
THE MASONIC CAFÉ - CONNECTING AND RECONNECTING

(or 'We've been closed for 2 years, Now what do we do?')

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Origin:

Universally, freemasons have been gathering, talking, sharing, and building our Craft into the beautiful thing that we now enjoy for centuries. We know, for example, that in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, speculative freemasons had gathered to promote a shared system of moral values and support each other in their practice. Historically, the fortunes of Freemasonry have ebbed and flowed for a variety of reasons. The restrictions on Freemasonry in the covid-19 world were indicative of that. The restrictions imposed on the world impacted the Craft globally. As these restrictions relaxed, brethren, including myself, started to meet in small groups.

In the winter of 2022, I was honoured to be invited to sit in with one of six such groups in Kamloops. It was comprised of some wise, veteran brethren, namely MW Bro. Jack Harper, Ill Bro Marvin Munro 33°, RW Bro. Jon Broadberry, RW Bro. Dave Costain and RW Bro. Don Ogilvie. This incredible group of men met quietly at the local "Timmy's" every Saturday afternoon for two hours. The conversations, inevitably, had a masonic theme. They proved to be most insightful and thought provoking. As time progressed, other brethren would stop by to join these sessions. It was not long until we found that that venue was restrictive both in space and privacy. As I am the property manager for the Kamloops Masonic Temple Association, I suggested that we move into the banquet area of the Kamloops Masonic Centre. From there, our coffee gathering grew in structure and scope.

Rationale:

As regular lodge meetings resumed, we found that attendance was low. To further complicate things, I found the overall atmosphere was off. It was as if our beloved fraternity had lost its rhythm. We were not in lock step and, rather than brothers, we were more like 'work friends'. We had to try and get back to our pre-pandemic closeness. Just before I went into the east in Kamloops Lodge No. 10 in May 2022, I began a series of three surveys of our lodge members. The intention was to ask our brethren what they were expecting from their lodge, what they were getting from their lodge, and how their masonic experience could be improved. Overwhelmingly, 'fraternity' and the social aspect of lodge life was identified as the primary motivator for their lodge involvement. Because of the covid-19 induced isolation, I felt that lodges could benefit from returning

to the roots of Freemasonry. A kind of reboot, reacquainting ourselves with our Craft and the brethren that make it so special. As the early lodges began by meeting over food and drink, and evolved into what we enjoy now, it seemed like a strong starting point. So, turning a casual, informal coffee gathering into an opportunity for social interaction, thoughtful discussion and masonic education seemed like a tangible way of getting back in lock step. In fact, the education plan for Kamloops Lodge is based on a similar idea and is expertly executed by the education officer, W Bro. Michael Mehta.

How it works:

In September, 2022, I started emailing weekly messages to the 150+ members of both Kamloops lodges, inviting all to what we had started calling a 'Masonic Café'. The invitations included reminders of the varying days each week (due to that venue's varied usage and members' availability). Each email ended with a question as a potential point of conversation. Masonic Café lasts roughly two hours in the afternoon and is open to all freemasons, regardless of rank. We also welcome visiting brethren, seekers and guests. We have seen more than one brother bring his son for coffee and conversation.

All the questions posed have a similar theme, 'action', as were the questions posed during the masonic education portion Kamloops Lodge meetings. The difference was that the 'masonic education' questions deal more specifically with degree work and the foundations specific to the Craft. The intention is to reinforce the basic teachings of the order and promote harmony in lodge. The "Masonic Café" questions can be a little more controversial (but not inflammatory), occasionally touching on possibly religious or political aspects that touch us as individuals, as freemasons, and as community members. The idea behind the 'action' oriented theme is that we should treat Freemasonry as a verb. Freemasons are who we are, but Freemasonry is what we do. Privately and publicly, we should be the personification of the morality and philosophy of our beautiful Craft. In both instances, the questions are the answers. Rather than finding a correct response, the questions are to encourage the brethren to ponder. Each will find his own path to the light.

Framework:

There must be a commitment to making this work. There are schedules to be made, reminders (including the 'question') promulgated, coffee and tea, &c. prepared and our guests welcomed. It works best, thus far, when a brother or two take on the responsibility of hosting or shepherding the gatherings. The weekly 'question' is generally asked early in the process, but sometimes not at all if the conversation has started moving organically in a different direction. This conversation is gently facilitated by the 'host', in an effort to maintain decorum and include every brother who wishes a participation in the flow of ideas. Aside from the question, there is no agenda, no attendance, and no minutes taken. Everyone has an opportunity to be heard. We actively insist on respectful conversation, even when matter become a little contentious. I have observed though agreement on issues is not always achieved, our brethren have acted with respect and civility. To quote many lodge secretaries over the years, 'peace and harmony prevailed.'

The group size started as five or six participants. It is now common to have twelve or more attendees. We have had close to twenty people on some occasions. After weekly meeting for over a year, I have found that the highest quality conversations take place when the number of participants is between five and twelve. There are no 'awkward' lulls in the flow, and every brother has opportunity to speak his mind. When more than twelve, some of the shy or less confident participants may not share their views. Also, with a larger group, side conversations develop that may distract from the flow. We have been considering ways of adapting the Masonic Café to maximize quality and participation should the numbers become too high. What an awesome problem to have.

The Take Aways

Since a small coffee group evolved into the Masonic Café there have been some noticeable changes in Freemasonry in Kamloops. Firstly, the spirit of fraternity in each lodge, as well as between the two lodges has grown. We are much more the 'Kamloops Masonic Family', rather than simply two individual lodges operating in the same city. That kinship plays directly into the sense of fraternity that our brethren crave.

On the lodge level, I find that the brethren feel more engaged in the masonic experience. They feel that they have a voice and much more willing to participate. I see that some of our senior members, who may not travel to evening meetings, are able to venture to the 'Masonic Café' and get their Freemasonry there. Those veterans are a brain trust for our organization that might otherwise be lost to our newest brethren. Knowledge not shared is wasted. The Masonic Café invariably provides masonic education to everyone who attends by its nature of sharing thoughts, ideas, viewpoints and most importantly the message of Freemasonry.

The Masonic Café is also a great way to engage seekers to the Craft. In conjunction with grand lodge initiatives, such as the 'Six Steps to Initiation' programme, it affords seekers an opportunity to see freemasons being freemasons. It also allows the brethren to get to know their potential lodge members. It also opens to the door to our sojourning brethren, who may be traveling through at a time when there is no meeting.

Conclusion:

The Masonic Café continues to evolve. Many of our newer freemasons in Kamloops think that the Masonic Café has always existed. In many ways, they are right. They have a sense of ownership of it and will keep it moving forward. In doing that, they will keep the Craft moving forward. I would encourage this kind of 'Café' in every lodge in the district, and even in the jurisdiction. While each lodge has its own culture and personality, we share the same framework. With a bit of effort, the Masonic Café can make each lodge and each lodge member stronger.

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