



Plain English Guide to Freemasonry

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Diana and John Litton

INTRODUCTION

Diana

When John told me that he was to be the next Grand Master of Freemasons New Zealand I was thrilled for him and naturally very proud of his achievements. When we told our children they too were delighted, but they also asked:

“So what exactly does this involve?”

“How will we explain this new role to our friends and workmates?”

They were witness to John's role as a Divisional Grand Master, but this was going to be so much more. I realised that they, and I, needed some help.

I have always supported John's involvement in Freemasonry, knowing how important it has been to him—as it was to his father before him. Our lives raising four children have been busy, juggling jobs

and other commitments and seem to be just as busy now—it appears you never stop being a parent—a situation no doubt familiar to many of you.

Freemasonry has always been part of our household; we have had many wonderful and memorable times and have made life-long friends. But the nitty-gritty of how to explain Freemasonry to others who have no knowledge of the craft has concerned me, particularly as John is now Grand Master.

Sometimes I have managed to answer the questions; other times I've preferred to refer the person asking to the Freemasons New Zealand website.

I hope this Plain English Guide to Freemasonry will give you the confidence to answer the questions I am sure we have all been asked.

John

We've put together this booklet because Freemasonry is at an important time in its 150-year history in New Zealand.

Freemasons have always enjoyed the trusted friendships that come through belonging to the organisation.

But in this open and transparent era in which we all live, we have a responsibility to discuss our organisation in the wider community.

Some of the best advocates for Freemasonry are our families and friends. It's our responsibility to help them understand the value of Freemasonry in a way that is easily understood by those without a masonic background.

Freemasonry is founded upon principles of care, kindness, honesty and trust. These are timeless values that are as relevant to the world today as they were 300 years ago when the organisation was established, and throughout the 150 years we have supported and cared for the people of New Zealand.

Our organisation has given much and has much to offer. We are an amalgamation of the old and the new, of tradition and modernisation, and an organisation that fits comfortably into the 21st century. Our future is bright.

I commend this booklet to you to use in your conversations with others about Freemasonry, and I challenge you to have at least one such conversation each month. If you take up my challenge, I am sure you will see men of calibre wanting to become Freemasons.

HISTORY

When and how did Freemasonry begin?

Freemasonry began about 300 years ago in Europe, when the men who worked as stonemasons—building castles and cathedrals—formed an organisation to protect their specialist engineering skills and pass them on to worthy apprentices. As times changed other craftsmen and men from a variety of trades and professions became Freemasons. Over time the organisation known as Freemasonry—with its key principles of kindness, care, honesty and fairness—has spread worldwide.

When did Freemasonry start in New Zealand?

With the arrival of the early settlers Freemasonry became part of local society. By 1842 the first Lodge was founded and by 1890 Freemasons New Zealand was established.

How many men are Freemasons in New Zealand?

Nationwide there are 8,000 Freemasons. Like many organisations, we at Freemasons New Zealand have seen our membership ebb and flow over the years.

How many Lodges does New Zealand have?

Lodges are the group of men who meet together as a single club, and there are 249 Lodges nationwide. Lodge buildings are the rooms where we meet and they are sited in or near most communities. A refurbishment programme is modernising many of our 167 Lodge buildings.

Is Freemasonry still relevant today?

The Freemasonry principles of kindness, care, honesty, trust and fairness are timeless values that are as relevant to the world today as they were 300 years ago. With these core ideals, Freemasonry in the 21st century fits comfortably into the modern world.

MEMBERSHIP

In a nutshell, what is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is a modern organisation with traditional values relevant to today's families and communities.

How do you become a Freemason?

If you don't know a Freemason, go to our website www.freemasons.co.nz or send an email to membership@freemasons.co.nz

Isn't Freemasonry only for older men?

Freemasons are men aged 21 years and over. Our organisation is relevant to all adult men. With people working and living longer, social networks—like Freemasonry—have become even more important in providing men with a balanced life. As is often said, “80 is the new 70; 70 is the new 60; 60 is the new 50; and 50 is the new 40.”

Is Freemasonry open to all men?

One of the greatest things about Freemasonry is that all men—regardless of their race, religion, financial and social status—can come together as equals and share a common bond of friendship and mutual respect.

Is there a trial period before joining?

Before attending a first Lodge meeting, a man will need to have made a commitment to become a Freemason and may have joined in some social activities.

Isn't the organisation dying out?

Freemasonry appeals as much today as it has through the generations. It provides a unique combination of friendship and structure in today's competitive and fragmented society.

Do the sons of members have to join?

Membership is voluntary and it is entirely an individual's decision. Many men—whether or not the sons of Freemasons—seek to be involved because of the ideals, values and ethics of Freemasonry.

Can men from any religion join?

