

G.W.U.

How can we use the digital world to serve Freemasonry?

Where We Are Now

After more than a year of complying with COVID-19 health precautions and the forced closure of Masonic Temples preventing us from meeting together, the issue is no longer IF we should adopt digital technology for our work; rather, it is HOW we should adopt these technologies, and to what extent we should integrate them in our Masonic rituals, practices, and work in the future.

In order to perpetuate Continental Freemasonry in North America, we must adapt and take advantage of this tremendous opportunity to expand Freemasonry in the digital era. Our Masonic forebears learned to thrive in the era of The Enlightenment, and we must do the same in the rapidly evolving world of information technology.

Properly utilized, digital technologies will enable us to hold Lodge meetings with dozens of Brothers and Sisters, and reach hundreds or even thousands of members in a Symposium or Worldwide Joint Convent. We believe that failure to adopt digital technology will only further isolate us from our fellow Masons as health experts warn us about COVID variants that may lead to future outbreaks and shutdowns. Transitioning any activity from a physical space into a virtual one is challenging, and some difficult decisions will need to be made.

2020: The Year to Try New Things

A few years before the COVID-19 Pandemic hit, George Washington Union Lodges began conducting "Virtual Lodge" meetings, in order to allow members who lived 50-100 miles from the Lodge to attend without having to travel. While as many Lodge members as could were physically present in the Temple, we set up a video+audio connection on Zoom to Lodge members who were unable to attend. Instead of being completely absent, the remote members were able to participate, deliver POA's, and stay informed about and contribute to Lodge business. Monitors placed in the East and other spots allowed on-site participants to see the remote members. Video cameras in the Temple allowed the remote participants to view the members in the Temple from different angles. Microphones allowed the remote members to hear the proceedings, and speakers allowed the on-site members to hear the remote participants.

In a traditional setting, when we come to our Temple for a Lodge Meeting, we prepare ourselves to move away from the profane world. There is the ritual preparation and travel before arriving at the door of the Temple where we leave our metals, are greeted by BB:. & SS:., and prepare the Temple. When we begin our work, the unfolding of the Ritual puts every B:. & S:. in unison (physically, mentally, emotionally). The decorum, the solemnity of the Lodge, the gestures, posturing, de-ambulation, all transport us and bind us outside of the profane world.

This experience is not replicated in virtual meetings where attendees simply "sign in."

During the pandemic, our Lodges began to substitute Virtual Meetings in which we replicated the unfolding of a ritual meeting. We adapted our ritual through simplifications because some actions cannot be replicated. For example, there is no de-ambulation, no steps, no posturing. We follow the rules for quorum, and have kept the roles of the WM:., Or:., Sec:., SW:., and JW:. that guide us through the meeting. Over the last year, technology has become an absolute necessity to our Lodges. It has helped us not only to survive, but also to work and thrive. The Virtual Meetings are productive, and help to maintain connections between Brothers and Sisters of the Lodge.

One member shared their perception that, "it is a poor substitute for in-person Lodge meetings." This is very true. And yet, we cannot go back; nothing will ever be the same. Just as in our Lodges, we do not go backwards, we always move forward. Now is the best time to put our words into action by finding new ways to work, support our Lodges, and help our Lodges and our obedience, GWU, to evolve and grow. We must adapt our ritual to the digital world without becoming simply another philosophic club.

New "Hybrid" Model

Virtual Lodge meetings conducted through video conferencing complement regular in-person Lodge meetings. We believe that special events including initiation, passing, raising ceremonies, and installation of officers should be planned for regular in-person Lodge meetings. One of our Lodges has already conducted a blindfold virtually with success. Our Lodges have discussed holding a summer initiation outdoors, in a rural/private setting to coincide with Summer Solstice. Because these events are strong markers in our Masonic journey, as well as the life of a Lodge, it would pose a serious disadvantage if they cannot be held in person. The symbolism the initiation carries, for example, is so powerful that abandoning it would diminish its symbolism and meaning.

Some may also wonder about the *Egregore* of our Virtual Lodges, the power of a virtual Chain of Union. We would respond that the *Egregore* comes from the work we perform together and that our Chain of Union will only become stronger as more of us are able to focus our energy in the same time and space, even though the space is, metaphorically, in our hearts.

Security

Modern online digital security is far more secure and trustworthy than physical paper in a locked room. Any Freemason or Masonic lodge with a need to keep something confidential is better served by placing it in The Cloud with strong encryption than by storing paper in an old style filing cabinet that can be broken into by anyone with physical access or a court order.

There are levels of visibility of documents created within the Lodge, ranging from items which are visible and shared only among specific individuals, to items which are visible only to certain grades and above, to items which are intended for the general (non-Masonic) public. Modern Internet cloud providers can accommodate these different requirements, and do so quite reliably -- reliable as in 99.999% uptime, as well as disallowing unauthorized access to restricted information.

