



OPENING THE DOOR

A Simple Guide to Understanding—and
Talking About—Freemasonry



INTRODUCTION

Talking About Freemasonry

HOW DID YOU FIRST LEARN about Freemasonry? Was it by stepping into a lodge hall in your town and meeting with members? Was it at a community event? Searching online? From a film or TV show?

In all likelihood, you learned about Freemasonry from someone you trust—your grandparents or parents or a colleague or friend. Research shows that by far the most common introduction that current members had to the organization came from a personal connection, not the Internet.

It's important, then, that members feel comfortable talking about Freemasonry and well-informed about it—and that those considering joining are provided with simple and accurate information. Despite the persistent myth about Masonry being a “secret” group, members are absolutely allowed to and even encouraged to discuss their experience with people around them. It's how the tradition stays alive, from one person to the next.

This booklet is intended to help with that. Use it as a guide or give it to a friend or relative who wants to learn more. Don't worry about memorizing answers. The most powerful thing you can do is share is your personal experience. Here are some examples to get you started.



What Is Freemasonry?

LET'S START WITH AN EASY ONE—or, rather, a common question. Put simply, Freemasonry (also called Masonry) is a 300-year-old worldwide organization born out of medieval tradesman's guilds. It's also a set of teachings for a life well-lived. Masonry is both a group you join and a moral scaffolding for personal growth.

Ancient Freemasons built castles and cathedrals. Today, we build character. We believe in strong values, self-improvement, giving back to our communities, and helping each other in times of need. Our traditions center on moral teachings told through the symbols and allegory of stonemasonry.

That's serious stuff, and we take it seriously. But we also like to have fun. Many members meet their best friends through Freemasonry.

IN A NUTSHELL

Freemasonry is an organization of like-minded members dedicated to improving themselves and their communities.



What Is a Masonic Lodge?

THE LODGE IS THE LOCAL CHAPTER of the fraternity. The term "lodge" refers to both the members of that chapter and the building in which they meet.

Each lodge is run independently and reflects the personality of its members and community. Some emphasize family get-togethers, for instance, while others exist for the purpose of studying philosophy. But big or small, old or new, all lodges share the same Masonic traditions and rituals.

To learn more about a lodge, the best thing to do is reach out and attend an event. Since no two are quite the same, it's smart to visit more than one to find the right fit.

IN A NUTSHELL

A lodge is the local meeting place— and group—of Masons.

BY THE NUMBERS

332

The number of local lodges under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of California.

~40,000

Members of the Masons of California.

25

The number of new lodges formed since 2015—typically small, intimate, and devoted to fostering a specific culture.



So: What Do Masons Do?

THIS MAY BE the single biggest question people have about Freemasonry. What actually goes on inside a lodge room?

Officially, the lodge is centered around regular “stated meetings,” at which members vote on new members and do the ongoing work of running the lodge, which is a nonprofit. Members also prepare for and hold the ritual performances through which new members advance through the degrees of Masonry. But there’s a second part to this answer, and that’s that Masons do what any other group of friends might do: We meet up for a cup of coffee. We arrange golf outings. Barbeques. We attend lectures. We

host community events, mentor young people, volunteer for worthy causes, and help one another in times of need. The vast majority of Masonry happens outside of the lodge hall.

IN A NUTSHELL

Inside the lodge, Masons advance new members through the degrees. But most of Freemasonry happens out in the world!

GETTING OUT THERE

93 percent of lodges give money to support local youth.

81 percent of lodges have regular meetings or events outside of the lodge hall.

75 percent of members surveyed said “fellowship/ brotherhood” was their most cherished part of Freemasonry.

38 percent of lodges have donated or volunteered time to disaster recovery efforts.

32 percent of lodges fund scholarships for local students, on top of statewide scholarship programs.



How Is Masonry Different from Other Service Organizations?

WHILE SERVICE IS one key part of who we are and what we do, it’s not the extent of it.

Freemasonry is about three things: personal development, true friendship, and community service. Unlike other volunteer groups, we spend a lot of time working on becoming our best selves. That includes building leadership skills and working to be better partners, parents, and friends.

Because we’re a 300-year-old organization with a love for symbolism, we also have a lot of pomp and circumstance: fancy regalia, unusual titles, very old rituals. That means when you join a Masonic lodge, you are joining an important part of history, with traditions that you won’t find anywhere else.

