

**Address by the Deputy Metropolitan Grand Master
to
London Grand Rank Association**

30th November 2005

LONDON FREEMASONRY - THE WAY AHEAD

Can I firstly thank you for the invitation to talk to you today. You will appreciate that such a large topic is one which has many aspects - not all of which I will attempt to tackle today - but also attracts many viewpoints, and mine is only one - but maybe one which has some influence on affairs!

The first question to pose may well be: Is there a way ahead? Does London Freemasonry have a future? Unduly gloomy you may think, but certainly a question which needs to be asked in the light of despondency in some quarters about declining membership, increasing costs, etc. I certainly believe that we have a future and, if handled imaginatively, a bright one.

Much of the discussion about freemasonry concentrates on administrative and operational matters - and indeed I will touch on some of those today. They are necessary, but only insofar as smooth administration and well planned meetings and events enable us to concentrate on the really important parts of our masonry - the individual enjoyment and enrichment we get from hearing and participating in the ritual, and the life-long friendships we establish. Our predecessors in London have enjoyed these benefits for nearly 300 years and it is our duty - and privilege - to ensure that our successors can do likewise.

Before going into detail on one or two specific areas, it is worth asking the question; why is London so important in the wider scheme of English and indeed worldwide masonry?

Partly it is a question of antiquity, partly that London is the largest area in English freemasonry and partly that being "in the centre" with so many of us meeting at "headquarters" inevitably puts London masonry at the forefront of the debate about the way ahead.

For make no mistake, brethren, if we get it right in London it will be of inestimable benefit to the whole Craft. If we falter it will inevitably act as a drag on our Constitution generally. In looking at the way ahead for London we must also be very aware of the good things being done elsewhere and not be afraid to import "best practice" from elsewhere. When I came into MetGL just over 2 years ago I was made aware from many directions that "London is different". Yes, there are many special features of London masonry and individual lodges which we should cherish, but masons are not different in London or Lincoln or Liverpool. We all share the same attitudes to life and I will have no hesitation in using ideas which have been shown to work elsewhere. Indeed many of you will know that it is false to draw this artificial distinction between London and the Provinces because many - if not the majority - of you live in the Provinces and either belong to or regularly visit Provincial lodges.

Having said that, what are some of the issues facing London masonry today and how can we set about tackling them?

Membership: the problems associated with falling membership are well documented. Although London as a whole has not suffered any worse reductions in recent years than the Craft as a whole, because of the average size of our lodges and chapters it has had a more immediate impact. We are not alone in this - many Provinces such as East Lancashire suffer from the same small average size of unit and you will have seen at Quarterly Communications in recent years the many lodge closures which they have effected. Within London, many lodges are below the average size of 30 and the issue is getting them to recognise early enough that a potential problem exists.

I cannot stress enough the importance of lodge committees assessing on a regular basis their plans for the future. And please incorporate in these discussions the views of all the lodge

members, young and old. I would not want the future of lodges to be decided by a clique of senior PM's, any more than I would important decisions about the day-to-day running of the lodge, such as time and place of meeting and dining to be decided in this way.

Inevitably, there will continue to be lodge closures and amalgamations in London for some time to come, even if our overall membership stabilises or starts to grow again, because the successful introduction of new members is not spread evenly across our lodges. Amalgamations can work, but need time and effort in preparation and often a 3-way one will work better than 2-way where there is obviously a strong and a weak partner. In all of these deliberations your Group Chairmen and RAC Officers and MetGL itself are there to help. Please use the experience and resources that we have, rather than struggling on alone. That is one of the prime reasons for a separate London identity - that we all pull together to help each other.

VGO's: In the sort of lodge deliberations I have mentioned, as well as in assisting regular two-way communication between MetGL and lodges and chapters, the role of the VGO is vital. He should be assessing the health of a lodge, offering encouragement and assistance – but not in an authoritarian way – and spotting new talent. This latter role is vital as I need to be made aware of those promising masons who can become active officers of MetGL and assist in the running of events for MetGL and their Groups. The stars of the future are there - they need to be unearthed.