Freemasonry welcomes as members men from all faiths, as belief in a supreme or divine being is required. Freemasonry is not a substitute for religion; nor is it a forum for religious discussion. So being a Freemason does not conflict with a member's religious beliefs or practices.

BENEFITS

What does Freemasonry offer me personally?

Freemasonry has many personal benefits. Among these are the potential for strong affiliations, and trusted and lasting friendships with those who share a concern for human values, moral standards and the rights of individuals. Freemasonry is an organisation that promotes self-development, the family, and community values.

Are there benefits for my family?

Freemasonry can provide men and their families with a fun and active social life with like-minded people. Many lasting friendships exist among people who have met through our organisation. Family values are an important part of a Freemason's life and families are frequently invited to take part in charitable work, social activities and get-togethers.

Are there benefits to be gained for my business?

Freemasonry provides men with an opportunity for public service and hands-on involvement in charitable and community activities, as well as the chance to socialise with men from all walks of life. But it is not a business networking organisation. Freemasons are prohibited from using membership to promote their own—or anyone else's—business, professional or personal interests.

Do Freemasons and their families gain automatic entry to Masonic retirement villages, if they wish?

Freemasons and their families do not get automatic entry to Masonic retirement villages. If a vacancy arises a masonic connection may be helpful, but having that connection does not ensure entry to a village.

WHAT YOU DO AS A FREEMASON

What will I learn as a Freemason?

Freemasonry provides training in self-development, public speaking, mentoring, tolerance, communication skills and self-confidence. In Freemasonry, members meet as equals and part as friends.

Where and how often do Freemasons hold meetings?

Freemasons usually hold meetings in local Lodge rooms. Most meetings are held monthly.

What happens at a meeting of Freemasons?

A meeting of Freemasons is similar to a meeting of any organisation. The meeting follows a business format. Minutes are taken and accounts are read. Members discuss plans for forthcoming events and discuss charity activities and social occasions.

A meeting of Freemasons includes ceremonial activities. These activities involve a series of formalised and symbolic presentations—similar to short plays—that use drama to highlight the codes of conduct by which Freemasons choose to live.

Why don't Freemasons talk about what they do in Lodge rooms?

Generally Freemasons talk about what they do in Lodge rooms, but as in any walk of life not all people want to talk about every aspect of their lives. At various times over its 300-year history, Lodges have been places of refuge—away from authoritarian and political control and memories of war and discord—and places where men were equal, trusted each other and were friends.

In more recent years societal changes and new technologies have created an open and transparent world. These changes have impacted Freemasonry too, and a spirit of openness is filtering through our organisation.

What makes Freemasonry different from other service organisations?

While charitable service and caring about people is a cornerstone of Freemasonry, there are aspects to Freemasonry not found in other service organisations. Men become Freemasons to develop as individuals and meet other like-minded people; and to enjoy the sociable nature of our organisation, its tradition, rituals, regalia and ceremony.

RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

What are the rituals?

Freemasonry rituals are basically a series of ceremonies for personal development and are the one aspect that distinguishes Freemasonry from almost all other social groups. For many non-Freemasons, this dominates their perception of Freemasonry.

What are the ceremonies or rituals about?

The ceremonies and rituals are steps or stages—dramatically portrayed as allegories or stories—through which new or Apprentice Freemasons pass to become Master Masons.

These steps or stages are known in Freemasonry as degrees and represent the three stages of a man's life: youth, manhood, and age.

The First Degree establishes a foundation and examines the cornerstones of charity, affiliation and tradition. The Second Degree builds on this base, illustrates the importance of education and work and encourages daily advancement to become a better person. The Third Degree brings acceptance of who you are, and shows that all men are equal irrespective of race, religion or social status. It also instils the belief that, with a good foundation, a man can be a worthy and contributing member of society.

MONEY

Don't you have to be wealthy to join?

Apart from being able to afford the one-off joining fee and annual subscription fee, wealth is not a consideration in Freemasonry.

How much does it cost to join?

The one-off joining fee and annual subscription vary depending on the type of Lodge. Some Lodges have particular interests such as history, research, and dining. For instance Dining Lodges have larger catering costs, so fees are higher. Joining fees vary between \$100 and \$300, and annual subscriptions between \$300 and \$1,000.

Do you tithe or have to give to the organisation and charity?

Freemasonry does not do tithing or pressure members to contribute money to charity. Generally Freemasons contribute through a combination of time, skill and money.

How come Freemasons have so much money?

The administrative arm of Freemasonry relies on its annual subscriptions for funding and of itself is not wealthy. Even so, over the 150 or so years Freemasonry has been part of the New Zealand community it has been financially careful with its charitable funds. The charitable arm of Freemasons is The Freemasons Charity. This charity has built up reserves from money continually given by Freemasons as well as bequests from Freemasons. The charity's funds are used in a variety of local and national charitable projects.

