



## **REPORT TO THE MW GRAND MASTER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

### ***THE NEW MILLENIUM, FREEMASONRY AND WOMEN***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the light of ever-quickening changes in society, the growing call for gender equality and a perception of Freemasonry's increasing problems, in May 2001 the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Australia and the Northern Territory commissioned a task force to look into Freemasonry's relations with women. The resulting Gender Relations Task Force comprised eight persons including four male Masons, a member of Amaranth and Rainbow Girls, the wife of a Worshipful Master (Masonically associated women), a member of the Order of the Eastern Star, and a member of the Order of Women Freemasons (resigned before committee prepared the final report).

This is the concise version of the final report. The report's conclusions, based on extensive research, are recommendations. None touch ritual or Landmarks. There is no call for Freemasonry to enroll women.

#### **FINDINGS**

##### ***SOCIETY***

Freemasonry was molded by society. A long past society.

Freemasonry, as we know it, was formed in the 1600 and 1700's, when the crushing English class system saw the vast majority of people living in abject poverty as peasants, or in towns which stank. The Industrial Revolution saw the masses even more exploited. A very few at the top lived in privilege and luxury. Between was an insecure group of tradesmen, merchants, businessmen and professionals. Even as late as the mid 1800's all of England's land was owned by about 3,000 men. Women had no real rights and did not gain the vote until 1918.

Thus Freemasonry was shaped by a harsh environment. It had no place for women.

In our present society human rights have been asserted, equal rights gained, and women's rights won; on paper. In fact women still do more work, receive less pay and are more liable to discrimination and abuse.

It is anticipated that technical and social changes will speed up, throwing an ever-greater challenge to Freemasonry to adapt or founder. A basic decider will be its ability to meet the ever-growing claims and status of women.

### ***POINTS ABOUT FREEMASONRY***

Freemasonry is governed by Landmarks. These are held to be dictates which cannot be changed. There exists no authentic list; it seems certain, however, that the exclusion of women is a Landmark.

Many independent Masonic jurisdictions exist. Before two can intervisit they have to 'recognise' each other to be 'regular'. A Grand Lodge cannot recognise a non-Craft Masonic-type order.

Freemasonry demonstrates positive and negative aspects. Positives include extolling freedom of speech, equality, democracy, peace, education and morality. Negatives, arising from its formative conditions, ultimately include autocratic government and resistance to change. The result is being out-of-conformity with today's society, which at best sees Freemasonry as irrelevant. This includes being seen as a male bastion embattled against women.

Freemasonry has deep problems, which culminate in an ever-quickenning slide in membership. Having become an organisation of old men it is inevitably dominated by out-of-date conventions. All steps to reverse or even hold its membership loss have failed. Only when men see value in joining Freemasonry can it regain strength, and only change can accomplish that.

### ***THE FURTHER ORDERS***

Freemasonry is accompanied by Further Orders, to many interest in which is their only inducement to remain in Masonry. To enable Masonically related women orders to be fairly treated the Further Orders open to men need first to be examined.

Those in South Australia are Mark, Chapter, Mariners, Knights Templar, Rose Croix, Secret Monitor, Royal And Select, KT Priests, Red Cross of Constantine, Royal Order of Scotland, Allied, Rosicrucians and Operatives.

Grand Lodge officially accepts Mark and Chapter. By regulation it could easily extend this to all the Further Orders, as is the rule in America, thus showing each to be an appreciated arm of Freemasonry. Further, to signal their true value, it is recommended that the Further Orders be recognised as part of the 'Masonic Family', and be made Affiliate Members of Freemasonry, the next best status to recognition available. Alliance would bring benefits to both parties, and would also pave the way for better relations with women orders.

## ***PUBLIC PERCEPTION***

Freemasonry's fate depends upon its public perception, including that of women. It is under attack from many churches, and the government in England, while harmful myths circulate. It is seen as a secret society, distant, anti-social, exclusive and aloof to women. As the older generations, which had some respect for Freemasonry, disappear, anti-Freemasonry must increase.

To counter this damaging public image one change needed is for Freemasonry to become more open. This is while projecting an air of tantalizing mystery. As is the norm in many jurisdictions we could improve and extend its range of public ceremonies and appearances and undergo dress reform. Vicious criticism needs to be met aggressively, invalid criticism disproven and valid criticism acted upon.

It is recommended that women need to be actively involved in public ceremonies and appearances, be part of all advertising, and be present at all Masonic publicity stalls. Freemasonry could coordinate its public perception reform by developing an 'Improving the Public Image of Freemasonry' program.

