

INTRODUCTION

Amalgamation and merger are both vague terms in freemasonry and yet the concept of two lodges joining under one charter to derive mutual benefit is not a new one, with amalgamation of lodges being recorded in this country as long ago as 1892. In that year, Lodge St. John and Summerset Lodge, both within the District Grand Lodge of Canterbury EC, merged to form Lodge Ashburton No. 1811 EC. The stated reasons for amalgamation, that of falling membership and financial difficulties, are now very familiar to many brethren and are as relevant today as they were ninety-nine years ago. The last decade has seen a dramatic upsurge in the numbers of lodges initiating amalgamation negotiations and since 1977, 53 lodges have merged, with 32 of those lodges handing in their charter.

There is no doubt that the process of amalgamation is often a difficult time for all participants and in some instances, the resultant new lodge does not match up to the expectations of the membership. Occasionally, lodges enter into negotiations too lightly without full consideration of all the pitfalls and often with unrealistic expectation as to the benefits to be derived from a melding of two or more disparate groups.

The processes by which lodges negotiate prior to amalgamation have been well documented in The Freemason and other masonic publications. However, details of the end results of these negotiations are rarely recorded. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that not all mergers are successful, although data relating to the success or otherwise of the various mergers that have occurred in this country, within recent years are sadly lacking.

In order to provide information that may be of use to lodges contemplating amalgamation, the Editorial Board of the Freemason circularised all Provincial Grand Masters requesting that they provide details of the amalgamations that had taken place in their Districts, and where possible provide comments as to what factors influenced the outcome of those amalgamations. In some Districts brethren were consulted widely and in all 38 collective or individual submissions were received. The replies have been analyzed and form the basis for this article, which it is hoped will provide a useful insight into the immediate and long term impact of amalgamation on a lodge and its members.

Amalgamation: is it the answer?

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Why amalgamate?

There seems to be little disagreement as to the precipitating factors that lead to lodges contemplating amalgamation.

Most lodges are currently experiencing a downturn in membership numbers which is itself the result of several contributing factors. In recent years recruitment has not kept pace with membership loss due to death or infirmity and more importantly the consequences of advancing age have seen a decline in regular attendances by lodge members. In most instances loss of membership results in a significant reduction of income for a lodge which may be compounded by brethren retiring and moving from the District and either resigning or opting for cheaper country membership. Falling lodge incomes have the effect of increasing the financial commitment for remaining brethren and will ultimately lead to a realization that the lodge is no longer able to maintain either the upkeep or rental on its lodge rooms. These are all major contributing factors that influence lodges to initiate amalgamation negotiations, but the most common precipitating factor is the realization that there are insufficient members available to fill the offices for the ensuing year. In these

circumstances few brethren contemplate handing in their charter but seek to perpetuate some aspects of their lodge by amalgamating with another lodge in similar circumstances.

Common attitudes

The perceived goal of amalgamation appears common to most brethren with the principal aim being the establishment of a strong lodge possessing a sound financial base, that meets in pleasant surroundings and has a happy amalgam of social and masonic activities. Most brethren also harbour the hope that the new lodge will preserve at least a portion of the heritage of their own failed lodge. The true result of amalgamation is usually the formation of a numerically strong but actively weak lodge that differs completely from any of the constituent amalgamating lodges.

The earliest indication that brethren have to suggest that the merger will not live up to expectations is the realization that they are members of a lodge composed of brethren unfamiliar to each other, of unknown backgrounds and with as yet largely unexpressed attitudes. After only a short period of time factional groups may develop in the new lodge with each pursuing its own interests. This appears to progress in an insidious manner

and interestingly brethren from each constituent lodge often express the opinion that the end result of amalgamation has been a takeover by brethren from the other lodge(s) participating in the merger.

In reality all brethren feel a sense of loss following amalgamation and this may be outwardly expressed by unwarranted criticism of various aspects of the new lodge. The most frequently noted criticisms relate to the nature of the ritual, the attitudes of senior lodge members and the performance of lodge officers, although no aspect of the amalgamation is immune from some degree of dissatisfaction. It would appear that this behavior is usually transient and in some cases is overcome rapidly as brethren widen their circle of friends within the new lodge. Unfortunately some brethren never adapt to the new environment and will either resign or allow their membership to lapse and thus become casualties of the amalgamation process.

Analysis of the various comments received regarding amalgamation and its consequences indicates that the process is accompanied by a predictable progression in attitudes held by the majority of the brethren.

When amalgamation is first mooted in a lodge, the suggestion is met with an aggressive denial that such radical steps are necessary. It is only after considerable debate that brethren are finally convinced that their lodge is no longer a viable institution. Once a lodge has decided to amalgamate the prevailing feeling is one of expectant optimism. It is during this time that negotiations are undertaken and it is because of this attitude that many important points concerning amalgamation are left for later discussion in the often mistaken belief that the solutions to unresolved problems will be more forthcoming once amalgamation has occurred. The amalgamation itself is usually a highly successful affair and is often followed by a rush of candidates seeking admission. This provides work for the new lodge and reinforces the feeling that amalgamation has been the correct solution to each participating lodge's problems. This attitude persists for approximately eighteen months and is gradually replaced by the realization that amalgamation has not resulted in the expected influx of members. Some brethren express dissatisfaction regarding the character of the new lodge and it is during this -stage that a degree of disharmony may develop. This period of dissatisfaction may persist for several years and is only resolved when sufficient new candidates enter the new lodge to provide a new masonic identity for the brethren.

In order to evaluate membership trends before and after amalgamation, the figures from annual membership returns of lodges amalgamating after 1976 were requested from the office of the Grand Secretary. These showed that the majority of mergers involved two lodges (17), with five mergers being between three lodges. One amalgamation of four lodges was also reported.

There was marked variation between the number of

members of the constituent lodges prior to amalgamation and membership of the new lodge at amalgamation. The membership change varied from an increase of 4.5% to a loss of 33.6%. The mean change was a loss of 13% of the membership on amalgamation. The loss of members was most marked in lodges with greater numbers of members. In lodges with a total membership in excess of 150 prior to amalgamation, the nett loss was 18.6% with four amalgamations reporting a membership loss of 20% or more.

In no case did a lodge recruit sufficient numbers of new members to consistently offset losses following amalgamation and only two lodges reported a year that showed an increase in membership over the previous year. The mean annual membership loss for each lodge varied between 4.5 and 20.5 members with a mean annual membership loss for all lodges of 83 members being reported. Over a five year period the mean membership loss for each lodge was 24.2%. This figure does not take into account the loss of membership at the time of amalgamation and when this is included each lodge showed a mean membership loss of 37.2% over the five years following amalgamation. This decline in membership was due to either deaths, transfers or resignations and in those instances where detailed figures were available it was possible to divide the losses into 51.2% resignations, 37.2% deaths and 11.6% transfers. This clearly demonstrates that the majority of members who resign from their lodge at the time of amalgamation do not rejoin another lodge and are therefore lost to the Craft.

Conclusion

While amalgamation does provide lodges with a short term solution to problems associated with declining active membership and dwindling resources, it does so at a considerable cost. This cost must be measured in terms of overall loss of members to the Craft and a serious disruption to lodge harmony. There are no simple solutions to reverse the now chronic decline in membership experienced by many social and service organizations and such considerations are beyond the scope of this article. Amalgamation does provide lodges with a period of grace that allows the brethren time to attempt to recruit members and thus retain viability, although statistical evidence suggests that such an occurrence is unlikely.

Acknowledgments

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