

Brethren

It is my privilege to address you as your Provincial Grand Master for, amazingly, the sixth time.

I have already introduced our distinguished guests and I once again warmly welcome them all. The relationship between the neighbouring Provinces remains very strong and is a great source of comfort and support. We build friendships that will remain with us forever. An example of this is that Rt W Bro Mike Sawyer, Past PGM for Bedfordshire is with us today as a lasting friend of this Province. We are also very honoured to have with us Rt W Bro Richard Hone. On behalf of the Province I would thank you for the address that you have just delivered. Your name will be mentioned frequently once we commence our Festival next year and I am so pleased that a lot of our members will now know who we are talking about. Brethren, I would remind you all that we will be launching the 2024 Festival next March. We are currently talking with the MCF to establish the target figure and we are also selecting the team that will run the Festival under the chairmanship of V W Bro Trevor Boswell. This team will be selected so that every centre in the Province has representation.

Let me now update you on the situation with regard to our Provincial headquarters here at Sheaf Close. The centre appears to be enjoyed by the members that meet here and also by our many visitors from around the Province and from farther afield. The centre is profitable and we are building reserves for future maintenance of the building. Despite our financial success, we will not reduce Lodge rents but neither will we consider any increases for the foreseeable future. This will enable us to build those cash reserves so that future maintenance costs will not cause problems. We do, of course, still own the plot of land to the side of the dining area. We have secured planning permissions for various developments of the site and are now in consultation with several parties with regard to the disposal. I am confident that I will be able to make a statement in the very near future regarding this disposal. When it does happen we will be in a position of having a financially stable centre with no debt, and money in the bank.

Grand Lodge has recently been expressing concerns about Masonic buildings generally and it is true that some Provinces are experiencing difficulties. Ageing buildings cause higher maintenance costs and this becomes difficult with a reducing membership. I have looked very carefully at the situation in our Province. There are 22 buildings where Lodges meet. Of these, one is a Town Hall, two are Village Halls, and two are schools. There is one inn, one Working Men's Club and one stately home – courtesy of Lord Northampton. All of these are hired on a lodge meeting basis. Of the remaining 14, Corby, Peterborough, Towcester, Northampton and Huntingdon are modern buildings that are efficiently managed and financially stable. The other nine are older buildings but all are well maintained, well managed and also financially stable. There is a building fund of almost £80,000 provided by the Lodges and held by the Province which is available to provide interest free loans for any maintenance work with repayment periods to suit most situations that may arise. We therefore have no building concerns for the foreseeable future.

There is a significant happening within this Province that demands a mention during this address. Some months ago two of our members, fired with enthusiasm after reading about some activities in Manchester, decided that there was a need for something similar in our Province. W Bros. Ged Dempsey and Mike Pescod registered a charity called 3 Pillar Feeding The Homeless Trust. Twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays these two brethren plus a host of assistants – Masonic and non-Masonic - attend in Peterborough and provide food for needy homeless people. They also provide clothing and bedding and currently there are around 60 poor souls who receive support on each occasion. Sometimes our people are also able to assist these unfortunates to find their way back into mainstream society. At present new equipment is being acquired and will be decorated with Masonic symbols and words such as Freemasonry in the Community and Freemasonry Cares, so that the general public are aware of who is carrying out this essential work. Based on the experience gained in Peterborough we are hoping to extend the operation into other towns in the Province. This is a clear example of how Freemasonry does care and proudly shows the world a side of Freemasonry that may not have been previously known. I ask all of you to support this initiative both with funds and with your time if you are able to help. I have spoken with V W Bro James Newman, Deputy President of the MCF and he considers this a very important project and has indicated that we could receive support from the MCF if it is ever required.

You are all aware that this is the very special Tercentenary Year for Freemasonry and we have already all enjoyed the first of our three major events. On 25th March over 1200 members of this province and their partners and guests assembled in the Grand Temple in Great Queen Street and received a fascinating talk from Diane Clements about the building – why it was built, how it was funded and then some wonderful explanations of the decorations and symbols on the walls and ceilings. After lunch we then held a second degree ceremony with over 900 Northants & Hunts Masons present to pass Bro Luke Howard. Twenty seven current Masters in the Province took part in that ceremony with almost perfect ritual being performed. The whole occasion was enjoyed immensely and made us all very proud. One of the highlights for me was that Rt W Bro Brian Smith, now 85 years of age, and his wife Joy were present. It is twenty years since Brian stood down as PGM of this Province and became the President of the RMBI. As he and Joy have moved to Henley to be near to their daughter many of our current members may not know him. Those of us that do, certainly remember him with the greatest affection – no one more than me. He has since written to me to say how proud he is of our Province. In just a few weeks our second event will take place – a parade in full regalia through the streets of Peterborough culminating at the cathedral to be greeted by the Dean for Evensong. I believe that following the success of our Gt Queen Street visit, many will come and support the Peterborough event. We then conclude this celebratory year with a Grand Banquet at Wicksteed Park, Kettering in October.

