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Answers to  
Questions about the  
**MASONIC FRATERNITY**

## **WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?**

Freemasonry, or Masonry, is the oldest and largest fraternal organization in the world, a universal society of friends who seek to become better men through their association with one another and their families. It is a 600-year-old fraternity with a 3,000-year tradition, the prototype of most modern fraternal societies and service organizations.

In a society whose moral values are being severely tested, Masonry brings men together for fellowship and the promotion of integrity and good citizenship.

Masonry requires a belief in God and urges its members to be faithful to their own religious beliefs, but it is not a religion.

It encourages its members and their families to be good citizens and to choose their own best means of political expression, but it is not a political organization.

Its charitable activities and good works are for the benefit of all humankind, but it is not a benefit society or welfare institution.

## **WILL I BE ASKED TO JOIN?**

No, not directly. And you should not wait to be asked! Some men who would like to become Masons never do because they are unaware that a Mason is not permitted directly to solicit new members. Regrettably, it is not uncommon to hear a man say that he waited in vain to be invited into the fraternity.

If you are interested in membership, or desire more information, feel free to approach a Mason and satisfy yourself concerning what Freemasonry is all about. Or possibly one of your Masonic friends may introduce the subject in conversation with you. But, he won't actually ask you to join because Freemasons believe that a man should seek membership only of his own free will and accord, not because he was solicited.

## **WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP?**

Membership in a Masonic lodge is open to men 21 years of age or older, without regard to race, color or religion. Those accepted for membership must be of good character and reputation, and believe in a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul.

A candidate for membership is first recommended by a member of the Lodge he wishes to join. His application or "petition" is read at a meeting and referred to a committee, usually composed of three members, who interview the applicant, normally in his home, so that the applicant's wife and family may become familiar with the organization and its activities. After the committee reports back to the lodge, the applicant is voted on by a secret ballot of the lodge members and, if accepted, begins the process of becoming a lodge member.

## **WHAT HAPPENS AT THE INITIATION?**

There are three basic degrees of Masonry—Entered Apprentice (First Degree), Fellowcraft (Second Degree) and Master Mason (Third Degree)—which are conferred at three separate meetings over a period of several weeks or months. The solemn process is an enlightening and interesting experience for the candidate with no embarrassing moments. Between meetings he is given further instruction concerning the meaning of the ritualistic ceremony in which he has participated. He will also be asked to memorize a few key passages of the ritual.

The Masonic ritual dramatizes its philosophy of the importance of a moral life. It uses the tools of ancient stonemasons as symbols to teach these ideals. A Mason promises to build his life and character with the same care and precision that stonemasons used to construct the great cathedrals centuries ago.

## **WHERE DID FREEMASONRY START?**

Because Freemasonry is many centuries old, scholars do not agree about precisely when and where it began. The most commonly accepted theory is that the origins of Freemasonry reach back to medieval times when the great cathedrals of Europe were built. The stonemasons who created these awe-inspiring Gothic structures formed craft guilds to protect the secrets of their trade, to help one another, and to pass on their knowledge to worthy apprentices.

In 17th century England, these guilds began accepting honorary members, men of learning and position. These new members were not working stonemasons or even associated with the building trades. As "accepted Masons," they eventually grew into a separate organization called Free and Accepted Masons, or Freemasonry.

## **WHAT DO FREEMASONS DO?**

Masons are dedicated to becoming better men. Like many people, Freemasons try to live in accordance with high moral principles as good citizens. They do not claim to have a monopoly on these ideals, but they do join together in lodges to help each other intensify their devotion to these enduring values.

Freemasonry teaches and practices the principles and ideals of kindness, honesty, decency, courtesy, fairness, understanding and concern. It upholds the belief that we are all a part of a Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God.

Masons practice patriotism and shape their lives in accordance with the best practices of civilized society. They do this in lodges for men, but there are many family activities as well.

## **IS FREEMASONRY A SECRET SOCIETY?**

No, this is a mistaken notion although it has been widely believed from the beginning. The membership, meeting places and activities of the Masonic fraternity are actually well known to anyone who is interested.

Many books have been written about Freemasonry, and you can probably find several in your local public library. Even the constitutions, rules and regulations of the Fraternity have been published.