Sharing & Collaboration

The exercise of writing this piece of architecture was completed by working online using screen sharing with other Brothers and Sisters. This has been an interesting opportunity for us to experiment and use digital technology as a group. Online "cloud" apps including Google Drive allows us to share our texts and work simultaneously on projects in a very

effective way. We can see that this could actually change the way we work on questions of study in our Lodges. It will also allow us to pass our archives from one administration to the next seamlessly.

These technologies can also support internal Masonic activities such as collaboration to prepare Masonic Workshops, to host and conduct untied meetings including Officers' Council Meetings, Directors' Meetings, Annual Board Meetings, Intra-Obedience Meetings (current practice with Executive Board meetings). Last November, 2020, when faced with canceling our traditional Obedience-wide Convent, the EB: voted to hold a Virtual Convent which was well attended, and certainly preferable to having to skip a year due to the shut-down of travel. Also, other Administrative Meetings, as well as communication with local or remote members of the Lodge could serve to keep Brothers and Sisters informed and involved in Lodge activities.

We have also successfully conducted personal interviews using Zoom to assess prospective members. We are hopeful that with the appropriate technology, a blindfold test could even be organized and conducted online.

Online video conferencing platforms offer many useful tools:

- Breakout rooms for junior and senior grades
- Multiple hosts and co-hosts to manage connection issues
- Screen sharing and whiteboards for showing boards/icons/symbols ● Moderator in control of speaking
- Ability to have hundreds of participants
- Ability to take notes
- Ability to translate chat
- Ability to have multi-lingual breakout rooms

Another advantage is access to resources for easier research and a more in-depth understanding. The ability to use websites such as L'edifice to get a decent translation within milliseconds is a godsend for an American (English speaking) Continental Freemason. Research has also become global and allows Masons from all corners of the world to share ideas.

Public Education & Recruitment

Public perception of Freemasonry in North America is very different than it is in France. Primarily, it is seen as a religious, very conservative, and old fashioned institution. We, as Continental Freemasons, need to do everything we can to counteract this perception of Freemasonry and educate people about the ever more important values of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity we have inherited from GODF, as well as our gender inclusivity. This is a civil and non-threatening environment that many people would find intriguing. We should also educate/inform about the ways in which society benefits from our efforts to improve ourselves, and society in general.

Therefore, we need to make sure people know A) that we exist, and B) that we are different, by explaining HOW. One main message should be that GWU Lodges are not in competition with our regular brothers, but rather a complementary group with ideals that resonate more with a younger, more diverse, liberal, atheist, gender-inclusive, and technologically-adept society. By reaching out online to a broader audience, we can build our ranks, and collectively become more efficient at promoting our ideals. Some Lodges have occasional open meetings where the general public is invited to get a taste of our activities, to chat with people from all walks of life and get an impression of whether they might be interested in joining. Perhaps there is a special presentation by a Lodge member or honored guest that pertains to Freemasonry and is suitable for the general public. Online outreach is a way to advertise the availability of these special events at a local Lodge. It is important to bring in new members with new ideas, outlooks, and enthusiasm, to replace members who leave the Lodge. Recruiting of new members would be aided by suitable outreach and informative materials that can be made available online. In order for our values to be embraced, we need to be able to make them known.

Summary

Brothers and Sisters who have been initiated, and have had the opportunity to develop as Freemasons, know how difficult it is to maintain our Masonic bonds when we cannot meet in person.

We should be inspired by ways the business world has adapted; video conferencing is now commonly used for training, workshops, education, and marketing, and is seen as more environmentally responsible than physical travel. It can also be used in our Masonic world and become a very effective tool of communication among ourselves and with the profane world. The use of these technologies can make it

easier for profanes to attend Open Workshops, Masonic seminars or conferences on topics of interest to Masons including social and societal issues, ethics, philosophy, and many other topics.

While some have criticized the use of our rituals online during this pandemic, it may be a simplified view of our practice to think that the risk of sharing the Masonic secret with profanes comes from the use of our rituals online. First, we maintain that they are already available to anyone who will take the time to look. Second, we all know that the Masonic secret does not lie in the ritual itself but in the way we are taught to use it.

Freemasonry aims to improve the human being, and technology claims to have the same objective. We realize that certain technological improvements reduce our own intelligence, for example GPS on the smartphone which means that we no longer have to be. The Freemason should ethically question the technological development and influence so that it is at the service of man and not the opposite.

The strength that we have developed in our journey is what holds us together as our bonds are deeply rooted in the fraternity that we have developed in Lodge. The future of Masonic tradition is in embracing the evolving world as it is, and not allowing ourselves to be constrained by traditions of the past.

We have spoken.