

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Five – The Closed Corporation

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The Closed Corporation

Question 4: Are we not worshipping at the altar of bigness?

One of the most serious trend in American Freemasonry is the development of the oversized, impersonal Lodge. Even though such a condition is utterly foreign to all the traditions of Freemasonry, little or nothing is being done to correct it. On the contrary, Lodges are encouraged and expected to become even larger. What the result will be, no one knows. It may require a crisis of the first order to bring us to our senses.

The entire philosophy of Freemasonry is built around the individual – the erection of a moral edifice within the heart of a man. All its symbolism is individual symbolism; all its tradition and practice is aimed at making individuals wiser, better, and consequently happier. Mass movements simply have no place in Freemasonry, and never have had.

Then why do we worship at the altar of bigness? For one thing, we are Americans. We measure civilization in terms of automobiles, TV sets and bathtubs. We count the number of gadgets as shown in the census reports and assume that means we are more civilized.

In the United States, the average membership of Masonic Lodges is about 252; in Canada's nine Jurisdictions, 166; in the seven of Australasia, 117; in Puerto Rico, 92; in Scotland, 85; in England, 80; in Mexico, 70; in Germany, 53.

Interestingly enough, the small Lodges overseas have little or no attendance problem. The Brethren receive a *summons* to attend their Lodge and they attend because it is worth attending, and because the membership is small enough that there is a congenial, closely knit unit – a community of interest, if you please. And certainly no one can accuse the overseas Lodges of not “doing things.” In their benevolent work and in their impact on community life, they put us to shame.

In the 49 Jurisdictions of the United States average membership ranges from a high of 482 in the District of Columbia to a low of 115 in North Dakota. There is even a Lodge in Kansas with some 5,700 members. (I almost hesitate to mention the fact for fear some of our itchy Hoosier Brethren will set out to exceed that record of doubtful distinction.)

Only nine Jurisdictions have a higher average membership per Lodge than Indiana's 336. They are all in densely populated States. (It will give us grave concern, I am sure, to know we are tenth instead of at the top.)

Is all this talk some curious notion the Grand Secretary has all by himself? Not at all. Some of the best minds in American Freemasonry are deeply concerned. Speaking of poor Lodge attendance, Past Grand Master Ralph J. Pollard, of Maine, observes: “This problem is probably inherent in our American system of large Lodges and relatively low dues. It is one of the prices we pay for bigness and cheapness ... Probably the best long-

range cure will be found in more and smaller Lodges where more Brethren can be put to work and where a warmer and more intimate fraternal spirit can develop.”

And in a masterly address before the Conference of Grand Secretaries in North America in February, 1962, Dr. Thomas S. Roy, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, observed, “If we permit our Lodges to increase in membership to a size inconsistent with a close fellowship, then we have created the conditions for non-attendance. The Grand Lodge of England is chartering new Lodges in England at the rate of over twenty-five a year. It is of some significance that, according to the latest figures, the average membership in all Lodges under the Grand Lodge of England is roughly eighty.”

II

What happens when we worship at the alter of bigness?

1. Well, in the first place, our annual waste of leadership is nothing short of a sin. Every year our Lodges welcome into Masonic membership hundreds of men with a great potential for inspired, dedicated leadership – and then we make certain they will have no opportunity to exercise it. Only one Master can serve in a given Lodge per year. We close the door on the best we have because we are too short-sighted, too solicitous of numbers and bank account to divide our membership into smaller units and utilize the manpower that is going to waste.
2. We provide too few opportunities for new members to use their talents, and then wonder why they lose interest and drift away. I have heard Lodge officers complain bitterly about new members coming once, twice, three times, and then no more. But why should they come when there is nothing for them to do except listen to the minutes and allow the bills? There is no place for them; worst of all, no one seems to care.
3. The fellowship of Freemasonry does not thrive in the mass. When will we ever learn that fellowship, that sweet and precious jewel of our Brotherhood, is an intimate thing not shared with great numbers? Some of the most priceless memories of my 28 years as a Mason center around individual contacts with just a few of my Brethren in the Lodge room and about the table – those times when we were doing things together, rejoicing in prosperity, standing steady in adversity – *but always together*. Thank God there weren't a thousand of us. If there had been, I daresay my interest in Freemasonry would have withered on the vine years ago.

What must be the feeling of a newly raised member when he discovers that his Lodge, which promised him fellowship and intimate friendships, is but a huge, impersonal aggregation of strangers – a Closed Corporation!

And we wonder why the membership curve goes downward, and why Masons do not attend meetings of their Lodges!

III

What are we doing about it? Just making certain that new Lodges will be formed, that's all. Then why aren't we at work on a long range, patient effort to correct a serious condition?

1. Well, first of all, remember, we are Americans, and in all areas of life we worship at the altar of bigness.

Two men came to my office to talk over what had to be done to form a Lodge in a rapidly growing community. Let us call the community Suburbia. One of the Brethren made a significant statement that has been ringing in my ears from that day to this: "In my Lodge of more than 1,500 members," he said, "I haven't a ghost of a chance to ever go through the chairs. A new Lodge at least would give me the chance." That Lodge was never organized, because a neighboring Lodge sent a committee to serve notice on the Brethren that "*We regard Suburbia as a stock pile for our Lodge.*"

2. Then, we are not at work organizing new Lodges because a new Lodge might cause some inconvenience to a horde of organizations now occupying quarters in our Temples. Scores of Masonic Temples in Indiana have room for one or two additional Lodges, but house only one. Instead of encouraging Lodges of Ancient Craft Masonry, which should be occupying our Temples, we shut the door on them in favor of groups which have attached themselves to Freemasonry's coattails. Isn't that statesmanlike thinking?

I am not worried about Lodges that are too small and too weak. That condition will eventually take care of itself. What disturbs me is the number of Lodges that are too large – and that condition is *not* taking care of itself. What possibly reason is there for boasting that Brotherly Love Lodge is the largest Lodge in the city or in the state? That should be cause for apology rather than rejoicing. Brotherly Love Lodge should be devoting its energies to the extension of its influence in other areas – but you can bet that Brotherly Love Lodge will do nothing of the sort. It might lose a few dozen members.

Truly, "the harvest is plenteous but the reapers are few." Scores of Indiana cities and towns could use another Lodge, or two or three, to the good of all Freemasonry. The population is here, and, in most instances, facilities could be made available. But first we must get over our foolish idea that in order to be effective a Lodge must be large, and wealthy, and own a lush Temple in which 5 per cent of its membership or less can huddle together on meeting nights.

What happens to an institution designed to be simple becomes complex, when units meant to be small become oversize and unwieldy, when work intended for many is restricted to a handful, when something that should be intimate becomes impersonal?

What happens? Look around. Exhibit A is all about us.