It is true that Masons have private modes of recognition and ceremonies for some meetings, but the Fraternity is not otherwise secret. Masonic halls and temples are often made available for community activities. Many members wear distinctive Masonic rings or lapel pins to show their pride in being a part of this ancient and honorable fraternity.

## **WHO ARE THE FREEMASONS?**

Men of every walk of life belong to Masonic lodges. They may be highly visible as Shrine Masons ("Shriners") in costume, or as lodge members wearing Masonic aprons in civic processions or Masonic funerals, or at special Masonic ceremonies such as the laying of cornerstones. For example, George Washington officiated at the Masonic cornerstone-laying of the U.S. Capitol in 1793.

The recognized Masonic fraternity in the United States includes 3 million members in 14,000 Lodges. There are about 4 million Masons and more than 100 Grand Lodges worldwide. New York has 136,000 members in over 800 Lodges, which belong to the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York.

George Washington and 13 other Presidents of the United States, as well as 18 Vice Presidents and 35 Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, have been Masons.

Washington took his first Presidential oath of office on a Bible borrowed from a Masonic Lodge in New York City, and the oath was administered by Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, another Mason and, at the time, Grand Master.

Here is a sampling of famous Masons in various walks of life, then and now:

"Buzz" Aldrin	Rudyard Kipling
Gene Autry	Lafayette
Beethoven	Mozart
Irving Berlin	Douglas MacArthur
Simon Bolivar	Norman Vincent Peale
Omar Bradley	John J. Pershing
Henry Ford	Paul Revere
Benjamin Franklin	Will Rogers
Garibaldi	David Sarnoff
John Glenn	Red Skelton
John Hancock	Thomas J. Watson
John Paul Jones	John Wayne

### **WHAT HAPPENS AT LODGE MEETINGS?**

A Masonic lodge usually meets one or two evenings each month to conduct its business, vote on petitions for membership, and do the work of conferring the three degrees. If no degree work is being performed, the meeting may include a program of interest, sometimes open to the ladies, and refreshments. Good fellowship is an important part of Freemasonry, and life-long friendships are often by-products of lodge membership.

### **ARE RELIGION AND POLITICS A PART OF FREEMASONRY?**

Freemasonry welcomes men from every religious denomination or creed, requiring only that they affirm their belief in a Supreme Being, and that they are of high moral character and are

good citizens. Masonic lodges are non-denominational and non-political. Partisan and sectarian discussions are not permitted in Lodges.

Masonry is not a substitute for church or religion. The Fraternity urges its members to practice their own particular religious beliefs in their daily lives.

## **HOW DO MASONS HELP OTHER PEOPLE?**

A basic teaching of Freemasonry is charity. The tradition of its members helping one another and humankind in general is practiced extensively.

In the United States alone, Freemasons provide over \$1 million a day, year after year, for charitable causes. These dollars go to support scholarships, medical research, hospitals for crippled children, facilities for those who have speech disorders or mental illness. Masonic groups also help people with serious eye problems and with respiratory difficulties. They provide retirement homes for members, their wives and widows.

Masonic volunteers are active in Veterans' Hospitals, sponsor summer camps for children, work with the handicapped, and perform many public service activities in their communities.

In New York, Freemasons created and support the world-renowned Masonic Medical Research Laboratory at Utica, where basic research is conducted by professionals in the areas of heart disease, problems of the aging, cancer, hypertension and blood substitutes.

When the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity were novel, Masonry helped promote them. The Grand Lodge of New York, for example, was in the forefront 150 years ago supporting the movement to establish free public schools in New York, an idea which soon spread to the other states.

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## **BEYOND LODGE MEMBERSHIP**

Lodge members may join Masonically-related organizations outside of the Lodge. These groups include the York Rite (Royal Arch Masons, Cryptic Masons, Knights Templar), Scottish Rite (4th to 32nd degrees, and the specially-conferred 33rd degree), square clubs, and the Shrine Masons, Grotto and others.

There are related organizations for women, the most widely known being the Order of the Eastern Star and the Order of the Amaranth. Similarly, for young men there is the Order of DeMolay, and for young women in New York, the Constellation of Junior Stars, the Organization of Triangles and the Order of Rainbow.

*a message from the*  
**Grand Lodge of**  
**Free & Accepted Masons**  
*of the*  
**State of New York**