IN A NUTSHELL

Masonry combines public service with a cultural and philosophical tradition unlike any other.

What Happens Outside Lodge?

WHILE THE OFFICIAL STUFF happens inside the lodge, most Masons will tell you that the most meaningful connections they make come outside those four walls. For example, we get together to:

SOCIALIZE. That includes everything from camping trips to black-tie dinners.

HOST SPECIAL EVENTS. Many lodges recognize people in their community, like standout teachers and students.

LEARN. Masonic clubs and groups meet for lectures or to hold discussions about history, philosophy, or other topics.

GATHER. Masons love to form clubs about common interests—for instance, the group of vintage Italian scooter lovers seen here.

GIVE BACK. Masons support their community and local causes, particularly around public education and childhood literacy.

MENTOR. Masons frequently work closely with students, including members of the Masonic youth orders.



What Can—and Can't—Members Say to Non-Members?

HERE'S WHERE THAT LITTLE SLICE of secrecy comes in.

Masons are totally free—even encouraged—to discuss the history of the fraternity, the nature of their lodge, and their own experience in it with anyone they choose.

The only things they can't discuss are the signs, grips, and passwords that Masons use to greet one another, or the specifics of the degree ceremonies. These rituals are partly a

test of the candidate's knowledge, so for one thing, we don't want to give away the answers. But more importantly, having meaningful degree ceremonies is a cherished part of Freemasonry, and keeping them private preserves that specialness. Same goes for the handshakes.

Masons' stated meetings and the degree ceremonies are open only to Masons. However, a lodge

dinner, social hour, or a meet-up is open to guests. That's it!

That means we can talk about Masonic symbols and what they mean. We can talk about the roles of different lodge officers, and why they wear certain regalia and sit in certain positions. Perhaps most importantly, we can talk about how Masonry has impacted our life, and what it means to us.

IN A NUTSHELL

Members cannot discuss the specifics of the ritual, or handshakes and passwords. That's it.



Is Freemasonry a Secret Society?

FINALLY, AN EASY ONE! The answer is no. It's a common misunderstanding, though.

When Freemasonry first began in 18th century Europe, Masonic ideals of tolerance and equality were quite radical, and sometimes illegal. So Masonic lodges didn't exactly advertise. (In the United States, though, Masonic lodges have almost always been highly visible in their communities.)

Times have changed. Freemasonry is at its best when we engage openly with the world. That's why our lodges have websites, social media pages, and public events. We can and do talk freely about almost everything we do—with just a very few exceptions.

IN A NUTSHELL

No!



SPOTLIGHT



Alan Clayton

Barbershop owner

LA JOLLA LODGE No. 518

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO FREEMASONRY?

I went to barber college, so I wasn't able to join a typical fraternity. But I was always looking for that kind of camaraderie. I remember talking to my brother-in-law and he mentioned that he was a Mason. He told me about a lodge in La Jolla with some younger members and that it might be a good fit. I fell in love right away.

DID YOU FEEL YOU FIT IN WITH THE GROUP?

I have my hands and my neck tattooed, so people can be a little shy or intimidated around me.

Especially the older generation. But it wasn't that way in the lodge. They asked what I did for work, about my wife and family. They weren't treating me any differently. That's the special thing about Masonry. It brings people together no matter what you look like. The longer I've been a Mason, the more I've realized it's about the internal qualities of a person.

HOW HAS THE LODGE CHANGED SINCE YOU JOINED?

We've made some changes that I hoped to see. We're doing more social outings—baseball games, some hockey games. Dinner and drinks. It's not about appealing to more people. It's about helping members get more out of lodge life.





Is Masonry a Religion?

LIVING THEIR VALUES

97 percent of Master Masons remain members for life.

89 percent of all members say they “value” or “strongly value” their membership.

81 percent of members surveyed described Masonry as an “organization I am proud to be part of.”

NO. Our members come from all spiritual backgrounds. But to get the most out of Freemasonry, you have to believe in a higher power. In fact, it’s a requirement of membership. But what that means is personal to you. One Mason may identify their higher power as God or Allah. Another might not have a name for it at all.

Because Freemasonry was created in Medieval England and Scotland, many of its rituals borrow symbols from Christianity. But make no mistake about it: We welcome members of all spiritual faiths.