Let me assure you that there is no downside in putting forward someone who is as good, or better than you are - quite the contrary. When my term of office concludes, the one essential thing I must do is to recommend as a successor someone who will help to take London masonry further forward, and in better ways than I could have done. Not difficult, you may think!

Mentoring: Having successfully introduced a new candidate to the lodge, how do we look after him? Not too well, I suspect, in many lodges. Brethren, these are our future; you have worked hard to find a good candidate, now please treat him with the respect and friendship he surely deserves. If he came into the lodge knowing only his proposer and seconder make sure he quickly gets to know as many of the brethren as possible. Vary your seating plans at dinner to ensure he has a chance to meet a wide variety of members. Above all plan carefully his steps through the degrees and well beyond. The latter is important, as we do not stop our Masonic education once our raising is completed - or I hope we do not.

A good mentor - not necessarily the proposer or seconder - should help to guide a new member through the early stages but also to point him in the direction of further development right through the offices of the lodge and beyond the Chair. Above all the mentor should be a good listener.

London Identity

This is the nub of the issue, and the reason why MetGL was formed. You will notice that the subject of this talk is "The way ahead for London Masonry" - not just London lodges. For too long London lodges have operated as single entities, running on parallel lines which seldom cross or meet. Of the 1000 lodges which meet in this building how many are aware of the existence of other lodges, regularly visit - even Mother or Daughter lodges -or share work. Very few, I suspect.

In good times this is less of an issue, but in more difficult times mutual defence and support become far more relevant. I am aware of the particular issues which confront London masons, many of whom live far out of Town and for whom dining and travel costs make inviting guests an expensive luxury. But please consider widening the circle of your lodge, even if only once a year. Within Groups, VGO's can often be the catalyst for bringing together lodges which they visit officially - and also for introducing a degree ceremony from one lodge with several candidates to one which has none. Again brethren, ask the question of your VGO or Group and you will be surprised how often help is at hand.

Events

One obvious way in which a London identity can be forged is through support of social events and charities. To date support for social events organised by MetGL has been patchy and we are re-assessing the sort of events which might appeal by sampling brethren in two Groups.

I would hope that the annual Festive Concert held in the Grand Temple and the annual Service of Thanksgiving - held this year at St. Clement Danes - will remain regular features of our calendar, whatever else may happen. I do not want you to support these events out of a sense of duty, but because I feel - and I am sure supported by those who have attended - that they are enjoyable and uplifting occasions, in both cases supported by outstanding musicians. And they are events which your families can enjoy with you.

The other key events in the year are our annual Craft and Chapter meetings, together with the LGR investiture. The latter, which I was privileged to Chair this year was - as always - well supported and proved to be a great day out for all involved. You will all have the dates in your diary for the Craft and Chapter Investitures in the New Year and I would like to see a far higher level of attendance at these high profile events. Brethren, please come yourself and support the SLGR and MetGL appointees and spread the word to your many friends. These are flagship events at which we entertain many senior representatives from our Provincial Lodge and Chapter friends and I would like to see the Grand Temple filled to capacity for our Craft meeting.

Charities

The other crucial area in which London masons can show their togetherness and outstanding generosity - as they have so often in the past - is by supporting our main charitable appeals. I hope you are all aware by now that we are focusing for the next 3 years on the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution (the RMBI).

This is the wish of all the Masonic charity Presidents and can I urge you when considering where to direct your charitable efforts that all of your Masonic donations go to the RMBI. They are doing fantastic work in looking after some 1100 elderly masons and their dependants in 17 homes around the country and the benefits accruing to London from this service currently far outweighs the contributions we are making. The Appeal which was launched at the LGR Investiture last year has so far topped £500k and is now getting into its stride. By raising the proportion of Masonic giving within your total charitable donations to near 80%, by focusing on the RMBI, and by use of regular giving by Gift Aid I have no doubt that our modest target of raising £1m p.a. for each of the next three years will be comfortably exceeded. Particularly if lodges and chapters with large charitable funds can be persuaded to release a large proportion of these funds now for the purpose which the original donors intended.