Do Freemasons get special treatment from some banks?

Freemasons New Zealand maintains a Freemasons Deposit Scheme, operated by Heartland Bank. This scheme may attract a slightly higher interest rate than other commercial banks. Currently the Scheme holds 2,500 accounts.

Can a person who is a member of a Freemason's family get the same interest rates?

Anyone who is a member of a Freemason's family can get the same interest rates.

In their will, does a Freemason have to leave money or a proportion of their estate to the organisation?

Freemasonry does not expect or force any member to bequest their money or property to another Freemason or to the organisation. Over the years some Freemasons have bequeathed money to specific charitable purposes within Freemasonry or to The Freemasons Charity. Yet any bequest is a member's personal decision.

CHARITY

How important is charity to Freemasonry?

Benevolence and helping those in need is a cornerstone of Freemasonry. Freemasons have been involved in charitable activities in New Zealand since European settlement.

Does Freemasons New Zealand have charitable status?

The Freemasons Charity, the charity arm of Freemasons New Zealand, is registered and has charitable status under the New Zealand Charities Act.

What do Freemasons do for charity, as you don't often hear about their charitable activities?

Caring for people through charity is key to Freemasonry. Traditionally, Freemasons have 'just got on with it'. It wasn't their style to publicise

what they did. In recent times more people have become aware of and recognised the philanthropic work of Freemasons.

What is The Freemasons Charity?

The Freemasons Charity is the registered charitable arm of Freemasons New Zealand and is the cornerstone of our benevolent activities in New Zealand.

The charity:

- provides support to individuals in need
- looks after widows and the wider Freemasons family
- supports Lodges and Districts in projects that benefit their local communities
- supports research activities at universities; and, through the Freemasons University Scholarship Programme, rewards students who both excel academically and get involved in their community.

Each year The Freemasons Charity, apart from other Masonic Trusts, provides about \$1,200,000 for health research in paediatrics, neurology and gerontology and, in education, it funds university scholarships and fellowships, as well as funding many other projects nationwide.

What is the Acacia Society?

The Acacia Society is administered by The Freemasons Charity and recognises those Freemasons who have made a bequest in favour of The Freemasons Charity. While some Freemasons prefer to remain anonymous, others are comfortable wearing a small Acacia pin to signify their bequest. The Acacia Society assures a member that their contribution will continue to support the masonic principles that they, as a Freemason, endorsed in life.

What are the rules in Freemasonry about giving money to charity?

Charity is a cornerstone of Freemasonry, and is one reason why men become Freemasons. The money that Freemasons give is out of their own pocket

and does not come from ‘tin-rattling’ or other public fund-raising activities. Masonic charitable activities and giving to others help to improve the welfare of Freemasons and the welfare of their communities.

The Freemasons Charity does not fund another organisation’s buildings or vehicles; nor does it fund that organisation’s ongoing costs (such as administration or salaries). Individual Lodges have their own criteria for funding community projects.

What groups, organisations and individuals do Freemasons give money to?

Over the years, most charitable causes in New Zealand have received proceeds from The Freemasons Charity, Freemasons Lodges or their charitable trusts.

Are all Freemasons New Zealand’s charitable projects in New Zealand?

Freemasons New Zealand focuses most of its charitable efforts on New Zealand-based projects. Sometimes people and organisations from overseas

have appealed to our members to donate as individuals. One recent appeal was after the fires in New South Wales. Australian Freemasons also generously assisted us at the time of the Christchurch earthquakes.

Do Lodges give money to small organisations within their community?

Freemasons give money to small organisations within their community as individuals or through a Lodge's charitable trust. One example in 2013 is the Otago Masonic Charitable Trust, which used its annual grants to give \$62,000 locally. Groups that benefitted from the Trust's grants included food banks, Pregnancy Help Inc., Brain Injury Association, Outram School, Caversham Toy Library, Otago Community Hospice, Mosgiel Central Kindergarten, Wakari Kindergarten, Operation New Direction Trust, Home of St Barnabas Trust, and Life Education Trust.

LODGES

Why do Lodge buildings look unwelcoming, with many lacking windows?

Architectural styles have changed enormously since the first Lodge was built in New Zealand in 1842, and Lodge buildings reflect these changes. Lodges are more than real estate; they are ‘living’ examples of the mix of traditional and modern aspects of Freemasonry.

Are Lodge buildings safe and do they comply with building codes?

The safety regulations for Lodge buildings are no different than those for other structures in New Zealand. Lodge buildings must comply with local law and a repair and refurbishment programme is ongoing. The devastating Christchurch earthquakes were the catalyst for nine Lodges to centralise and develop a modern, purpose-built Lodge to house them all.

