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What is the Purpose of the Masonic Fraternity Now and In the Future?

What is Purpose?

Purpose is how an organization provides value to the members.

Masonic organizations have many purposes. Just ask a group of members. Masonic organizations provide social groups, raise funds for philanthropies, are the core of business and community networks, support public schools, and any number of well known and publicized values.

But these are the purposes of the Masonic organizations, each a part of the overall purpose of Masonry. What is the overarching purpose of Masonry?

Why Define the Purpose?

I present Masonry history to the general public at an accredited Western History museum. Last year I spoke to about 6,000 people about our Craft. The most common question is “What did the Masons do?” The most concerning part of the question is the tense – past tense. A majority of the public does not know that we still practice our gentle Craft! Many are surprised when I explain that we still exist today and that we are active in their communities. When I explain that “We are a group of men who study, teach and practice ethics, morals and philosophy” they are often very interested and want to learn more! But even that statement does not provide a full Purpose Statement. We must, somehow, let the public and our members know what our core purpose is! To do that we must first understand our core and ancillary purposes, then we must articulate our core purpose simply and completely.

The related problem is that many of our Brothers think they know what our purpose is! Further, they believe that what they get out of Masonry is the purpose of the Masonry, when it is

really the purpose of the Masonic organizations they belong to. When Masons are asked what our purpose is, their answers often point to outcomes along the lines of “We are an exclusive group who are a local community service club” or “... a business network club” or “... a public philanthropy club” or “.. a social club”. These statements cannot all be true unless they are supporting purposes of a deeper core purpose. Others respond with the Masonic Slogan “To make good men better”.

These members point to the outcomes or use the Slogan as if these statements fully define our core purpose. These are purposes of Masonry, but they are ancillary purposes. These ancillary purposes vary from Lodge to Lodge, body to body, and Mason to Mason. That is not to dismiss these purposes, because they are all true! These Masons miss the point, and the opportunity, because there is so much more to our core purpose!

The underlying, core purpose of Masonry has not changed in more than 302 years. There is no need to change that core purpose for another 300 years. There is a need to identify, recognize, understand, emphasize, articulate and use that core purpose.

Outcome versus Purpose

Defining the purpose of Masonry, evolved through centuries of discussing and writing, has been the subject of a plethora of books and articles. Many of these verbose and pedantic writings dissect and describe in excruciating minutia the Masonic histories, traditions and myths. Some of these writings get lost in their own labyrinth, resulting in tomes that focus on politics such as the Jacobite movement or drift off into arcane diatribes of academia and etymology that obfuscate the reader (like the last two sentences!). Many of these discussions identify the outcomes of our purpose but do not define that purpose. These are important outcomes such as providing ideals and inspiration for the:

- seeds of the Renaissance and Enlightenment Movements;

- development of democratic government in Europe, North America, South America and elsewhere;
- development of public education;
- development of charitable programs;
- spread of cultural influence throughout the world;
- resolution of and reconstruction after major conflicts such as the English Civil Wars, the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II;
- development of world bodies like the League of Nations and the United Nations.

The mud stirred up by conflating purpose with outcome has confused and confounded Masons, and more critically non-Masons, for centuries.

When the mud and dust is allowed to settle we can focus on core elements – ‘why’ and ‘how’. As we study the core actions of our effective students and leaders we begin to identify critical ‘why’ elements and conclude that ‘Masons influence, shape and interact with their environments (personal, family, job, community)’. The ‘how’ that ‘why’ is accomplished is ‘by identifying, emphasizing, teaching and enacting central ideals espoused by all faiths of Mankind in their beliefs in a Supreme Being’.

Evolving Purpose from Outcome

The influence of the Masonic core purpose has been felt since good Presbyterian Scotsmen and Anglican Englishmen met in London, England over 300 years ago. These men lived in the midst of reconstruction from the English Civil Wars, Jacobean international conflict, cultural upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, colonial change starting in North America, social and political change leading to the French Revolution, and scientific change of the First Information Revolution. The key is they talked, argued, agreed, and influenced each other’s

personal thoughts in a mutually respectful environment. We continue to use that key process to influence each other, those closest to us, and those we interact with.

This phase of refining our Core Purpose Statement into more precise words results in “Masonry puts into action the ancient core moral and ethical teachings of self-control and self-knowledge to create selfless positive growth in mankind, families, professions and communities.”

Refining the Core Purpose Statement

Once these core competencies of ethics, morals, philosophy and values are internalized, people influenced by Masonry will be caused to act by the very nature of those lessons. They interact with, exemplify, teach and influence all that is around them. They perceive and execute the easier ancillary purposes identified earlier.

There are two critical lessons of this influence that are not written in our rituals. These lessons are exemplified in the symbolism of our rituals and are hidden in the very method of transmission of our earliest lessons.

The first lesson is that Masonry teaches about tools and how to use them. It does not teach what to build with them. In simpler words, we teach mankind how to think, not what to think.

The second lesson is there must be mutual respect in order to communicate. We do not have to agree, in fact it is often more productive to disagree. But we must hear each other, especially when we are in violent agreement. And to hear we must listen. And to listen we must respect. The Third Degree shows us what happens when we lose that respect.

A Purified Core Purpose Statement

An effective core purpose statement must be clear and concise. It must state and describe who, what, when, where and why the group exists. If ‘how’ can be added there is even more

power to the statement. The core purpose must be flexible enough to encompass all of the ancillary purpose statements. .

The Masonic Slogan “To make good men better” is a good start, identifying ‘who’ and ‘what’. Implicit are the ‘when’ and ‘where’ – ‘always’ and ‘everywhere’. It initiates the purpose statement nicely. By adding the ‘why’ and ‘how’ we define the full Purpose of Masonry.

“Masonry makes good men and all around them better by providing a respectful body as they discuss, study, learn, teach and live a core set of moral, ethical and philosophic tools acceptable to all faiths of Mankind in their mutual relationship with the Supreme Architect of the Universe.”