Brethren, it is all very well talking about our first class buildings and then about our very well supported Tercentenary events, but we also need to acknowledge the fact that Freemasonry is facing massive problems that need to be urgently addressed. I refer, of course, to the serious reductions in membership numbers. In the last 10 years, some Provinces in the UK have suffered membership reductions of up to 20%. We have not experienced anything like that figure and it would appear that the shire Provinces are holding up better than the more urban ones. Nevertheless, we have to realise that unless we do something drastic, then in thirty years' time, Freemasonry will have ceased to exist – certainly in anything like its current format. We are the generation of Masons that are faced with the problem and it is us that must remedy the situation. We will not be the generation of Masons who preside over the death throes of this important institution. Quite simply brethren, we have to recruit more members. It is not impossible. The scouting movement suffered years of decline but addressed the problem and now they are again thriving, with membership waiting lists. In our Province we do bring in a good number of quality Initiates but we need to increase that number. We have much to support us currently with the openness of the Tercentenary Celebrations and our exposure on a recent TV series. Websites at Grand Lodge and in the Provinces are receiving a massive increase in activity. Recruitment is not, of course, the total answer to the situation. Once we have brought the man into our organisation we need to make sure that we provide what we promised. We have to nurture him and make sure that he is

comfortable with what we are presenting to him and what we asking of him. We need to involve him in the social events that enable members to get to know each other better and to also meet each other's families. We are working very hard at this and our Provincial Membership Officer, W Bro. John Fergusson, has travelled around the Province with me to meet the area Group Officers and produce a 'best practice' method for dealing with the initial approaches, the preparation for initiation and then the proceeding ceremonies and the ongoing membership. This 'best practice' is not mandatory but I am sure that it will help and the effect will be to increase our membership numbers. Another area that we must concentrate upon is that of resignations. I believe that our numbers will increase as much through reductions in resignations as through recruitment. We all have to work harder in looking after our Initiates and to make them feel an important part of our society as soon as we can. I can inform you that in the last 12 months our net numbers increased by 4. Not a lot, but after years of decline, I am very pleased to have a positive result. Brethren, I cannot do this alone. I need the support of all of you. Those of you here today to receive your appointments are the future of Masonry. Help me to ensure that you, and then future generations, have an organisation to enjoy. Freemasonry is such an important constituent part of our society and is too valuable to allow it to die.

I would now congratulate the members of this Province who received some well-deserved appointments and promotions at the Grand Lodge Investiture Meeting last month. First appointments to Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies went to Michael Caseman-Jones, Provincial Grand Secretary, and W Bro John Hitchin a Past Senior Warden of the Province. A promotion from PAGDC to Past Junior Grand Deacon went to W Bro Bob Allison and a promotion to PSGD to W Bro Charles Bennett, Assistant PGM. V W Bro James Newman was reappointed as Deputy President MCF. He is, of course, a member and Past Master of the Old Wellingburian Lodge. These promotions and appointments are given in respect of past service and also in respect of what is expected in the future. The same can be said to all those who have received appointments here today in this PG Lodge. Whilst your preferment shows how much the Province appreciates your efforts to date, it is also in expectation of further efforts in the coming years

Brethren, before I close I must thank the hard working staff of our Provincial Office who have ensured once again that everything has proceeded smoothly. I would also thank our Provincial Director of Ceremonies, W Bro Dale Gilbert, and his team for the efficient manner in which they have handled the ceremonial and I would not forget the Provincial Stewards who have dealt with the car parking and greeting of our guests, and finally our Past PG Superintendent of Works, W Bro Kevin Corcoran for all the arrangements within the building.

Brethren, I hope that you are all enjoying today's proceedings and will continue to do so throughout the Festive Board. We have a successful and happy Province but we all need to continue the hard work in order that our future may be assured.

Thank you for your attention. God bless you all.