

Independent Order of Odd Fellows Dedicated Members for Change

December 4, 2013

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Demographics and Its Relevance to Growth and the Benefits of Odd Fellowship

Recently, it occurred to me that something fundamental is happening to our order. It is not unique to the Odd Fellows. Years ago the world was a different place. Many of our parents and grandparents settled in suburban enclaves and smaller villages in the hopes of making a place for better childhoods and lives less hurried, but now something perhaps unprecedented has happened – many of us are now returning to the larger metropolitan areas. Perhaps for better employment opportunities or other factors, but for whatever reason, many of the smaller communities are now dying. So, when we look at the Odd Fellows in a smaller town, we should note that the Masons and other groups are dying out as well. We should realize that it is not all due to internal issues, but rather due to a basic demographic shift. So, then we should ask ourselves, what should we do about it?

My feeling is that we should learn to react. Sometimes, I am struck on my visits to country lodges at the number of members that actually continue to attend. I have gone to lodges in towns of less than 500 people where the lodge has 25 members. This means that 5% of all townspeople are members. If one were to translate these figures to a larger town, you would see that this is indeed a large amount. So it follows then that we have separate but sometimes divergent issues – specifically, more people in smaller towns tend to join fraternal groups, probably because there is likely more free time in a more leisurely atmosphere of a smaller town, and yet, many lodges in smaller towns have collapsed altogether which should tend to emphasize the other fact that smaller towns as a whole are failing. So, what does our group do about it? We have to realize that in small towns the towns are just as dependent upon us as we are upon them. We live or die with the town. Some lodges in smaller towns have done well because they exemplify this fact. If your lodge is in a small town, offer your halls to the town officials as meeting places, or polling places. While big towns may have specific places for town events, oftentimes smaller towns have to search for suitable meeting places. This should seem obvious, but many lodges sit dark and aloof when not meeting. Just like a small lodge, a small town needs friends too.

The news is not all dire. The ebb and flow of society is evident in the way living characteristics have changed over the years. While the tendency of late is to move back to the big city, there are also indicators to show that eventually the pendulum will swing the other way as well. What we as an order need to do is to learn to react to the world around us. If the world at large changes, our lodges need not change internally, but externally we need to show our willingness to adapt. This is important, because otherwise we appear terribly out of step, deaf to greater society. I am convinced that while our rituals may need some change, that is not why people don't join. It



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should seem apparent that the real reason people don't join is because they no longer see the benefit to joining. To be frank, rituals are part of almost every group going, so while updating our rituals may seem prudent, it is not the underlying reason for the loss of membership. What we need to do, and I have heard this from a number of members, is to show benefits to prospective members. While some may say that this exhibits the inherent selfishness of the modern world, I would disagree. The early lodges were bulging with members for some purely selfish reasons: security, nourishment, personal welfare. Let's be truthful to ourselves, without extending some kind of benefit to prospective members, we stand little chance of lasting much longer. So, it should seem that our primary goal going forward should be to find proper benefits to offer that a) show value to prospective members and b) don't break the proverbial bank, because many of our still functioning lodges are functioning with limited resources. If we were to go back a generation, we would see that many joined lodges to build contacts within a community: sales people could find referrals, politicians could woo voters, and merchants could build a customer base and so on. Successful lodges in all areas both offer allegiance to the towns they reside within and offer benefits to their members. This is what we need to do in order to sustain growth.

In Friendship, Love, and Truth, Rick Boyles, Grand Master