GRANDMASTER OF MARYLAND:

The Focus Of Masonry Is Shifting

The basic belief of the Masonic order is that they must always be ready to help each other. This has not changed, but a lot of the projects undertaken by the Prince Hall Masons would have been impossible a few years ago.

Maryland Grandmaster Samuel T. Daniels.

"In the old days, when I joined the Masons, things were different," explained Prince Hall Grandmaster Sam Daniels of Maryland. "If a member got sick, for example, he was assigned a brother mason who sat with him, making sure all his needs were met, until he got back on his feet. Sometimes that meant sitting with him all night. Sometimes it meant days."

Masonry as Daniels once knew it also meant that if a brother mason died, and had not made provisions for his family, the masons were obligated to make financial arrangements for the dead man's family that would insure their comfort.

But that was a long time ago, conceded Daniels, and because times are so different now, the thrust of the Masons has changed from a society primarily concerned with the every-day well-being of its members to a more external role.

The redefinition of focus has not changed the masons' basic belief that they must always be ready to help each other; if the need arose today, said Daniels, for a deceased member's family to be taken care of financially, it would certainly be done.

But on the whole, the Masons serve a more social and fraternal need to the more than 5,400 Prince Hall Masons of Maryland.

Solid Reputation

Although Grandmaster Daniels insists that the Masons cannot and should not be called a philanthropic organization, the fact remains that over the years, the group has gained the solid reputation of being a source of help to individuals, organizations and causes in need.

Grand treasurer, Donald Scott,

By Sue Williams

who has held the post for over 20 years' explained that part of that reputation could be attributed to the leadership of Daniels, who constantly tells the group that there is a need to "go one more step."

"Sure, we've given money to a lot of organizations over the years," Scott said, flipping through pages of carefully documented records. Those groups include health societies, such as the American Cancer Society, legal funds, the NAACP, and on and on and on.

And while Scott was unwilling to give a precise total of contributions made by the Masons to groups of that nature, he admitted that the sum comes to well over $500,000.

"We have regular projects we get into every year," he said, responding to the question. Each year, for instance, the Grand Lodge gives over $5,000 in scholarship money to Baltimore students; this year, 10 students received awards of $500 each.

The doors of the Masons' facilities are open to civic and private groups for meetings, forums and workshops, many or most free of charge. The only charge given out to most groups, said Scott, is a minimal fee for custodial services. The "open door" policy is one way the Masons fulfill their outreach commitment.

"We are not a country-club, a closed society," he said. "One of the ways to reach the younger people of the community is to open these doors to them for their causes, for the things that are important to them."

By reaching more young people, the group also hopes to increase its membership of younger men; the average age of the Masons today is 50 years.

The strength of any organization is in its youth," said Scott, citing the well-used but true cliche. "Right now, we're not only trying to hold our current younger members for leadership responsibilities, but also draw more younger men into the fold."

But aside from the general tasks of opening its doors and helping out charitable organizations, the Masons have undertaken some causes of a much larger scale.

Every Thanksgiving, for example, the facilities are used (free of charge) by Goodwill Industries to give a holiday dinner to the city's poor.

On the first of January, individual members of the Masons don aprons and caps to prepare dinner again for those who do not have it as well.

The cost of the dinner is entirely absorbed by the Masons; leftovers are taken most often to the Anna May Hunter Home for the Blind.

The holiday affair is more than an invitational gathering; those people who do not have transportation are picked up by members of the Masons and brought to the facilities, and taken home afterward.

According to Need

People come into the offices from time to time who need food; the need is determined and the groceries brought. Of course, said Scott, there is a need for scrutiny. "You can't help everyone," he conceded, "and the fact is that many people who came asking for help are more interested in a free ride than in getting genuine help."

When the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP was threatened with bankruptcy two years ago, the Prince Hall (Baltimore) chapter was called together by Grandmaster Daniels.

"He called us together one Saturday morning," recalled Scott. "I'll never forget it. He explained the situation to us and asked us what we were going to do about it. It was not a question of whether or not we would do something; the only consideration was, how much we would do."

Within two hours, the group of about 100 men had raised $10,000.

"That's what we're about," he said. "You see, it's not enough that six years ago we gave Provident Hospital $100,000 for their building fund. That was then. The hospital has new needs today. So do a lot of other things."

The need to go one more step, to find new causes, is something that Daniels constantly exhorts members to remember, and something which they respect. "It was that philosophy that was the incentive for us to raise the $10,000 for the NAACP," explained Scott, "and if another major cause like that were to arise, we would do it again."

