



Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Dedicated Members for Change

July 30, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

As you know, my prime focus has been, is, and will continue to be: Membership! Over the years, I have done my best to draw attention, again and again, to the decline in our membership, and the serious problems that decline engenders to Lodge life and the health of our fraternity. But as the old saying goes, simply complaining about something without offering solutions to the problem is no more than whining. So, over the years I have offered solutions. In numerous articles (and in my book "The Future of Odd Fellowship - To Be or Not To Be"), I have pointed out methods and techniques to bring in (and retain) members. At bottom, I have advocated that Lodges can no longer afford to be one-dimensional in the Twenty-First Century. Successful Lodges in this Century are three-dimensional: (1) emphasizing not only the history and ritual of our Order, (2) but also opening the doors and windows of our Lodges to reach out into our communities with good works, (3) and further making sure that we bring the fraternal social life back to our Lodges and just have some fun.

It is interesting to note that the serious decline in our membership is NOT an Odd Fellows phenomenon. We are not alone. Indeed, other fraternal orders have seen very similar declines over the past several decades. I thought you might be interested in thoughts from some leaders of our sister and brother fraternities – gathered from news accounts around the country. I think you will find them instructive.

“The young people – we’re talking married couples 25 to 35 – their priorities have changed as far as joining fraternal organizations,” said Phil Kirmse, exalted ruler of an Illinois Elks Lodge. “They have so many outside interests.” The Elks, nationally reported a drop since 1980 of 125,000 members. Mr. Kirmse’s lodge had 1,300 members when he joined 10 years ago. It’s has dropped to fewer than 700, and the average age of its members is about 62. “So, in 10 years,” he said, “unless we bring some young people in, we’re just going to go downhill because we’re so old.” The Elks annual report for 2010-11, nationally, showed 869,019 members with a net loss of 23,868 members for the year ending March 31, 2011.

Mel Spizzo, secretary of a Moose Lodge, said, “We get some young people, but mostly old-timers join. New enrollees have to stay here for an hour and a half and listen to people tell the history of the lodge. You have to sit and stand, sit and stand. It’s like being in church. It turns some people off.” Nationally, in 1979 there were 1,323,246 members of Moose Lodges. In 2013, the number of members had declined to 800,000.

The Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal organization that traces itself to the Boston Tea Party, is strongest in New England, the Far West and Texas, but it’s membership is down to about 23,000 nationally, and has declined from its high of 500,000 in the 1920’s. “All of the



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organizations have the same problems,” said David Lintz, director of the Red Men Museum and Library in Waco, Texas. “Guys just don’t commit as much anymore to the requirements, the memorization and ceremonies and rituals. The fraternities aren’t as needed anymore for things like insurance or political clout.”

Even the largest fraternal organization of all – the Masons – has shown a serious decline in membership. The high point for the Masonic Order in the United States was in 1959 when they showed 4,103,161 members. Since 1959, the Masons’ membership has declined every single year without fail (a steady decline of over 50 years). In 2012 membership had dropped to just 1,306,539. In a recent article appearing in USA Today, it was noted that despite the impression given by books such as “The Da Vinci Code” and “The Lost Symbol” and movies like “National Treasure”, the Masons are not a clandestine group. “We’re not a secret society,” said Mark Bennett, historian of a Freemasons lodge in North Carolina. “We’re a society with secrets.” In an effort to boost flagging membership across the USA, a number of Masonic lodges, like other fraternities, are abandoning secretive ways and inviting the public to see what the organization is really all about. In 20015, the Masons produced a report called “It’s About Time” which encouraged lodges to invite the community in. Most, however, didn’t start opening their doors till 2009 when Masons in Massachusetts saw success with the new policy.

And, of course, Odd Fellowship has experienced a precipitous decline in membership over the years. The high watermark for Odd Fellows' membership in California was 1927 (almost 90 years ago) when our Order boasted 58,398 members. Then starting in 1928, our membership started to decline, with an occasional year of growth, until the World War II years, when membership increased for a few years. In 1948 our California membership was 30,600. But starting in 1949, membership began a steady 64-year descent (with the exception of one year which showed a slight gain) until the present day. And currently (as of December 31, 2013), California Odd Fellowship shows that we have 4,727 members. One has to travel back in California history to 1859 (over 150 years ago) to find membership totals less than 4,727 members. In 1859 we had 4,603 members. And no one suggests that 4,727 members "on the books" represents the true number of Odd Fellows who participate in Lodge and fraternal life. We all know that Lodges carry "paper members" - folks who may pay their dues and are listed on the annual reports, but who rarely if ever appear at the Lodge. I will surmise that of the 4,727 members on our books, the number of active and engaged Odd Fellows in California is less than 2,000. There are high schools in our state with higher enrollments than 2,000.

Business as usual is unacceptable. When we had 58,000 members, we could ignore the problem. When we had 30,000 members, we could be complacent about it. But today, with our membership on the books of less than 5,000, we must address it as our highest priority. It's the elephant sitting in the middle of our Lodge room, and can't be ignored any longer.



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It seems pretty clear to me that if simply continue to do what we have been doing for the last 64 years, we will certainly continue the decline. On the other hand, if we are willing to evolve and change - and become three-dimensional Lodges - we will stop the slide and reverse the trend. Certainly, our sister and brother fraternal orders are changing the way they do business. And in the last year (under the leadership of Junior Past Grand Master Rick Boyles and 2013-14 Membership Chairman Peter Sellars) we actually halted the precipitous drop in our membership. In 2013-14 we were almost flat - our net loss was only 3 members (rather than hundreds of members as in past years). We halted the descent in 2013-14 because we emphasized membership and we encouraged Lodges to become three-dimensional.

The proof is right before our eyes. Progressive Odd Fellows Lodges in California which have opened their doors to the public, have involved themselves in the community, and have brought the fun aspect back to fraternal life have shown significant growth, while Odd Fellows Lodges that have not changed their ways have shrunk in membership or, at best, have remained static.

The path to the future should be clear to any Odd Fellow who wishes to see this Order continue, prosper, thrive, and grow.

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Dave Rosenberg

Deputy Grand Master