On the Kapiti Coast, two Lodges sold their buildings and bought a property more suited to their needs. Both projects include commercial space that provides the Lodges with rental income.

Can anyone visit a Lodge room?

Today Lodge rooms are seen as community facilities. Although mainly used by Freemasons for meetings, many Lodges make their premises available to community group for activities such as health and fitness, dance lessons, and arts and crafts.

Do Lodges hold working bees to look after the premises?

Sometimes Lodges hold working bees, but they are not a burden on members.

WOMEN

Can women become Freemasons?

In New Zealand women can join The Order of the Eastern Star, an international organisation started by a Freemason in the United States.

Do women benefit from Freemasonry?

Although Freemasonry is an organisation for men, women play an important role. Their encouragement, interest and support of their husbands and partners, their involvement in charity projects and social activities, and the often life-long friendships they make within Freemasonry are welcomed and valued.

What are the benefits to the family of a Freemason?

Put simply, Freemasonry is about creating better people and encouraging members to be the best people they can be. Its traditional values are still

relevant and important in how today's families and communities develop. Care of people—family, fellow Freemasons, the community and country—is a cornerstone of the organisation.

Is a Freemason's wife/partner welcomed at a Lodge?

Family values are an important part of a Freemason's life, and families are often invited to take part in get-togethers at Lodges and Masonic occasions at other venues.

SECRETS

Are there secrets in Freemasonry?

You will find information about Freemasonry in public libraries and on the internet. Until recently it was policy for members to be self-effacing and to avoid publicity about our organisation and our community work. Today among Freemasons there is an openness and pride in our organisation and its special quality of benevolence. This benevolence shows that Freemasons value people, have a tradition of caring and trust, tolerate diverse views, and encourage learning and advancement.

What goes on in Lodge rooms?

Freemasons gather at their Lodge for meetings that follow a business format much like other organisations. Meetings also have a ceremonial aspect, unique to Freemasonry. The ceremonial aspect involves steps or stages—dramatically

portrayed as allegories or stories—through which new or Apprentice Freemasons must pass to become Master Masons.

What's the meaning of the handshake?

The Freemasons handshake is nothing more than a sign of trust that dates back 300 years to the start of modern Freemasonry, and is a gesture still used by Freemasons today.

Do Freemasons use things like passwords and symbols?

Developed long before modern modes of communication, passwords were used by Freemasons to establish their level of progress or attainment in the organisation. We are surrounded by logos and symbols that organisations use to represent their ideals. Freemasons use their passwords and symbols to communicate and educate.

What happens in an initiation, and can family attend?

The initiation of a new Freemason is a ceremony that lasts for about one hour. At the end of the ceremony, the new member is presented with an 'Entered Apprentice Apron'.

Only Freemasons can attend the ceremony. Family members and friends who are also Freemasons generally attend to support the new Freemason.

Is any ceremony open to the public?

The ceremony to appoint a new Grand Master and his national officers is a public ceremony.

The Freemasons logo and Lodge information is often seen in funeral notices. Do Freemasons have to attend these funerals?

Freemasons do not have to attend a fellow Freemason's funeral, but those who are members of the deceased's Lodge may do so as a sign of respect and friendship.

APRONS, FORMAL DRESS AND REGALIA

Why do Freemasons dress up in formal dress?

Formal dress is merely part of past tradition and style. Today most Lodges see a business suit as suitable, yet some older Freemasons like to keep the tradition of formal dress.

Can you wear casual clothes to a Lodge?

Freemasonry has a proud tradition and most men own a business suit, and dress in such attire at Lodge meetings and activities out of respect for, and for the tradition of, Freemasonry.

What are regalia?

Regalia are items such as aprons, cuffs, sashes, medals, swords, Lodge banners, and accessories including ties, lapel pins, gloves, cases and rings.

Why wear aprons?

Aprons are symbolic of the aprons worn by stonemasons who centuries ago built castles and churches, and were the craftsmen who began Freemasonry. The decoration on aprons signifies the level of attainment or role of a particular Freemason.

Where are the regalia made?

For many years, the regalia (such as aprons) that Freemasons use in New Zealand were made in England. In recent years, the regalia have been made in England and various other locations, such as Australia and Asia.

Does a Freemason buy his aprons or is the cost included in his subscription?

Some Lodges include the aprons in the subscriptions; other Lodges require the Freemason to buy his aprons.

If a family member was a Freemason, can his apron be used by a new Freemason?

Many aprons are passed on within families, from generation to generation.

As a Freemason moves through the organisation he wears different aprons, so can he sell the old ones?

A Freemason can sell his old aprons, but generally they are used by others within a family or a member of his Lodge.

When a Freemason dies, must his family return the aprons?

A Freemason's family doesn't need to return his aprons after he dies, but generally family members do pass his regalia, including any apron, back to his Lodge.

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