

Grand Superintendents address to Provincial Grand Chapter 18th May 2023

Companions I offer my congratulation to those Companions whom I have appointed to, and promoted in Provincial Grand Chapter today. I hope that you all enjoy your new, well earned ranks and I look forward to working with you. Remember that your new rank is not solely a reward for past services, it is also for what we are expecting you to contribute to you Chapter and the Province in the future.

Congratulations also to those Companions who were appointed to Grand Rank at Supreme Grand Chapter last month. E.Comp Geoff Lester, who stood down today as 3rd Provincial Grand Principal, he was appointed PAGDC and our Provincial Scribe E, E.Comp Charlie Barker who was appointed Past Grand Standard Bearer. Also a well deserved promotion for our new second Provincial Grand Principal, Martin Slocombe to Past Assistant Grand Sojourner. Not forgetting of course our Past Provincial Grand Master, E.Companion David Medlock who was promoted to Past 3rd Grand Principal.

Today I have a new team and there are many Companions who have worked hard and given great support to the Province and to me who have stood down today. E.Comp Clive Lambert, during your tenure as Deputy GS you had to deal with the pandemic and also the effects of the untimely passing of E.Comp Barry Woodside. Your resolve, hard work and dedication in making sure that the team stayed together, secured the future, I thank you most sincerely and we wish you well in your new role as Inspector General in Rose Croix.

E.Comp Geoff Lester thank you for your support throughout your two and a half years as 3rd Principal, and for taking over as Provincial Charity Steward. Terry Hayes eight years as Treasurer, I have already mentioned you but thank you again Terry. E.Comp John Smith, fourteen years as Provincial Almoner and a great job you have done over that long period, thank you John, it is a hard act to follow. E.Comp Andy Clapp, thank you for your five years as Charity Steward and for the work that you have done in the last year promoting the food bank initiative. Jim Nicol, thank you for your six years as Assistant Scribe Ezra. Also those Provincial officers who have been on the team for the last twelve months and who are standing down today, thank you for your support, I have enjoyed your company and I hope that you have all enjoyed your time on the Provincial Team.

Those of you who have read Freemasonry Today will be aware of the Pro Grand Masters strategy for the future of the Craft and the Royal Arch and the membership challenge. The challenge is to reverse the trend of the falling numbers in the both, a fall also reflected of course in the membership of other orders that rely on the Craft and in some cases also the Royal Arch for their members. Part of the strategy is to encourage more Master Masons to complete their journey by joining the Royal Arch.

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Last year I mentioned in my address that we have great number of Royal Arch Masons in our Province who are no longer subscribing members of a Chapter, over 500. We can pontificate on why they left but I believe the overriding reason was that they didn't enjoy the Chapter and decided that it wasn't for them. We have to change Companions, no one continues to do something voluntarily if they do not enjoy the experience. We all should reflect on how we can help to make our Chapters happy, comfortable and enjoyable places to be.

At the end of 2015 we had just over 1000 members, 1011 to be precise in our Chapters, six year later at the end of 2021 that had reduced to 854. Those figure continue a downward trend that has been going on for many years previously and it seems that we have developed an almost weary expectation that those figures can indeed only go one way and that is down.

But Companions it does not have to be so, I believe that together we can turn the tanker round. The combination of increased encouragement by the Craft for more Master Masons to join us and a large pool of possible rejoining members create a great opportunity to expand our numbers.

My membership challenge to you Companions is to increase Royal Arch membership in Somerset Chapters to 1000 by the end of 2025, to equal or better the number that we had at the end of 2015. Meeting the challenge requires every chapter in the Province to make a net gain of six Companions, rejoiners or new exaltees, over the next two and a half years. How are we going achieve that ambition?

