

Introduction

In this article, we will examine just a few of the questions, which are often asked, about our Ancient Craft. We do not pretend to attempt to answer all of your questions or to explore Freemasonry in a great amount of detail. Freemasonry has existed for hundreds of years now and to even try to cover its many facets in a few brief paragraphs would clearly be impossible. Hopefully, however, we will provide answers to some of the questions you may have wanted to ask and will stimulate other questions you may wish to raise later.

What is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is the world's oldest and largest secular, fraternal and charitable society and has several million members spread throughout the world. It is a universal society of men who seek to improve themselves through their association with one another and their families. Freemasonry promotes the basic precepts of Truth, Morality and Brotherly Love. It brings good men together for fellowship and the promotion of integrity and good citizenship. It encourages charitable activity and social awareness and strives, through its teachings, to uplift its members and assist them in their efforts to promote high moral standards, to live decent lives and to conduct themselves to the benefit of others.

No Freemason is ever asked to perform any task or take any oath which may conflict with his duties to his God, his family or as a citizen. Freemasonry is not a religion, but it demands that every member believes in a power greater than man. It does not focus solely on charity, but strongly promotes charitable activities and encourages members to assist those less fortunate than themselves. It is certainly not politically motivated, but it expects its members to play a meaningful role in society.

In simplest terms, Freemasonry's aim is to improve the world we live in by uplifting the moral and spiritual standards of the men living in it.

Where did Freemasonry Originate?

Freemasonry is many centuries old and scholars do not agree about precisely where and when it began. The most commonly accepted theory is that the origins of modern Freemasonry reach back to medieval times when the great cathedrals of Europe were built. The stonemasons who created these awe-inspiring Gothic structures formed craft guilds to protect the secrets of their trade, to help one another and to pass on their knowledge to worthy apprentices.

In 17th century England, these guilds began accepting honorary members, men of learning and position. These new members were not working stonemasons or even associated with the building trades. As “accepted Masons” they eventually developed into a separate organisation. They were now referred to as Free and Accepted masons, this forming the basis of Freemasonry. The earliest recorded “making” of a Freemason was in 1646, being that of one Elias Ashmole, while formally organised Freemasonry, as we know it today, began with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717.

In 1772, the Dutch introduced Freemasonry to South Africa and Lodge de Goede Hoop was established in Cape Town. The Lodge is still operating today and is the Mother Lodge for all local Freemasonry. The Lodge buildings were established over 200 years ago and are situated alongside the Houses of Parliament. The Lodge itself has played a leading role in the Cape’s history and its past members include an impressive list of eminent citizens.

Is Freemasonry a Secret Society?

In recent times, one of the main challenges faced by the Order has been to dispel the impression it has created about itself as being a Secret Society. It most certainly is not! The reality is that the rules and aims of Freemasonry are available to the public, its meeting places are well known and its members are encouraged to speak about Freemasonry. Many books have been written about Freemasonry and you are sure to find some at your local bookshop or library. Many members wear distinctive Masonic rings or lapel pins to show their pride in being part of this ancient and honourable fraternity.

Traditionally, Freemasonry has not advertised itself or drawn attention to its good works and this, in itself, has contributed to some of the suspicion aroused. You will observe, however, that this is changing and, indeed, this pamphlet is an example of a more open approach. The problem with being low key is that one encourages speculation – and it is a sad indictment of modern society that such speculation is invariably negative. Freemasonry clearly needs to be better promoted.

It is true that there are means which enable members to recognise one another as Freemasons, but this is hardly an unusual occurrence in modern society. After all, we have pin numbers at our banks, membership numbers at our clubs and fingerprints are recorded for our ID documents. Proving that people are who they claim to be is a common challenge – and Freemasonry is no different.

