

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

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Examination of the purpose of the Masonic Fraternity now and in the future begins with a common definition or understanding of the purpose of the Masonic Fraternity. With that framework of understanding, it is possible to explore the current purpose of the Fraternity and how this purpose may be shaped by the predictable forces of a changing world. Just as it would be unproductive to attempt to foresee the future without understanding the current purpose of Masonry, it is difficult to articulate its current purpose absent a brief exploration of its historical development.

The word, “purpose”, describes the fundamental reason an organization exists. It describes a unifying and aspirational vision, which encompasses a higher perspective than the term “mission” as used in a business strategy context.

The purpose of the Masonic Fraternity has changed significantly over its documented existence. In the middle ages, the primary purpose of the Masonic Fraternity was educating, regulating and protecting the occupational concerns of its members who were composed entirely of stonemasons. The Masonic Fraternity, at that time, may fairly be described as a stonemasons' guild, based upon its primary purpose. The Masonic prohibition on employing or being employed by a “cowan”, one pretending to have the training, skills and recognition of membership provided by the Masonic Fraternity, is one example of the application of that former purpose.

Over the course of many years, those “Operative” Masons, men working with stone as their occupation, admitted “Accepted” Masons, men of excellent character, whose reasons for joining the Masonic Fraternity had nothing to do with earning a living by working with stone. Rather, these “Accepted” Masons, also called “Speculative” Masons, embraced the Masonic principles found in the teachings and regulation of the Fraternity. Increasing numbers of these “Speculative” Masons found great value in the Masonic Fraternity completely unrelated to the practice of erecting stone structures. Ultimately, their numbers substantially exceeded that of professional Stonemasons, thereby completing the transition in Masonry from an Operative Craft to a Speculative Masonic Fraternity.

Having an uninterrupted existence of hundreds of years with a purpose that has changed markedly, analyzing the current and future purposes of the Fraternity is an interesting and

challenging undertaking. For purposes of this discussion, identifying and establishing a working definition of the current purpose of the Fraternity is necessary.

“Making good men better” is frequently described as the purpose of the modern Masonic Fraternity. While accurate, that brief definition is broad and imprecise making principled critical analysis extremely difficult without further specificity. To facilitate this discussion, we will use the following as the working definition of the purpose of Masonry: A society of men of good character and repute, each professing a belief in a Supreme Being, working together to advance and to obtain the benefits of the principles of Freemasonry that include brotherly love, relief and truth.

Using that definition of the purpose of the Masonic Fraternity, exploration of the principles found within the working definition of the purpose of the Fraternity may permit casting a reasonable vision of whether those specific principles might change in the future. As indicated, the “principles” and “purpose” of the Masonic Fraternity are not synonymous but are closely related. Thoughtful examination of these elements or principles, which combine to help define the purpose of Masonry, are useful to identify whether its purpose is likely to change in the future.

The principle of “brotherly love” originates in the belief that the concept of “the brotherhood of man” is the natural result of accepting the belief in “the fatherhood of God”. The existence of this special connection, which exists between brothers within a fraternity, is the explicit and commonly understood meaning of this principle. However, the principle of “brotherly love” also includes essential understanding related to equality, tolerance and social responsibility as directed to humanity. Long before it was popularly understood or accepted; Freemasons saw equality.

Today's communication and transportation opportunities are unprecedented in the course of human history. It is easy to predict astonishing improvements over the course of approaching years. Nevertheless, this improved ability to interact has not necessarily resulted in improvements in meaningful connections with others. In spite of living in this highly interactive world, many feel increasingly isolated due to the lack of true human connections.

The principle of "relief" may well have originated in the provision of assistance to families of Fraternity members who were injured or killed during the course of their labors as stonemasons. Over time, the Masonic Fraternity has substantially expanded the definition of "relief" to include the provision of charitable assistance in extraordinary amounts and in numerous ways to humanity, not just its own members. During the existence of the Fraternity, governments and other organizations have accepted the task of the provision of charity to those who are less fortunate. However, notwithstanding the charitable efforts of others, the Fraternity still plays a significant and ongoing role in providing important and needed relief.

The principle of "truth" is not limited in its Masonic application to veracity in word or action. It also encompasses a broader understanding to include the importance of education, stewardship and morality. The fraternal concept of "honor" recognizes the principle of "truth" as being its foundation. This principle of "truth" encourages independent thought and exploration within the marketplace of practices and ideas related to religion, politics and philosophy. As a result, the Masonic Fraternity is non-sectarian and does not require a particular religious faith or political belief as a prerequisite for membership.

The world continues to have despots and dictators who seek to control the thoughts, actions and allegiance of others. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that there are

numerous examples of dictators restricting the activities of the Masonic Fraternity; including imprisoning its members solely as the result of that membership.

At different times in history, these principles of Freemasonry have shifted in emphasis without changing the substance of the purpose of the Fraternity. For example, in desperate times of strife or scarcity, even when composed primarily of Speculative Masons, a dominant principle of the purpose of Masonry has been relief. In times of peace and plenty, particularly in the period following a war, the provision of the fraternal bonds of brotherhood and fellowship has been an attractive principle within the purpose of Masonry.

Even though today's world is remarkable for advances in knowledge and understanding in many fields, it appears unequal to the task of cultivating civil discourse, which produces the light of reason instead of the heat of passion or discord. This world's culture covets the advantages provided by financial gain but suggests that others should be responsible for the provision of assistance to the disadvantaged and the disconnected. Today's culture exalts the famous but does not have a reverence for truth and integrity.

Therefore, the Masonic Fraternity is well positioned to be a meaningful and positive force today and in the future based on examination of its purpose, the principles found within that purpose and the needs of our world. Freemasonry is able to serve the needs of its members and prospective members who are seeking a special and true connection that Masons call "brotherly love". The Fraternity is also able to serve the interests of a broader humanity which desperately needs and is seeking principled and consistent advocates for tolerance, civility, trustworthiness and fidelity to truth.

As defined here, the purpose of Masonry will remain the same in the future even though we can anticipate substantial changes in the manner in which that aspirational purpose is

pursued. If the fundamental purpose of the Masonic Fraternity changes dramatically, even if called by the same name, it will not be Freemasonry.