On the non-masonic charitable front, our presence in the Community remains of vital importance if we are to maintain the acceptable public face of freemasonry. The excellent work initiated by the Freemasonry in the Community week some years ago has been carried through by John Hammill and his team at UGLE together with Information officers throughout the country. We are all part of the larger community and in London we have a unique opportunity to support local good causes where relatively small donations can make a big difference. In this respect can I ask you to focus this aspect of your charitable giving through our own charitable Trust - the London Masonic Charitable Trust. This is a registered charity so donations can be gift aided by individual masons. Most importantly we would like you to suggest where you would like donations to go so that we can make the greatest impact in our local London communities.

I will give you just one example of the sort of support which we can give from the centre which should have a major impact and also give us some beneficial publicity. You may recall that a service was held in St. Paul's Cathedral at the time of Freemasonry in the Community week and we have maintained strong links with the Dean & Chapter since then. We have now been asked if we will consider helping to sponsor an apprentice stonemason at St. Paul's. I, together with Bob Corp-Reader, the Met Charity Steward was given a tour of the Cathedral and its workshops recently by the Dean and Registrar and had the opportunity of meeting the apprentice in question and seeing some of his work. We have as a result agreed to fund his salary to the extent of £10k

for each of the next 3 years, subject to his making satisfactory progress. I hope you will agree that this is just the sort of project in which we as London masons should be involved.

LGRA

One body which I have not so far mentioned and which already provides a strong bond for London masons of standing is of course the LGRA itself. I would like to pay tribute to the work that you do and assure you of our support from MetGL in all your endeavours.

I see our two bodies as being complementary rather than competitive. To the extent that there may have been concern from some of your members at the time of MetGL's inauguration that the special features of London masonry, and not least the London ranking system was at risk, I hope those concerns have been allayed. Active Metropolitan rank is there for a specific ceremonial and administrative purpose and is a focus of London masonry. I have no desire to alter the current ranking system which has served London well over the years. To the extent that Provincial masons understand it, they have grudging admiration for its simplicity - and even envy us!

Summary

I have not endeavoured to cover the waterfront in this brief talk, but merely to touch on some areas which I believe are particularly important for London masons now and in the near future.

I have not, for example, mentioned the importance of the Royal Arch where only around 1 in 3 London masons - as elsewhere in the country - decide to go on and complete their education in pure antient masonry. A figure which is far too low and which will, I hope be improved over time by the recent revisions to the ritual - and by Royal Arch members in lodges being more forthcoming about chapter membership, perhaps encouraging WM's at the festive board to take wine at least once in the year with members of the Royal Arch. Certainly by ensuring that new MM's not only are reminded of the Royal Arch but also by use of the relevant Peterborough Booklet to elaborate on those few words. Again a role for the candidate's mentor.

I have not touched on the importance of choosing your candidate's wisely, of taking time to get to know the candidate well before he is approved and of ensuring that his membership has the full support of his family.

Neither of these matters are unique to London, but given the somewhat precarious position of some London lodges and chapters less care may be taken over candidate selection than is essential in the one case, and less thought given to Royal Arch recruitment than is desirable in the other.

Whither London? I would certainly see a Metropolitan Area in 5 years time with fewer lodges and chapters, even if membership picks up, but I would hope that the individual units, which are after all the foundation of our whole Masonic structure, will be larger; can plan their futures with more certainty; be flexible in arranging their affairs to the best advantage of their members; feel more a part London masonry as a whole; have members with a deeper awareness of Masonry's wider and more spiritual aspects; and are continuing to contribute generously in money and time to both Masonic charities and their local communities.

This is by no means an unattainable wish list, but something that can and must be achieved if future generations are to enjoy the same rights and privileges which we have done. Incidentally, it will also ensure that Metropolitan Grand Lodge - and the London Grand Rank Association - are the thriving and successful organisations we all wish them to be.

RJ Race *DL*

Dep. Met. GM

30th November 2005