A lot of Chapters have already started to make themselves more user friendly to new and rejoining members. Sharing the ritual between the three Principals and the three sojourners. I'm pleased see that nearly all our Chapters are now doing this, it gets more Companions actively involved, it means no one has to present really long pieces of ritual, it produces better ceremonies and a better candidate experience and we, every one of us all appreciate ritual that is well presented. I'm pleased also to see that many Chapters have adopted the new versions of the readings given by J and H during the first part of the exaltation ceremony. Being in modern English they are easier to read and therefore much more likely to be understood. Chapters also need to consider removing some of the so called traditions that have developed over the years. In most cases these add nothing to the ceremony apart from time wasting and causing distracting "we don't do it that way" arguments, usually in the middle of a ceremony. I also mentioned last year that I would like to see Chapters appoint a mentor, few have done so but I expect that in the coming year most will. The mentors task is to look after newer members in particular and make sure that they are comfortable, that they have gained an understanding of the ritual and are happy to support the Chapter, although they may not wish progress through the offices. I believe there is a place in the Royal Arch for everyone including those who do not wish to progress through the three Chairs. Succession planning is vital for the Chapter

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to be able to thrive, I don't think a Chapter in the Province has a succession plan in place. Remember that well proven old adage, Failing to plan is planning to fail.

There is help available to Chapters from Supreme Grand Chapter. Those of you who have read this weeks edition of First Rising, the Grand Lodge newsletter will have seen and perhaps read the new Royal Arch discover more brochure, it is all part of the programme to encourage more Master Masons into the Royal Arch. Archway, a version of the Members' Pathway specifically for Chapters will be available later this year and will provide a tool box that Chapters can use to improve their performance and sustainability.

The Province is also here to help. There is an updated Companions Guide, that will be presented to all new and recently exalted Companions. It explains briefly what they can expect in Chapter and just as important, what is expected of them. In conjunction with the Craft Executive we will be introducing training for Craft Royal Arch Reps and offer training to new Chapter Mentors.

I appreciate that the task ahead will be more difficult for some Chapters. So to provide hands on help to all Chapters, members of the Provincial Executive and other senior members of the Province will be available to attend Chapter committee meetings and Convocations to provide information and ideas that Chapters need to help them in moving forward.

Last year I asked Chapters to consider helping their local Food bank, I am pleased to say that many have and over £8,000 has been given in support of Food banks across the Province. It is a fantastic effort Companions and I thank those Chapters who have taken part. Unfortunately the need for food banks hasn't diminished, if anything the current economic climate has caused it to grow. I am therefore extending the scheme for at least one more year and alongside that offering an assisted funding scheme to Chapters to increase the amount of their donation with help from the Provincial Charity fund. Your Chapter Charity Steward can get information form our new Provincial Charity Steward E.Comp Geoff Lester. Today's retiring collection will be donated to the Provincial Charity fund so please give generously Companions using the gift aid envelopes if you can.

I want to specifically thank the members of the Craft Executive for their much appreciated support for the Royal Arch. Particularly the Deputy Provincial Grand Master, E.Comp Ben Batley and Assistant Provincial Grand Masters, E.Comps Richard Winter and Tony Guthrie. Thanks also to the Rulers of the other Masonic Orders, many of whom are here today, for their continued support. We are fortunate in enjoying good relations with all the other orders meeting in the Province, and it is certainly my intention that that cooperation will continue under my tenure as your Grand Superintendent & Provincial Grand Master.

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Companions there are many people to thank for helping to make this day a success. The Provincial Scribe E, Charlie Barker for his tireless work and hundreds of emails! The Provincial director of ceremonies Chris Summers his team of assistant DCs and Stewards and the Provincial Janitor, Ray Johnson Smith. The Companions of Connaught Chapter, under whose banner this convocation has been held for supplying the Chapter equipment and helping to set up the Chapter. The management and the team at the Webbington Hotel. Our organist, Companion Barry Renwick and our sound engineer, Excellent Companion Toby Hammond. I thank you one and all. If I have missed anyone please accept my apologies.

Finally Companions I said in my inaugural address a year ago today that I would endeavour to visit all the Chapters in the Province in my first year. I have managed 26 out of the 29. I apologise to the Companions of the Chapters I haven't been able to visit, I will be visiting you in the near future. As I have travelled across the Province I have been warmly welcomed and I very much appreciate your hospitality and kindness. I detect a realisation in most Chapters that Royal Arch Masonry must adapt if it is to flourish and I am encouraged by that. Companions, I wish you well in your membership challenge and remember, I and the Provincial team are here to help you succeed.

Thank you for your attention Companions and may the TALGMH keep you all safe.

Ray Guthrie
18th May 2023