



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

May 23, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

Here is an article from Brother Mel Astrahan, a member of America Lodge #385 and a member of the Grand Lodge Board of Directors, that you may find intriguing. Mel takes an "old" idea and puts it in a "new" package.

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Dave Rosenberg
Deputy Grand Master

Mutual Aid and Other Benefits of Membership for the 21st Century

by Melvin Astrahan PhD, America Lodge #385, Pasadena CA

Odd Fellowship was originally founded, and is still considered by the IRS to be a mutual benefit society. A benefit society is characterized by, amongst other things, its members receiving equivalent benefits, aid going to those in need (e.g. the strong helping the weak), and collection of funds for payment of benefits. For example, in the late 19th century, the "Brotherhood" Company of Boston paid sick, accident, and death benefits exclusively to Odd Fellows. In New Hampshire, the "Odd Fellows' Mutual Relief Association" paid a death benefit to a deceased member's family by assessing every member of the association one dollar. These types of benefits helped to fuel the growth of Odd Fellowship.

In the mid 20th century, the introduction of government managed and regulated social welfare and security programs, combined with industrially sponsored health and retirement plans, led to a significant decline in the need for, influence, and membership of all benefit societies. The existence of government and industrially sponsored benefits, however, does not mean that we, as Odd Fellows, no longer need to offer tangible benefits to our members. Working to "elevate the character of mankind", degree work, regular lodge activities, and civic service work in our communities are absolutely crucial to our revitalization as an Order, but these activities are the intangibles of being an Odd Fellow. Tangible benefits, in addition to all of the intangibles, will be an attraction that can help to differentiate the I.O.O.F. from other service organizations and societies.

Here in California we have a beneficial fund, created and managed by the Grand Lodge and Rebekah Assembly of California, and capitalized by an annual per-capita assessment, which currently offers emergency assistance of up to \$1000 to California members. We also offer a



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discount at our retirement homes that is proportional to years of membership. When that discount was recently increased, it led to an increase of Odd Fellows moving into our Napa retirement facility. The scholarships that we offer are another example of a tangible benefit. Even something as simple as preceding every lodge meeting with a dinner is a tangible benefit will help attract and keep members interested in attending meetings. We need to continually develop new, modern benefits that are applicable to the 21st century, and to loudly trumpet our benefits to potential new members.

A few of our historic health, accident and death benefits still exist. Here in California, some of our lodges pay a small death benefit. In the past, various forms of supplemental health insurance policies were available to Odd Fellows. We need to revive and expand both our emergency assistance benefits and group insurance offerings. Imagine, for example, the number of new members, especially younger members, we might attract if the I.O.O.F. offered an affordable "ObamaCare" plan.

Mutual aid and benefit is not limited to group insurance and health care plans. Although we might have "missed the boat" in the insurance arena, new technologies provide new opportunities for us to support one another through mutual aid. Odd Fellows once had a distress signal that is no longer taught because it was considered archaic. Personally, I think an Odd Fellows distress signal is still a great idea and it should be reinstated, but in a form applicable to the 21st century. I have recently tested a smart phone app that will transmit an SOS distress signal including the member's name, phone number and GPS map position to that member's lodge brethren via SMS, email and social networking. I am now working on adding an option that will alert any Odd Fellow that happens to be within a few miles of the sender's location.

There are also collaborative groups that organize via the internet which need places to meet. We will need to technologically modernize our lodges in order to attract these groups. Access to our lodge halls to host churches, scout troops, elderly day care, and special interest group meetings should be among our advertised benefits of membership, with incentives related to lodge attendance. For example, an advertised perk of regular attendance at lodge meetings might be use of the lodge hall to host group or family events (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, quinceaneras, bar mitzvahs, whatever...) at a substantially reduced rate.

Every time that we, collectively, as an Order, reduce our benefits of membership, we potentially lose the interest of our current members, and something that might have attracted a new member. Whenever we add, strengthen and advertise a benefit, we potentially attract new members.