help? When we leave Lodge of an evening, do we remember the degree work or, do we remember the fellowship of the evening? We remember mostly the Brother that we hadn't seen for quite awhile. This summer I was asked by a member of my own Lodge if I would go with him to our Lodge as he was afraid to go alone after not attending for several years. I think he was afraid of being ignored! After that meeting, he turned to me, with tears in his eyes, and said, "Thank you. Now I can attend regularly." That is a memory I will have forever and a friend for life, simply because I took the time. The reward was more mine than his!

Masonry is not how many candidates we can raise in a year and it is not how perfect the delivery of the ritual. We assume once the Brother has received his Third Degree that he can make it on his own. It is at this specific moment that he is the most vulnerable and needs our assistance for a better grasp of the symbolic meaning of the ritual. It is at this moment that he needs direction in how he can best serve his Lodge on a committee or by becoming a coach or an officer. It is at this moment the new Master Mason is the least prepared and the most willing to participate. We must not continue to waste this talent!

I submit that the solution to the decline in membership has little to do with television and it has little to do with our busy daily lives. The solution is that we must realize that Masonry is like a business and unless we are diligent in our efforts to provide a quality product we will lose our customers in Masonry as we certainly will lose them in business. Through the Leadership Workshop programs, we are informing our Lodge officers of their administrative responsibilities and informing them of the valuable tools available to them as Masters and Wardens of their Lodge through the Grand Lodge. Through the Layman's Night program, we are informing those we believe to be interested in what we represent. Through the Ritual Committee, we continue to strive for excellence in the degree work. All of these are required to make your Lodge a viable entity. If you do not demonstrate a real interest in your individual Lodge member by calling upon him to see why he has not attended Lodge, if you allow him to drop from sight, then it will not matter, for your Lodge is surely headed for a steady decline in membership and finally will cease as a Lodge.

We have a Masonic heritage in America that includes fourteen Presidents, eighteen Vice Presidents, many Governors, Senators, Congressmen, thirty-five Supreme Court Justices (including our own Past Grand Master Earl Warren) and twenty-three of the thirty-nine signers of the Declaration of Independence. Every step in the opening of the great and mighty West was prominently pioneered by Masons. Astronauts are the pioneers of today's frontier and many of them are Masons. We do not take this heritage lightly. The few major accomplishments of

individual Masons that are herein recorded are but a small representation of Freemasonry's contribution to a growing America. The record is extensive, the cast too numerous, and the scope too broad to trace in more than general outline in this oration, but the point is clear: Freemasons helped to conceive, build and shape this great America! As you already know. Masons of California and Hawaii have contributed over \$900,000.00 to the refurbishment of the Statue of Liberty, America's most tangible reminder to the rest of the world that we are a free Nation, made up of all races, colors and creeds; willing and able to live in harmony and freedom. As you see, Masons continue to contribute in the building and shaping of America!

As Masons, we give our time and money to the care of our elderly at our Union City Home and the care of our children at our Covina Home. Our operating budgets for these Homes alone exceed \$1,000,000.00 per month and are supported by California and Hawaii Masons. Masons, through their memberships in the Concordant Bodies, fully support the Burn Centers, the Orthopedic Hospitals and the Aphasia Clinics, to name just a few. Through the Scholarship Program the Masons of California support many deserving young people in obtaining a higher education.

One of the great tragedies of today's California Masonry is the Mason that moves out of State and affiliates with another Jurisdiction and then dimit. Consequently he loses his right to petition our Masonic Homes for residency. Beyond that is the tragedy of thousands of Masons that live in California but do not affiliate with a California Lodge and therefore can-not petition the Home for residency, or assistance, when they need it most. Therein exists a great source of membership that we have not attracted. It might be of great benefit to that sojourning member once he fulfilled the minimum requirements of California membership.

Yes, we have an important story to tell our neighbors and friends, our own sons and daughters; of the magnificent heritage we Masons possess and of the "good works" we do by way of philanthropy. We have some-thing to be very proud of and it is time we tell our story to the world.

This oration is reaching the membership that attends Lodge and that is interested in its progress. Usually, this is the wrong audience, but not this time. YOU, in this audience, are the ones on which depends the future of Masonry. Let's wear our Masonic pins with pride and be prepared to tell our story of Masonry and what it represents when we are asked. Let's quit telling people that Masonry is a secret organization when in fact it is any-thing but secret. Let's promote a family environment in our Lodge. Let's take the time to meet with our Brother that is asking for a dimit and see what we can do to change his mind. Above all, let's visit the Brother that is not paying his dues to see why and if necessary what we can do to relieve his distress.

I had several opportunities to address the school children during corner-stone ceremonies this year and would leave them with an important thought that they could carry with them. I believe we can apply this thought to our daily living and, more particularly, to resolving the problem of our membership decline.

"If you think you are beaten.... You are.

"If you think you dare not... .You don't.

"If you'd like to win, but think you can't... It's almost a cinch you won't.

"If you think you'll lose.. .You're lost.

"Life's battles don't always go to the stronger or faster man;

"But sooner or later the man who wins is the one who thinks he can....."

Yes, we have a great story to tell about Masonry, how Masons contributed extensively to the forming of this great Nation and at great personal risk; how Masons forged the great Plains and opened the West to new growth; how Masons became great leaders of our Nation as Presidents, Statesmen and as Justices; how Masons have contributed to our space pro-gram and have given their lives in exchange; how Masons have been great military leaders. No part of our great American history is without Masonic influence. There is, in fact, no area of American life that Freemasons have not bettered through their devotion to God, Country and Humanity.

If these great Masons of history, while serving their country, found time to be Masters of their Lodges or Grand Masters of their Jurisdictions, isn't it logical to assume we of today can give an equal measure of devotion to maintain such a magnificent heritage? Our forefathers in Masonry did not take their obligations to Masonry and America lightly and they did not take for granted that someone else would do their job for them. Let us go forth and tell the world the truth about Masonry. We have an important story to tell of our heritage and of what we stand for and above all what we are doing to make this a better place to live as Americans, as parents and as Masons! It is time for all Masons to take upon their shoulders the responsibility to tell their friends, children and neighbors what Masonry is all about and that we are not a secret organization. It is time for all Masons to renew their pride in Masonry. It is time for all Masons to pull together within their own Lodge. It is time for Lodge Officers to realize that the manner in which they conduct their Lodge business and the quality of their delivery of the ritual is in direct relation to the interest of their membership in attending Lodge and participating in the Lodge operations. It is time for Grand Lodge to carefully consider constructive changes to the approach and broad administration of Masonry in order to meet the challenges of modern day America. We must take seriously our responsibilities and duties as the Master or Warden of our Lodge, to insure the quality of the ritual, the proper administration of our Lodge business and to attend to the needs of the individual member and to make certain that each member is fully aware that he is indeed important to Masonry. Masonry is not the individual... Masonry is the family as a unit. MASONRY IS A FAMILY EXPERIENCE.

As Masons of California we have a golden opportunity to prove that to reverse the decline in membership is a simple task of telling, and re-telling the important story of Masonry to our friends, neighbors and children. Telling them of what we do for our charities; how we make good men better; how we believe in the founding principles of our Government and how our early Masons helped to found this great country of ours. Yes, we have a great story to tell and one that we can be most proud of. We must tell them we are not a secret organization and that everything we stand for is printed within the Holy Bible and the Constitution of our great United States. We are Masons that believe strongly in the tenets of brotherly love, relief and truth and in God and country! Our people are once again demonstrating their love for our Country, they are returning to the Church. The moral fibre of this Country has once again been tested and proven strong. Mason are strong. Masons are America!