Freemasonry does not publicise the content of the ceremonies for its various degrees, although you could certainly read about them if you chose to. Frankly, though, you should avoid the research. Each degree is a unique and unforgettable experience, greatly enhanced by the candidate not knowing what to expect. This does, of course, require a level of trust, but you are assured that our ceremonies are extremely enlightening and are most certainly not humiliating or offensive in any way whatsoever.

What Happens at Masonic Meetings?

The Grand Lodge of South Africa is sub-divided into 5 Divisions, each comprising several Lodges. Individual Freemasons belong to these Lodges. Initially, new members will join a single Lodge but, in time, they may join other Lodges or side degrees allied to the Craft.

Lodges have 2 formal meetings a month - the Board of Management and the Ceremonial Working. At the Board of Management, business issues related to the effective running of the Lodge are discussed, including charitable functions, social events, finance and planned Ceremonial workings.

At the Ceremonial workings, the Lodge confers basic degrees on candidates or installs a new Master. It is also common practice to have lectures and discussions on various Masonic topics and most Lodges cater for Ladies' nights where the members' partners are included in formal Lodge activities.

The 3 basic degrees of Freemasonry are the Apprentice (1st degree), Fellowcraft (2nd degree) and Master Mason (3rd

degree) and these are conferred at 3 separate meetings over a period of several months. The solemn process is an enlightening and interesting experience for the candidate and, in between meetings, he is given further instruction concerning the meaning of the ritualistic ceremony in which he has participated. He may also be given the opportunity to memorise a few key passages from the ritual, so that he may participate more fully in future workings.

The Masonic ritual dramatises its philosophy of the importance of a moral life. It uses the tools of ancient stonemasons as symbols to teach such ideals. A Mason promises to build his life and character with the same care and precision that stonemasons used to build great Cathedrals so many years ago.

It is also common practice for members to visit other Lodges and this enables them to expand their sphere of contacts and to learn more about the Order. At the end of all meetings, the members partake in light refreshment, which provides a platform for getting to know other members better and to discuss issues of common interest. It is worth noting, however, that any discussion on potentially controversial topics, such as politics or religion, is forbidden at Lodge functions.

What Sort of Man is Suited to Freemasonry?

According to its own rules, Freemasonry accepts “Free men of good repute”. Clearly, however, we need to explore this in a little more detail as there are 2 issues to be addressed here. We first need to define what Freemasonry sets as its basic requirements and we then need to examine the type of man who would want to associate himself with us and is likely to derive real benefit from our Order.

To be a Freemason, a man has to believe in a Supreme Being and our Order welcomes good men of all religious persuasions. It must be stressed, however, that we do not accept atheists, men with a criminal record or unrehabilitated insolvents. If you are married, you must have your wife’s support, as Freemasonry strongly believes that a man’s family is more important to him than the Order.

The type of man, which Freemasonry is most likely to appeal to, tends to be a more subjective issue. He will want to improve himself and to be associated with men who are seriously endeavoring to live better lives. He will be stimulated by helping others and will be striving for inner fulfillment. He may be attracted to the historical aspects of the Order, enjoy the active participation in charitable efforts or be fascinated by debates on the deeper meaning of symbolism. Above all, he will want to contribute. If he expected to gain material benefits as a result of joining the Order, he is likely to be disappointed.

Who, for example, have been Freemasons?

Freemasonry has attracted many highly respected men from throughout society.

Included are Sir Winston Churchill, American Presidents such as George Washington, both Roosevelts and Gerald Ford, Simon Bolivar, King George VI, Kings Edward VII and VIII and similar men. Literary giants include Robert Burns, Rudyard Kipling, Alexander Pushkin, Mark

Twain, Johann Goethe and Sir Walter Scott; composers include Beethoven, Mozart, Sibelius and Sousa; top sportsmen include Jack Dempsey and Arnold Palmer and explorers include the likes of John Glenn, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Buzz Aldrin, Sir Ernest Shackleton and Richard Byrd. The list is extensive and several, such as the actor, Ernest Borgnine, have achieved high Masonic status.

