

PGMs Address - Thursday 4th April 2024.

Having already welcomed our distinguished guests from other Provinces, I now welcome you all brethren to our Provincial meeting. It is a special day for those brethren whom I have appointed or promoted in Provincial Grand Lodge. Congratulations to you all, it is your day, please enjoy it. Enjoy your new rank and remember that it is not just a reward for your past services to your Lodge and the Province but an earnest of what we trust you are going to contribute in the future.

I must thank the outgoing active Provincial team, you have all done a fantastic job. Your support at Provincial Fraternal visits and Installations last year and your enthusiastic support for our Membership Challenge visits this year has been much appreciated. Your company has made our Team outings very enjoyable both for us and for the Lodges we have visited. A special thanks to two team members standing down after several years distinguished service. W.Bro Richard Winter, thank you for your four years of dedicated service as Assistant Provincial Grand Master and W.Bo Colin Snook, who standing down after twelve years as Provincial Tyler.

On 24th April at the annual investiture at Grand Lodge in London the following Somerset brethren will be honoured by the Grand Master.

First appointments - W.Bro Russ Woodland to PGJD and W.Brothers Garry Sharp and Keith Baker to PAGDC.

Promotions - W.Bro Malcolm Bell to Past SGD and W.Bro John Peters to Past Junior Grand Deacon.

The following day in Supreme Grand Chapter - The First Grand Principal will appoint E Companion David Maddern as an Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies and promote E Companion Neil Hurcum to the rank of Past Grand Sword Bearer. We congratulate you all brethren and Companions.

Brethren, on a sad note I would think we all know at least one brother who's name appears on the In Memoriam list in the summons for this meeting. Over the last twelve months we have lost many dear friends. It would be remiss of me not to remember two in particular R.W.Bro Stanley Hopkins, Provincial Grand Master from 1990 to 2002. He was a visionary leader who helped bring Freemasonry into the 21st century. Also V.W.Bro Peter Layzell Deputy, PGM from 2001 to 2010, another wonderful mason who did a great deal for the Province and was a good friend to many of us.

When visiting your lodges many of you have asked me 'how is David Medlock'? He is as well as can be expected in the circumstances brethren, he has asked me to relay this message to you. Some of you will have read this in yesterday's edition of Midweek Mason.

Brethren, My children and I have been touched by the hundreds of cards, notes, emails and even flowers over the period since my wife Jacky passed away in a tragic road traffic accident in January. Your kind thoughts have helped us through our bereavement. We now have to move forward without the heart of our family and despite the pain, continue as she would have wanted.

I will be starting back slowly into Masonic life during April and look forward to once again enjoying your company and your continuing support.

With grateful thanks David

In my address to you last year centred on the fall in membership we have experienced in the Province over many years, an average annual loss of 70 members every year for the last fifteen years. In 2023 the loss was down to 50, below average but still a significant loss.

I suggested that in order to halt the decline we have to make sure that our Lodges are welcoming and happy places. Lodge meetings should be an occasion we look forward to, with an enjoyable Festive Board in the company of friends. (six minutes) Using the new Members' Pathway, Lodges should make a plan for the future that their members could all buy into. At heart, these plans are simple. Involve every member, agree a realistic officer progression for the next five years, raise the profile of the Lodge on social media and the Provincial website and engage with other organisations in your local community. Last but by no means least, make sure that everyone enjoys the journey.

I also spoke of the Pro Grand Master's strategy for Freemasonry, with its three pillars of Thriving Membership, Coherent organisation and Community engagement. The membership Challenge, to turn the gradual decline we have seen in our numbers into a positive growth of 1% a year in membership by the end of this year.

The strategy also includes the Royal Arch, the journey from initiation to exaltation. One journey one organisation. Every Master Mason now receives the Royal Arch Discover More brochure when presented with his Grand Lodge certificate.

