

Masonic Charity

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The full article has been condensed to give the reader an idea of how Masonic Charity developed from its earliest beginnings and concludes with an insightful look at the question "Is there a future for Masonic Charity?" – Editor

Freemasonry, we say, is founded upon three Grand Principles – Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. It is with the second of these Grand Principles – Relief – that this Prestonian Lecture is concerned. In simple terms our early brethren understood Relief to mean the alleviating of the suffering of a brother, or the dependents of a deceased brother, by giving money or sustenance until circumstances improved. In modern terms we see Relief in its wider context of Charity, that is not simply providing money to relieve distress but actually caring and giving of our time and talents in the service of our communities as a whole and not just to our brethren and their dependents.

The practice of Charity has been so inextricably linked with our Institution that I would claim it as a landmark of the Order. If we define a landmark as being something in Freemasonry which if it were removed its removal would materially alter the essence of our Institution then Charity is certainly a landmark. Without the second of its three Grand Principles Freemasonry would be a different organization. That Charity was important is clearly shown in our earliest surviving documents. The manuscript Old Charges or Gothic Constitutions are a marvelous series of documents comprising a 'history' of the mason craft followed by a series of Charœ,~es in which were outlined a masons' duties to his God, his master, his family and society in general. It was from these Old Charges that the Rev. Dr. James Anderson 'digested' the Antient Charges which prefaced the 1723 Book of Constitutions, and all of its subsequent editions. Over one hundred versions of the manuscript Old Charges survive today, dating from circa 1390 to the mid-18th century. The earliest versions are clearly operative in character but the later have a much greater speculative content. In operative terms the Old Charges enjoined the stone masons to assist a

strange mason with up to two weeks' work and lodging. In speculative terms they enjoined a mason to succor the needy and act with Charity towards all mankind.

This is not the occasion to discuss the origins of Freemasonry but it has been suggested in recent years that charity might have been one of the reasons for the founding of Freemasonry. Box Clubs were known to have existed in many trades and crafts in the 1600s. Members of a particular trade or craft would meet on a regular basis in a local inn or tavern to socialize and discuss the affairs of their craft.

Prominent at their meetings would be a box into which the members would pay their dues at each meeting and into which would go the fines levied on members for misdemeanors occurring during their enjoyment of 'innocent mirth' at their meetings. If a member became sick, had an accident or was prevented from working for lawful reasons he could claim sustenance from 'the box' until he recovered his health or regained employment. Many of these box clubs are known to have had primitive entrance ceremonies and to have begun to admit as members men who had no connection with the particular trade or craft. It has been suggested that Freemasonry may have developed out of just such a series of box clubs originally limited to operative stonemasons.

Whatever its origins, it is certain that even after the formation of the premier Grand Lodge of England in 1717, Masonic Charity was carried out on a very casual basis, and that casual relief of necessity has continued to be an important function of Masonic Charity.

In 1725 the Immediate Past Grand Master, proposed that Grand Lodge should set up a central Fund of Charity to provide financial relief to brethren or their dependents. A Committee was set up to investigate ways and means and like many good Masonic Committees it met regularly, argued long, presented an unworkable scheme and was sent back to think again. Their new scheme was accepted in 1727 and resulted in the formation of the Committee of Charity. To be comprised of the Grand Officers (then only the Grand Master, his Deputy, the Grand Wardens and Past Grand Masters) and the Masters of Lodges 'within the Cities of London and Westminster' the Committee of Charity was empowered to receive and deliberate on petitions and to grant assistance of up to five guineas to each case. If they believed that a case warranted greater assistance it could be recommended to a meeting of the Grand Lodge itself. Lodges were invited to make voluntary contributions to the Charity Fund and a Treasurer-to become the Grand Treasurer in 1727 – was appointed to receive the money, invest it, make disbursements and keep accounts which had to be submitted to the Grand Lodge for approval.

The Charity Fund proved popular and throughout the 18th century much time was taken at Grand Lodge meetings in calling over the list of lodges to enable their Masters to pay over to the Treasurer their contributions to the Fund. Contributions from lodges overseas occasionally caused problems for the Treasurer. Usually paid in gold it would have to be assayed, which occasionally revealed that the gold was not as pure as it should be. The Treasurer's accounts

would include on the credit side the supposed value of the gold and on the debit side a deduction for 'short gold' to the difference between the supposed and actual value of the gold.

In the late 1730s the work of the Committee of Charity was greatly extended. Compared with today's meetings of the Grand Lodge those in the 18th century were much less structured and all manner of subjects and proposals would be raised from the floor and complaints and quarrels would be aired at great length. Not surprisingly this led to lengthy meetings and on a number of occasions the minutes end with the statement that 'the hour being late the Grand Lodge was adjourned without the business being completed'. The Committee of Charity having proved its worth began to be used as a general committee of the Grand Lodge having referred to it for investigation, report and recommendation, complaints, discipline cases, proposed amendments to the Book of Constitutions and many other matters of general policy. In effect from the late 1730s to the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813 the Committee of Charity had a dual function of looking after Grand Lodge's charitable affairs and being a forerunner of the Board of General Purposes and its Committees.

Is there a future for Masonic Charity? In what seems to be an increasingly selfish and materialistic world constantly at the mercy of economic forces over which no one seems to have any real control I think that the answer to that question is not only a resounding YES, but a yes carrying with it the implication that we will have to dig even deeper into our pockets.

One thing that is often forgotten is that charity in its widest sense is more than just collecting and disbursing money. It is also the giving of time and talents selflessly in service of the community. One of the things that came through in the evidence to the Bagnall Committee in the early 1970s was the unquantifiable evidence of lodges, groups of brethren and individuals adopting the local hospital, children's or old people's home and in addition to providing money and equipment doing the simple things such as providing a new face, a new ear to hear someone's troubles and in many cases providing the only social life that long stay residents ever have.

That non-financial aspect of Charity is one which I think that we will see emphasized more and more in the future.

Over the last decade Freemasonry has come under considerable attack from outside. Many brethren have asked how they can help to counter the misinformation peddled by the media. Surely the best counteraction is to show by example that we live by those principles and tenets which we obligate ourselves to uphold as we go through the three ceremonies to become Master Masons. By showing the world that we do not just give lip-service but put into practice those three Grand Principles – and in particular, the greatest of all: CHARITY.

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