Different Time

The services offered by the Masons to the community are a reflection of the changing of the times, said Scott. Under the leadership of the previous Grandmaster, Willard Allen, the needs were different.

"The social needs were not the same then as now," he said. "Back then, we were more concerned with getting our new facilities, with starting overseas lodges for our men in the service."

The present facilities, located on Eutaw Place in Baltimore were purchased from Hebrew Congregation Oheb Shalom in 1958, moving the Masons from their original home on Mosher and McMechen Sts.

"That purchase was historical," he said, "because it marked the first time any black organization paid cash for such a large transaction."

Former Grandmaster Willard Allen.

Early Beginnings

Masonry as a group actually began 1600 years before the birth of Christ as a means to meet the everyday needs of bricklayers who were working on a house for King Solomon.

From that seed organization the masons grew, eventually including architects and other skilled tradesmen who found solace in the umbrella group as it met their needs in a world largely dominated and controlled by the Roman Catholic Church.

As the numbers of the masons grew, so did the power of the group, and a resultant schism resulted between the masons and the Roman Catholic Church that has in some ways remained intact to the present day.

Although there was nothing to indicate that the masons were attempting to sap power from the church, and although there was no indication at all that those men who joined the masons were against the church, a movement was begun by the church to carefully and systematically remove the masons from existence.

The move was unsuccessful, however, and the masons continued, an all-white male, exclusive group that refused admittance to blacks, women and all other minority groups.

That exclusivity continued until one Prince Hall, son of an Englishman and a free black woman who served as a volunteer in the Revolutionary War, became upset at being refused admittance by the masons of Alexandria, Virginia.

He petitioned the Grand Lodge of England for membership and was granted a charter in 1775 and the Prince Hall Masons came into being. As the first black organization outside of the church, the Prince Hall Masons met to address the needs of the black men of all professions who ran to the group for solace and as another means of getting their needs met in a basically hostile white world.

And the Prince Hall group, just as its white father group that had evolved before the time of Christ and snowballed in power and membership as time went on, grew, as more and more black men realized how important the group was and could be to them and their well-being.

The schism that once existed between church and the masons is all but gone now; in fact, says Daniels, a man cannot belong to the masons and not believe in Christ, as has always been the case.

And, he said, membership in the masons often leads to closer involvement in the church because men begin to see the value of Christian service, which is what the Masons are really all about.

Each state in the United States has its own "jurisdiction," and each jurisdiction sets its own fees; there is no standard or set rate. There is a slight presence of competition between the 43 Prince Hall Grand Lodges in the United States, Canada, Liberia, Europe and the Bahamas, and the settling of that competition is partially achieved by how much each lodge can and does do.

Fees are largely determined along with the setting of goals, and brother Grand Lodge units are not at all eager about spilling to the world or to each other the exact figures of how much a year is paid. It is understood that whatever the amount paid, it is sufficient to get work done in their respective communities.

That was the need then, getting facilities, helping to increase the self-esteem of black men in a society which would put them down. Grandmaster Allen encouraged the men to wear the Masons' uniform and flaunt what could truly be called their own.

He listened to the pleas of overseas servicemen and began the overseas lodges 25 years ago. The overseas lodges serve a specific function of giving a little home atmosphere to black men in an all-white world. No more. No less.

But things are different now, conceded Scott, and Grandmaster Daniels has before him the awesome task of helping a community that is suffering from severe economic hardship.

Property Purchase

It was his response to that need that encouraged him to purchase property at the corner of Eutaw Place and North Avenue, in the heart of Baltimore's renovation craze.

"The situation was that people were moving into the area with a lot of money, pushing the long-time residents out," said Scott.

Daniels saw the trend and made a bid on the property on Eutaw Place. What he did not know was that the AME Church had made an identical bid on the same property.

Because it was difficult for any black enterprise to acquire property at that time, and because chances of that property becoming black-owned with both entities purchasing it, a joint purchase was in fact made ten years ago.

But the AME church, apparently overburdened with the financial obligations the property required, eventually backed out of its responsibilities and the Masons now have almost total financial responsibility of the building.

It has been a continual financial nightmare," conceded Scott, rubbing his head. "HUD and the Bolton Hill Society have thrown up roadblock after roadblock in front of us over the years as we've tried to make repairs, get help.

"Several times, for example, when we've had plans approved for internal construction that would improve the conditions of the property, HUD has in the last moments found a reason to disapprove them."

Scott said that the city housing authority has not been much more helpful; it is all due to a general approval of the Section 8 housing

(Continued on page 37)