



**GRAND LODGE OF
A.F. AND A.M. OF CANADA
IN THE PROVINCE OF ONTARIO**

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Brethren,

As the province starts to open up again from the pandemic, I have been thinking a lot about lodges re-opening, so here are some thoughts. I was asked what category do I think lodge meetings fall into? My first response was that there really is no category that we fall neatly into. In some ways we are like churches and other places of worship, but Masonry is not a religion and our rites and ceremonies are nowhere near as important as that. So we're not in that category which is high on the list of places to re-open sooner. No, we're more like amateur sports events. We have a small group of people who come in close physical contact and a larger group who sit on the sides and watch. And yet there are important differences. One is that we generally meet inside. But more significantly, our demographic is older. A recent analysis of a small sample of lodges showed that 28% were over 80, 23% in their seventies, and 19% in their sixties. Without even counting those with chronic medical conditions, that puts 70% of our members in the high risk group. We're not in the same risk category as Little League baseball.

The push to re-open has been mostly driven by economics. People need to earn a living to feed their families. Nobody depends on Masonry to earn their living. Well, our COO and staff do, but they have been working from home to hold things together. Whether lodges meet does not impact people's financial well-being. But it does carry all the risks of transmission.

The Ontario government has announced Stage 3 of re-opening in much of the province. Indoor gatherings of up to 50 people are allowed. But that is just the headline. The framework document <https://files.ontario.ca/mof-framework-reopening-province-stage-3-en-2020-07-13.pdf> puts many conditions on that. This 20 page document contains the phrase "physical distancing" 33 times. It also lists wearing a mask, frequent hand washing, cleaning parameters, and working remotely as much as possible. And recording each attendee's name and contact information to support effective contact tracing in case there is an outbreak.

The framework document refers you to other docs for more guidance in safe opening. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/develop-your-covid-19-workplace-safety-plan#hierarchy-of-controls> is one that is for re-opening workplaces. An interesting exercise is to download this and use your word-processing program to replace "workplace" with "lodge", and "worker" with "member". Reading it then is an eye-opener! I suggest you try it.

It outlines a hierarchy of controls, from most effective to least effective. The most effective is to have everyone stay home.

It then goes on to list other measures, in decreasing effectiveness, from engineering controls like modifications to the building, to limiting attendance numbers and instituting cleaning protocols, and lastly, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). However, it goes on to say, that while wearing masks is recommended, they are not a substitute for physical distancing. They also note that gloves do not provide any more protection than hand washing or using hand sanitizer.

Since lodge meetings are in no way a must activity, we ought to follow point 1 and do the most effective thing to prevent our members becoming infected by the virus.

We do, however, recognize the importance of the brethren maintaining a relationship with their lodges.

So I ask you to picture this: if we were to go through all the safety points (ignoring the most effective, that is, staying home) what would a lodge meeting look like? We cannot do any ritual that involves contact, so that excludes all degrees and installations. (We will not be watering down the Ritual.) So, we open. The brethren are spread out around the room all with masks on. Most of the senior members self-select to not come. Some brethren cannot get in because there is not enough room. We do the business. (This can be done virtually.) We have Masonic education. (This can be done virtually.) We close and go home. (No banquets allowed.) Someone thoroughly cleans the room, halls, bathrooms, doorknobs, etc..

There is no benefit to meeting in person this way, and our membership is put at risk, 70% at high risk. Is it worth it?

When we do re-open, it will be in phases. In order to PREPARE for the first phase, Lodge and Temple leaders should now be reviewing the government guidelines above (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/develop-your-covid-19-workplace-safety-plan>) along with a few extra points specific to Masonry which are identified below.

Lodge specific requirements for the First phase:

All local and provincial guidelines must be followed.

In the first phase of reopening the following restrictions will apply:

- **No visitors from other lodges**
- **No physical contact including shaking hands**
- **No ritual will be performed (except that required to open and close the meeting)**
- **No Installations and Investitures will be allowed**
- **No degree work will be permitted (EA, FC or MM)**
- **No fourth degrees/festive boards (no preparation or serving of food or beverages of any kind)**
- **No singing (including the National Anthem)**
- **No Masonic Memorial Services permitted**
- **No official visits by the DDGM**

In addition to the restrictions, everyone who attends a Lodge meeting must provide his name and contact information to be stored with the Lodge Secretary in case there is an outbreak and contacts need to be traced. Membership lists will only be shared with public health if a potential exposure occurs on site.

Remember that these points are the EXTRA things. You must also do the things in the government document.

No lodge will be required to open if they do not feel it is safe for their members.

Note that we are still in Lockdown mode and are not moving to the First Phase yet. And the way things are unfolding, it is looking less and less likely that we can safely open in September.

So, it is suggested that, while waiting to be able to re-open, lodges consider having virtual education sessions on their regular lodge night, followed by a social chat on-line. They could continue with separate virtual GP meetings as well to discuss the business or roll them into one. If this is technically too much for an individual lodge, perhaps districts could do it. And pay extra attention to keeping in contact with those elderly or ill brethren who continue to self-isolate.

Brethren, we were all taught to be cautious. Masonry has been through times when we were unable to meet in lodge before. And Freemasonry came back stronger than ever.

We will watch what happens, keep reading the government bulletins, and will keep in touch.

David J. Cameron
Grand Master