## ***THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN TO FREEMASONRY***

By giving serious regard to half the population, women, Freemasonry would go a long way to lessen internal problems, benefit from women's unique talents and capacities, and improve its public image. It would, also, help to mitigate bad press and unwanted legislation. Masonry, in turn, can offer women its positive influences, directly by exposure to its tenets and experiences and, indirectly, a better society; provided it engineers its social resurgence.

## ***CHANGE***

There have been great changes in society since Freemasonry was formed. It continues, however, with many old social practices which alienate younger generations. Should it allow this to continue its future must appear grim.

There is no legal requirement at present for Freemasonry to admit women. Ethics, however, is another consideration, overrides laws, customs and rules. Freemasonry extols morality, although has yet to address ethical issues in its relationship with women.

There is nothing within the structure of Freemasonry that allows women to give significant input.

It is recommended that Freemasonry, based on thorough investigation and consultation, needs to develop women relationship policies, and form a 'Freemasonry and Women Relations Program', of which all members need to be informed and involved.

In its quest for survival Grand Lodge will need to commit itself fully to all changes determined. Otherwise, they will not take hold.

## BRINGING ABOUT GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN WOMEN AND FREEMASONRY

### *MASONICALLY ASSOCIATED WOMEN*

Masonically associated women (the wives and partners of Masons) are expected to encourage, or at least tolerate, their husbands/partners being Freemasons. Further, they are expected to support them by doing voluntary lodge work. To most lodges the fulfillment of these expectations is crucial to their survival. These women, however, are often subject to out-of-date social practices which most of the younger generations find offensive and alienating. This can and does lead to husband/partners leaving Freemasonry and, in turn, lodge collapse. Freemasonry needs to adequately acknowledge the vital role played by Masonically associated women, and bring about change in its relationship with them.

It is recommended that Grand Lodge develops an 'Improving Freemasonry's Relationship with Masonically Associated Women Program'. Included would be:

- lodge-organised discussions with women.
- Appointment of women's representatives, with a place on the care committee.
- Perhaps a lodge women's committee.
- Moderating lodge hours, so that husband/partners do not arrive home very late.
- The Festive Board not to be an expected automatic responsibility of a woman who does not want it.
- Changing the too frequently encountered out-of-date language and approaches to women in lodges.
- Better informing women what is happening at lodge, eg by regular newsletters.
- Involvement of women in lodge event planning.

Conducting ladies/wives-partners nights at least three times a year, and preferably off the premises.

'Ladies Nights' at the Festive Board prefaced with a short lodge business meeting only, and preferably none at all – no waiting around. If there is to be waiting, quality entertainment engaged.

- If at the Festive Board, the usual run of Masonic speeches and toasts dispensed with.
- Involvement of a wife/partner in her husband/partner's significant lodge ceremonies, eg
- Presentation of Master Mason's certificate, installation, fifty year jewel presentation, eg at the Festive Board.

Further, Freemasonry could show its appreciation of Masonically associated women, and improve its own position, by offering them associate membership.

### *MASONICALLY ASSOCIATED FAMILIES*

Where Masonically associated families are involved the situation is more intense.

- Fathers can be seen as visiting lodges too often.
- Drawing upon a tight budget. Some lodges offer little or nothing for children.
- A lodge's calendar of events needs to consider family events, such as Family Days, outings, picnics and parties.

## ***WOMEN ORDERS***

Women Masonically related orders offer places to women interested in Masonry, thus taking up the slack. Acting as a buffer they also absorb criticism by those who might otherwise attack Masonry as a movement with no place for women.

The women orders in South Australia are the Order of Women Freemasons (Craft and Mark); Co-Masonry (Craft, Mark, Mariners, Chapter, Rose Croix and Knight Kadosh); Eastern Star, Amaranth and Rainbow Girls.

The Order of Women Freemasons, Craft, strictly excludes male membership. It is acknowledged, as are the Eastern Star, Amaranth and Rainbow Girls. The Eastern Star and Amaranth include Freemasons. Co-Masonry, which also joins men and women, has psychic and mystical elements which make it proscribed around the world.

A resulting 'Improving Freemasonry's Relationship with Women Orders Plan' would include stopping their victimisation, eg by hall denial, and removal of posters, and mutual assistance in publicity.

## ***ALLIANCE***

To signal their true value it is recommended that the women orders be accepted as part of the 'Masonic Family', and made Affiliate Members of Freemasonry.

Communication and coordination of the alliance would be facilitated by the formation of a 'Freemasonry and Women Order Liaison Committee'.

Ongoing interaction between the Craft, Further Orders and women orders is recommended. This could take various forms, including social, ceremonial and intellectual.

## ***PERMANENCE***

Information on the various recommended women programs would be given to the membership through a printed 'South Australian Freemasonry and Women Relations Handbook'.

To come to grips with the many facets of women relations it is recommended that the Craft forms a permanent 'Women Relations Committee'.



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