



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

March 10, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Today's subject is all about a great and ancient fraternal order. This fraternity had its beginnings in the USA over 150 years ago with the formation of a Lodge back East started by a far-sighted man. This fraternal order is distinguished by three words which embody the principles of the organization (hint: the first word is "Friendship"). It is international and non-sectarian. It has a branch primarily dedicated to women, and it has junior branches for boys and girls. This fraternity strives to do good works in the community and prides itself on an ancient and long-standing ritual. The fraternal order is composed of Lodges, brought under the jurisdiction of Grand Lodges. Members who attain the highest rank can be uniformed and can carry swords.

Sound familiar?

If you thought I was talking about Odd Fellowship, you would be wrong. The references above are to the Order of Knights of Pythias. The Knights of Pythias, at one time, was the third largest fraternal organization in the United States, right behind the Masons and the Odd Fellows. The Knights of Pythias' watchwords are "Friendship, Charity, Benevolence". They were founded in 1864 by Justus Rathbone. Once, California was dotted with hundreds of Knights of Pythias' Lodges. In fact, a Knights of Pythias' Lodge, years ago, met in my own Davis Odd Fellows Lodge Hall building.

But today, the Knights of Pythias website shows that there are only 12 Knights of Pythias Lodges in the entire State of California.

Let me repeat that: There are only 12 Lodge left in California, where once there were hundreds.

I tell you this tale because, if Odd Fellowship does not change the way it does business, the future of our own fraternity may soon parallel that of the Knights of Pythias. Can it happen? Certainly. It is one future scenario for IOOF in California. Odd Fellowship once also had hundreds of Lodges throughout the State of California. Virtually every town and hamlet in this state once had an IOOF Lodge. Some of these Lodges had memberships in the hundreds. Grand Lodge Sessions drew thousands, as did Grand Encampment Sessions. Uniformed Patriarchs Militant marched by the hundreds in colorful parades through California cities with their bands playing. Yet over the last 70 years, our numbers have declined dramatically. We now have only 120 Lodges in the entire State of California. And of those Lodges, most show net membership losses every year, year after year. Today, over two-thirds of our remaining Odd Fellows Lodges have less than 30 members on their books. Some 35 of our Lodges have 15 or



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

fewer members on the books, and 10 of our Lodges have 10 or fewer members on their books. And that's members "on the books". It is likely that, in most Lodges, only about half the members "on the books" actually participate in Lodge meetings and gatherings. You don't need a PhD in statistics to see the trajectory of Odd Fellowship.

Do I believe that Odd Fellowship will die? No, I do not. But do I believe that - without changing the way we do business - Odd Fellowship could travel the path of the Knights of Pythias? Yes, I do. At the current rate, without change, our 120 Lodges may very well become 12 Lodges within the next generation.

I don't want to see that happen. And I know that the vast majority of you don't want to see that happen either.

Can we reverse the trend of declining membership that we have experienced over the last three generations? Yes, we can. How? All we need to do is open our eyes and look at our own Lodges. In spite of the losses, we do have Lodges in California which - contrary to the trend - have gained members and have grown. Why? Because they have become three dimensional Lodges that feature three elements: (1) Respecting the history and ritual that makes us uniquely Odd Fellows, (2) Reaching out into their communities to undertake good community and charitable projects, and (3) Organizing good fellowship activities for the members and the public that bring the "fun" back into Odd Fellowship. Those three-dimensional Lodges provide a satisfying fraternal experience for the members, but also provide an attractive base for the men and women we need to attract as new members in our Order.

As one long-time member recently said to me, somewhat laconically: "We have Inside Guardians that keep our members in our Lodges, and Outside Guardians that keep the public out of our Lodges. And look where that has gotten us." The long-time member was not suggesting that we reveal our secrets. But the member was suggesting that we need to open the doors and windows of our Lodges to the public when we do good community and charitable works, and that we need to invite our friends and neighbors into our Lodges when we plan fun social activities.

And I see that we are changing the way we do business, little by little and inch by inch. Ultimately, because I am ever the optimist, I do see the trend of diminishing membership starting to slow down, eventually stop, and soon reverse. In my opinion, it will happen this year, or next year, or very soon after that. I predict that the slide will stop, and the Order in California will start to grow.

F - L - T

Dave Rosenberg, Grand Warden