

# Rebuilding Lodges (Part 1) by Bro. Jeff Peace

American Freemasonry began to decline back in 1963. Since that time the number of Masons in America has dropped to less than fifty percent of what it once was.

The number of brothers is not the only thing that has declined over time so have the lodge buildings. Most Masonic lodges in the United States have seen little if any maintenance or renovation since the 1960's. Freemasons are supposedly builders and architects, and our buildings are our face to the community. What does it say about us as a fraternity when our buildings are in such a state of disrepair?

Maybe the buildings are just a symptom of deeper problems — problems that go right to the core of our fraternity. Maybe our buildings are a reflection of the true state of our brotherhood.

Have we forgotten what Freemasonry is all about — what it really means? Today we have books like *Freemasons for Dummies* by Chris Hodapp and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry* by Brent Morris. Who is buying these books? Freemasons. Are we so ignorant of our fraternity that we need a guide for dummies and idiots to teach us what we are already supposed to know?

When a young man joins one of our lodges he expects that Master Masons are "Masters" of their Craft and can take him from being an apprentice to a master through education and participation. If he sees us thumbing through books for dummies and idiots what kind of impression do you think he will have of Freemasonry? He paid his initiation fee to a lodge and expected to learn something about the Craft from its supposed Masters.

What exactly is a "Traditional Observance Lodge"? Isn't Freemasonry a tradition that's over 400 years old? Why do we need Traditional Observance Lodges when supposedly every Masonic lodge is a part of that 400 year tradition? There is nothing special about these lodges! They are merely doing what every other lodge has forgotten how to do. We have lost so much of our Masonic heritage that we have a special name for lodges that do what was common place a hundred years ago.

Then there is the poor state of our brotherhood. We are no longer held together as brothers by such things as honor, trust, and mutual respect. We have replaced these things with thousands of rules written in Masonic Code books. The rules are so complex that we have been forced to create jurisprudence committees to maintain and interpret them for us. Ours is no longer an enlightened brotherhood of free-thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin and Voltaire, but a group of

automatons blindly conforming to rules regardless of their moral consequences. We are not taught to think as individuals working towards a greater good, but that conformity in some magical way accomplishes this without any effort on our part.

Is it really any wonder why the public and the community have lost their faith in our fraternity? Is it a mystery to anyone why we are declining?

We need to start rebuilding our lodges today. It needs to begin with a true spirit of brotherhood and cooperation. We need to realize that rules do not make us brothers and that honor, trust, and mutual respect are the things that bind us together. We need to learn our Craft and once again become true Masters of the Royal Art so that we can pass on our age-old traditions to future generations. Grand Lodges cannot mandate by edict that we be brothers and it have any real substance or meaning. It must begin in each and every individual lodge across America. If Freemasonry dies it is our fault for not taking responsibility for our own lodge and expecting our Grand Lodge to solve all our problems for us.

### **Rebuilding Lodges (part 2) by W. Bro. Ken Miller**

As you know, the decline in Masonry in the 1960's was not unique to our order. This same erosion was seen across all fraternal groups. Why did everyone decline? Because of societal changes that happened outside of our walls, not just rot from within (although there is little doubt that has happened).

Just as our lodges came to be governed more and more by code books and less and less by trust in our brothers, outside our walls more and more attorneys found work as our society became increasingly litigious and less trusting of one another. Unlike in the first half of the 20th Century, now we all need to "get it in writing."

As group participation in America waned, we lost our trust in one another. This, in a nutshell, is what Dr. Robert Putnam calls "social capital." Within our walls we have another name for the same thing — brotherhood.

Without social capital, we don't know how to interact with one another with civility, we don't look out for one another, and transactional costs increase (a handshake agreement is cheaper than getting the papers drafted up by the lawyers). Politics becomes shrill and base, our economy becomes more inefficient, crime rises and safety declines. The decline of social capital has become recognized as a profound challenge to quality of life in America.

How does this fit in to Masonry? Two ways: one, we must recognize this broad social force for what it is; and two, we can counteract it perhaps not on a large scale, but at least in our own lives.

First, Masonry has to acknowledge that the 1950's aren't coming back. Our lodge

rooms will never again seat 150 for a stated meeting. Instead of swimming against that tide and amplifying the problem with one day classes, let's embrace our past and look to early lodges as our example.

In the Golden Age of Masonry, when it was a force for improving society, lodges were smaller than today. It worked pretty well for them, so let's take a few pointers from that age. Let's not fight declining social capital by diluting our own social capital. That is, let's not let in thousands of new Masons in one day classes and do nothing but collect their annual dues. That's the path to making Masonry a mailing list.

Let's counteract these forces in our own lodges by allowing our lodges to naturally contract. A small lodge where new petitioners are carefully vetted is a lodge where we all know one another and more likely have trust in one another. In other words, there is social capital. There is brotherhood.