It is also worth noting that a number of religious leaders have been active Freemasons, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sir Israel Brodie, who was Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, and such Islamic leaders as the 3rd Aga Khan.

South African Freemasons include Cecil John Rhodes, CJ Langenhoven, Piet Retief, Louis Thibault, General Louis Botha and Charles Bell, after whom Bellville was named. The list of famous Masons is extensive and well illustrates the diversity of the personalities who may be attracted to our Order.

How does Freemasonry Relate to Religion?

Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. While it demands that its members believe in a Supreme Being, it provides no system of faith. The names used for the Supreme Being enable men of different faith to join in prayer (to God as each sees Him) without the terms of the prayer causing dissension among them. Freemasons meet in common respect for the Supreme Being as He remains Supreme in each of their religions. Freemasonry has no desire to combine religions, but supports all religions and encourages its members to actively support their personal beliefs.

As the past few years have seen a number of unfortunate misinterpretations between the Church and Freemasonry, it is important that you fully understand Freemasonry's position on this issue. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that Freemasonry, indeed, lacks the basic elements of a religion: it has no theological doctrine and, by forbidding religious discussion at its meetings will not allow a Masonic theological doctrine to develop; it offers no sacraments and it does not claim to lead to salvation by works, by secret knowledge or by any other means.

Far from being indifferent too or in conflict with religion, without interfering in religious practice, Freemasonry expects each member to follow his own faith, and to place above all other duties his duty to God by whatever name He is known to him. Its moral teachings are acceptable to all religions.

How does Freemasonry provide Charity?

From its earliest days, Freemasonry has been involved in charitable activities and has provided support for many worthy causes, including widows and orphans of Freemasons, their families and friends. Grants, donations and active support have been provided to Masonic and non-Masonic charities alike.

Locally, we own Masonic Homes for Seniors and for Quadriplegics, and we run such events as our annual Masonic Spring Ball, which raise substantial funds towards these projects. We also actively participate at public events such as the Maynardville Carnival and our individual Lodges contribute to a range of needy charities including hospitals, disadvantaged children, the handicapped and the elderly.

Internationally, Freemasonry has earned a great deal of respect for its charitable contributions. Many of the Grand Lodges have Homes, Hospitals or similar facilities, while the United States Freemasons, for example, donate over 2 million dollars a day to charity.

What would Freemasonry expect from Me?

On joining a Lodge, you would be expected to regularly attend it's monthly Board of Management and Ceremonial workings and will be encouraged to participate in occasional visits to other Lodges. Your Lodge is likely to have social events and would include you in their charitable activities. In many cases, activities will include wives and families. You will be encouraged to study the rituals and to prepare yourself to participate in them. As far as activities are concerned, these are the total "expectations".

Financially, there will be a joining fee and annual subscription, which will be detailed to you prior to the processing of your application. As with all societies, you would be expected to be in good standing.

As you progress in the Order, you may well find yourself drawn into side degrees or other activities. This is part of the growth process and individual members decide for themselves where their interests lie. You are not, however, compelled to involve yourself more than you are in a position to and would have to judge for yourself the extent to which you are able to participate. Freemasonry really does have a great deal to offer and some of the additional activities can be extremely rewarding.

How do I become a Freemason?

If you meet the criteria that Freemasonry has specified and are satisfied that you would like to be a Freemason, You APPLY to join our Order. The principle here is an important one. While you have, hopefully, been given all the information you need on which to base your decision and may be considered an ideal candidate, you are unlikely to be asked to join. You may well be encouraged to do so by men who know you well, but it is a Masonic principle that new members join us of their own free will and we would be most concerned if you had been persuaded to do so against your own judgement.

If you are interested in joining us, Tell us. Who knows, it could be the first real step of your Masonic career and could open the door to the manifold blessings offered by our Ancient and Honourable Order.

Freemasonry – A better World, through a better Man!