Our Provincial strategy is aligned exactly with that of the Pro Grand Master and Grand Lodge. Everything I said last year is still very relevant but we need to step up a gear brethren. Since the beginning of this year, the Deputy Provincial Grand Master, the Assistant Provincial Grand Masters and I have been visiting Lodges to discuss the Membership Challenge. To impress upon all the brethren the seriousness of the problem and to have a conversation about how we might turn things round. This has been quite a radical change for us and for the Lodges. The Membership Challenge visits have meant that we can no longer attend Lodge installations and I am grateful to the Provincial Wardens and Grand Officers who are stepping in to represent me on those occasions.

So far we have made twenty six Membership Challenge visits to Lodges and eleven to Royal Arch Chapters. We have been greeted with great courtesy and our presentations seem to have struck a chord with a lot of members. One thing that has impressed us is the readiness of Brethren and Companions of all levels of experience, who are willing to join in the debate and provide interesting and constructive ideas about how their Lodge or Chapter can move forward. We can see that there is a pool of talent in every Lodge and Chapter that could, if properly organised, propel it forward.

Lodges must have not only a membership officer but also a membership team around him, comprised of that pool of talent we know is there. Every brother in the Lodge is responsible for maintaining its membership. It isn't acceptable to say "I'm over seventy and I'm Billy no mates, the young guys all have friends they can bring in new members." 45% of our members are over seventy, only 8% are under 40. It is unrealistic and indeed selfish to expect that 8% to provide all our new members. No matter what our age, we are all ambassadors for Freemasonry.

As your Grand Superintendent I am encouraging Chapters to, appoint a Mentor, share the ritual, improve the quality of ceremonies, and keep all Companions engaged. I am pleased to say that a number of Chapters are now adopting, or seriously considering adopting The Savage Ritual. It provides a much better and more understandable

experience for the candidate and all Companions. The Royal Arch like the Craft has to be enjoyable for all.

Every Lodge and Chapter will have a Membership Challenge visit this year, we plan follow up action with a further visit to every Lodge and Chapter next year to evaluate how Lodges and Chapters are implementing plans to improve membership and retain members. As always brethren the Province is here to help when required.

Moving from the health of our Lodges and Chapters to personal health, according to NHS England Cancer Registration Statistics - 2020, prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among men over the age of 45. Prostate cancer is responsible for 12,000 male deaths every year in England. Yet there is no NHS screening program for prostate cancer, nor is there a simple, accurate test for the disease. Perhaps that is due to the age old problem of men not wanting to “make a fuss” about a possible health problem. The only option available to most men who think they may have the disease or who just want the reassurance of knowing they haven’t got it, is the PSA or Prostate Specific Antigen test.

If you have tried to get a PSA test via your GP then you will be aware that it isn’t easy. Now in common with quite a few other Provinces we have decided to offer our members and their families the option of taking a simple PSA test. Adrian Robson, the Provincial Almoner has organised two testing events, the first Keynsham Masonic Hall on Saturday 19th October and the second at Taunton Masonic Hall on Saturday 16th November. Testing will be conducted by the Graham Fulford Charitable Trust. Full details are include in the leaflet that was placed on your chair. All this information will also be available on the Provincial website after this meeting. Please consider the information carefully, if you decide you would like to take the test follow the instructions on how to book in on-line.

There are many thanks that I need to make today Brethren, this meeting takes a great deal of organisation. My thanks go to the Provincial Grand Secretary, Mike Greedy and his Team, the Provincial Grand DC Garry Sharp and his team, W.Bro Richard Dredge and his team, the management and staff here at the Webbington Hotel last but by no means least, W.Bro Toby Hammond for providing the sound system. All are working together in organising and running this this meeting and the lunch that will follow and in ensuring we have an enjoyable and successful day. If I’ve missed anyone out, it’s the Provincial Secretary’s fault and I apologise on his behalf.

Finally Brethren I thank you all for coming today and helping to make this Provincial meeting a success, I look forward to your company in the bar and at lunch. To those of you who can’t stay, safe journey home. I look forward to being with you in your Lodges and Chapters in the coming twelve months.

Ray Guthrie
PGM 4th April 2024