



Independent Order of Odd Fellows  
Dedicated Members for Change

September 10, 2014

Dear Dedicated Members for Change,

THE SOVEREIGN GRAND LODGE IS STRUCTURED FOR FAILURE

Have I gotten your attention with that headline? I thought I might. Those are strong words. And certainly controversial. But I do not say them lightly, and I say them with due respect, in the vein of constructive criticism, and in the hope that the structure can be changed. Obviously, we all want a structure that supports success, not one that fosters failure.

First, let me define my terms. When I refer to "Sovereign Grand Lodge" (hereafter, "SGL") I am referring to the ultimate legislative body of Odd Fellowship. This is the entity that, at bottom, controls the fraternal life of our Order - everything from regalia to ritual and all points in between. When I refer to "structured" I am not talking about the individuals who are part of SGL - I have the greatest admiration and respect for our new Sovereign Grand Master Jimmy Humphrey, and all the officials and representatives who comprise the membership of SGL. When I refer to "structured" I am talking about the dictionary definition: "The way something is built, arranged, or organized." And when I refer to "failure", I am focusing on the long-term viability of our Order - and specifically, Odd Fellowship in North America.

So, what's the problem, you say? After all, the SGL has been in existence in North America (in some form) for almost two hundred years. That doesn't sound like failure, does it?

Indeed, if one is looking at Odd Fellowship through the lens of 1914, one would argue that SGL was doing quite well. But, Brothers and Sisters, we are not talking about 1914. We are talking about 2014, and the years going forward. The structure of SGL may have been well-suited during the rise of fraternal orders in the 19th and early part of the 20th Centuries. But now, in the early 21st century, in the midst of the era of the decline of fraternal orders, the structure of SGL is an impediment.

Don't get me wrong. We need a SGL. I am not advocating for its abolition.

I am, however, advocating for its reform. I am suggesting that the SGL needs to be restructured - to make it an effective and responsive force to deal with the single greatest issue faced by Odd Fellowship in the 21st Century (and, frankly, faced by fraternal orders in general): The decline in membership. That decline has been steady for decades now, and is absolutely unsustainable at its current pace. We simply cannot continue to lose hundreds of members every year. The decline in membership in our Lodges directly affects a host of other issues faced in Lodges, such



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as lack of membership to implement the checks and balances required for financial stability and security. There are Lodges that have shrunk to such a degree that less than 10 members are listed on the books, and officer positions simply get rotated every year amongst the handful who can serve. Some Lodges become so small that they lack quorums to conduct meetings, and are controlled by just one or two people. These are not healthy situations. And the membership statistics that we have been keeping for the last half century show an alarming decline. There are entire jurisdictions in North America - and quite a few of them - that have less than 200 members on their books. And we all know that "book" members don't necessarily translate into active members. Our many branches (Theta Rho, Junior Odd Fellows, Encampment, LEA Patriarchs Militant, and LAPM) are, in membership, mere shadows of what they once were.

Ultimately, the solution to this dilemma of declining membership can only be achieved by individual Lodge members, with the assistance and support of their respective Lodges. Grand Lodges can play peripheral supporting roles in membership development (e.g. membership development seminars, membership development grants, membership brochures, and the like). And, in my opinion, SGL can play a significant role as well. But, currently, SGL's structure prevents it from helping to overcome our membership decline. Rather, the structure of SGL is a structure of inertia, not progress. It is structured to preserve the status quo. And what is the status quo? It is 60 years of membership declines. No one should want to preserve that.

So, what do I suggest? Here are the four structural changes at SGL which, I hope, can be accomplished in the near future:

1. SGL should be structured more like a "House of Representatives" rather than like a "Senate." Currently, every jurisdiction receives the same number of votes at SGL. This is inherently unfair. A jurisdiction with less than 200 members receives the same 2 votes as does a jurisdiction with over 4,000 members. I would suggest a modification of this structure which would not deprive any jurisdiction of its present representative numbers, but would grant larger jurisdictions some modicum of equity. So, for example, while every jurisdiction would receive the minimum of two representatives, some jurisdictions would receive a total of 3, 4, 5, 6 or 7 representatives, depending on the number of members in that jurisdiction. It won't be a full "one person-one vote" equity - but it would go a long way to providing a fairer and more representative voting system. And it certainly would recognize jurisdictions that are growing.
2. SGL needs to be able to move a lot faster. Currently, for example, it takes literally years for changes to be made in ritual, if they happen at all. I know, for example, that representatives from California a few years ago, proposed some relatively simple (but important) changes to an Encampment degree that would have eliminated some blatantly racist and offensive



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passages. To this day, the changes have not been made. This inertia discourages members, and leaves in place language that is outmoded, or stilted, or even offensive. Another example, is the oath taken by new members in the Initiatory Degree. That oath is the longest I have ever heard. It's length is downright painful. It takes over five minutes for new members to recite this oath. Heck, the oaths taken by the President of the United States, or a Governor, or a Judge are also important - but they are about one-tenth the length of this degree oath in Odd Fellowship. Can it be readily modernized and shortened? Apparently, not.

3. Form should not take precedence over substance. I am aware that jurisdictions submitted legislation and proposals to SGL this last session which were not considered by the body because a new committee chair imposed a requirement on the form of the submission, that had not been effectively communicated to the jurisdictions in advance. Accordingly, proposals were not considered on the floor and were bounced to a future year. That sort of process dampens fraternal democracy. Virtually all of the work of SGL is done within an antiquated committee structure that gives inordinate authority to one person (the chair), and relatively little of substance is taken up on the floor. The committee structure allows issues to be sidelined, delayed, or even buried. One could say that SGL, with its committee structure, is formed to support the status quo, and is structured to resist change. And yet, change is the imperative needed to attract a new generation of members to our Lodges and to our Order. It was once said that true insanity is doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting a different result. Well, for the past 60-plus years we have been doing the same thing over and over and over again, and for the last 60-plus years we have been losing members year after year after year. And yet, some in our Order still believe that if just keep doing things the same way we will suddenly start gaining members.

4. SGL needs to join the electronic age. In case no one has noticed, we are in the 21st Century. Yet voting continues to be done at SGL in an antiquated, non-electronic way. At my urging, California tried electronic voting rather than ballot or hand voting at the 2014 Grand Lodge sessions, and it was quite successful. Previously, we had spent at least 25% of our floor time during sessions in the laborious process of counting (and recounting) ballots and hand votes. With the use of electronic voting several remarkable things were achieved: (a) The item on which we were voting was displayed on a screen so that everyone was on the same page when voting; (b) the actual voting took less than a minute, and at the end of the voting, results were immediately displayed on the screen; (c) the vote tallies were accurate and disputes were avoided; and (d) the meeting secretary had an instant and complete record of each vote.

At the local level we can revitalize our Lodges by bringing in new, quality members. Ultimately, the health of our Lodges and the growth of our Order is an individual responsibility of each of



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us. At the state and province level, we can make our Grand Lodges viable by electing strong, progressive leaders. But all our work at the Lodge and Grand Lodge levels will be stymied unless we can restructure the old battleship that is the SGL. I commend our new Sovereign Grand Master Jimmy Humphrey for intending to re-charge and re-focus the SGL's Revitalization Committee. Several years ago a Revitalization Committee was created. (Such a Revitalization Committee was something that I, and others, had proposed.) In its initial term, the Revitalization Committee had some suggestions for change. But, over the succeeding years, this committee has been relatively moribund. This Revitalization Committee offers hope for structural change that will make our Order more responsive, better, and stronger in this new century.

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