IN A NUTSHELL

No. Masonry is open to people of all faiths and traditions.

What’s the Deal with Politics and Religion?

THE MASONIC LODGE is designed to be a special space—one that exists as a fundamentally different place than regular life. In the words of Masonry, this is described as the difference between the “sublime” and the “profane.” For that reason, while Freemasons are sitting in lodge, we don’t discuss politics or religion. That’s been the case for 300 years.

That doesn’t mean our members can’t hold fierce political beliefs or commit their life to their faith. Indeed, many famous Freemasons over the years have been spiritual and political leaders, from priests to presidents. And outside of

lodge, members are encouraged to engage in respectful, open discussion about whatever they please.

But for the few hours that we meet as a lodge each month, we agree to table these two topics.

Masonic lodges exist to encourage lifelong friendships and provide a supportive space for self-improvement. One of the keys is emphasizing what unites us, rather than what divides us. By intentionally setting aside politics and religion while we’re at lodge, we protect that space.

IN A NUTSHELL

To preserve harmony between members, politics and religion are not discussed while in session.



SPOTLIGHT



James Rualo

Graphic designer

CORONADO LODGE No. 441

HOW DID YOU FIRST COME TO FREEMASONRY?

When I was in college at San Diego State, I started taking a Filipino contemporary history class and it became my favorite class and probably the most informative one I took. I'd never known how rich Filipino history is. The only Filipino interactions I had as a kid were Saturday morning bowling with my dad's friends' kids. But that class planted the seeds for my Masonic journey. A lot of heroes of the Philippines are Masons—Andres Bonifacio, Jose Rizal. The revolutionary Katipunan was based on Masonic organizations.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO SERVE AS MASTER OF YOUR LODGE?

Coronado is a Navy lodge, so there's a lot of turnover. In 2015, two men had to drop out of the officers' line because they were deployed. For me, being a Mason is already an honor, but being an officer is a really big undertaking that only a select few can commit to or even be called to. At first, I felt intimidated, but I committed to serving in the line and in 2018, I was master of the lodge. Leadership really tempers your character. Especially Masonic leadership—understanding the plumb, the square, and the compass. You learn a lot about yourself.



Are There Women Freemasons?

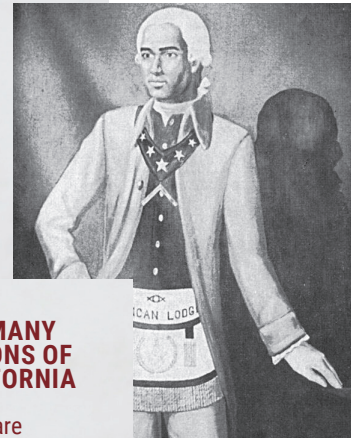
IN A NUTSHELL

There are! Visit freemason.org for a list of women's and co-ed lodges.

WOMEN HAVE BEEN Freemasons for hundreds of years, beginning in France and later spreading across Europe and to the rest of the world. Today, there are women's and co-ed Masonic lodges around the globe. That includes several in California, like the Honorable Order of Universal

Co-Masonry and the Women's Grand Lodge of California. For a fuller list of women's and co-ed lodges, visit freemason.org.

In addition to women's-only and co-ed lodges, most states (including California) also have several Masonic-related groups comprised of women, most notably the Order of the Eastern Star.



THE MANY MASONS OF CALIFORNIA

There are thousands of Masonic bodies around the world—including several in California, including:

Grand Lodge of California, F&AM

MW Prince Hall Grand Lodge of California

Grand Lodge of Iran in Exile

Women's Grand Lodge of California

Grand Orient de France

Le Droit Humain, American Federation

Women's Grand Lodge of Belgium

What Is Prince Hall Masonry?

PRINCE HALL MASONRY is a branch of Freemasonry founded to serve the Black community. It began in Boston in 1775, when many Masonic lodges denied membership to Black applicants.

Today, Prince Hall Freemasonry is the oldest and largest predominantly Black fraternity in the country. It continues to provide a meaningful experience to hundreds of thousands of members, and is open to people of all races and ethnicities. Although we are two different organizations, we sit in on one another's meetings and often partner together on community and philanthropic projects.

IN A NUTSHELL

Prince Hall Masonry is a historically Black branch of the fraternity.



Who's Joining Today

TO BORROW A TIRED PHRASE, this isn't exactly your grandfather's fraternity. Today, the average age of new prospects is 38, the lowest it's been in generations. Members and prospects come from all cultures and walks of life. In fact, Masonry is one of the best ways to meet great people from different backgrounds.



WHY JOIN A LODGE?

MANY MEMBERS SAY joining a Masonic lodge is one of the best decisions of their lives. It's a way to step back from the grind of daily life and enter a different mental space. It's a way to meet with friends and make new ones. It's a refreshing change of pace.

Of course, the specific reasons to join are unique to every member. Here, we've collected some of the commonly cited reasons people say they join. If any of these sound appealing to you, Freemasonry has a lot to offer. To join or learn more, visit freemason.org and hit the "Connect to a Lodge" button.

1

Forming lifelong friendships

2

Focusing on personal development

3

Helping others

4

Being part of a historic organization you can take pride in

5

Meeting new people from different backgrounds who share your values

6

Engaging with the community

7

Learning time-tested leadership skills

8

Enjoying regular social activities

9

Connecting with a global network



What Causes Do Freemasons Support?

ONE OF THE MOST important goals of a Freemason is being a good citizen. That's why Masons are known for giving back.

At a local level, we support causes that are important to our communities. We also take care of vulnerable members and their families through the Masonic Homes of California, an outreach organization

that supports seniors and at-risk Masons and families with health care services and emergency funds.

IN A NUTSHELL

Primarily, public education and senior care.

Globally, we're known for supporting public schools. Many of the first public schools in the United States were launched by Freemasons, who believe that equal access to knowledge is the basis for a civil society. Today, we continue to support public schools and youth education initiatives through the California Masonic Foundation, which sponsors many student scholarships, awards, and literacy efforts.

YOUR DOLLARS AT WORK

\$5,924,363 raised by California Masons in 2021 for charitable programs

\$3,521,639 provided in 2021 to support members in need and their families

More than **\$1.5 million** donated since 2009 to four MLB foundations to support kids through Masons4Mitts

More than **\$3.5 million** donated since 2011 to Raising A Reader youth literacy nonprofit.



Is Anyone Turned Away from Masonry?

YES, SOME PEOPLE are turned away. Each Masonic jurisdiction has basic membership requirements. For example, to join a lodge that's part of the Grand Lodge of California, you must be a man, profess a belief in a higher power, and be at least 18 years old. (There are

lots of other jurisdictions, even within California, with different membership requirements.)

Beyond that, applicants go through a sort of mutual interview process with a lodge. They meet with members to learn what it means to be a Mason and get a glimpse of the lodge's unique culture. They talk about whether

they're ready to commit to Freemasonry in general and that lodge in particular.

The lodge members eventually vote on whether to accept each applicant. The vote must be unanimous. The most important requirement is to be of strong moral character.

IN A NUTSHELL

Yes. All Masonic organizations have specific membership requirements.



SPOTLIGHT

DeAndre Simmons

Opera performer

SAN DIEGO LODGE No. 35

MASONRY SEEMS LIKE IT PROVIDES LOTS OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERFORMANCES.

Oh yes. I've performed for my lodge and for a few Eastern Star events, too. We also have a wonderful pianist in our lodge who plays for us. It's like singing for family—it's a great feeling to contribute to an event that way.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH FREEMASONRY?

My grandfather was a Mason in New Jersey. Growing up, I was constantly going to Masonic events and parades. And then later,

when I became a classical musician, I learned about our wonderful brother Mozart, and that sparked my interest even more. When I moved back to California, I was led to San Diego No. 35, which I applied to in 2020. I'm happy and proud to be a member of the lodge.

WHAT'S A NORMAL DAY LIKE FOR A VOCALIST SUCH AS YOURSELF?

We're essentially athletes. By that I mean we practice every day. I'm normally up around 6:30 a.m., and by 10 a.m. I'm vocalizing for half an hour. Then in the afternoon I do it again. After that I work on whatever piece of music I'm learning or studying. I'm always studying the next piece—that's the craft.



What's Happening Now?

LODGES ARE REFLECTIONS of their members—in other words, they're constantly changing. Recently, that evolution has picked up extra speed. Here are some of the recent developments in California.

WE'RE MAKING NEW LODGES. One of the most interesting developments is the establishment of new “affinity” lodges built around members’ shared interests. For instance, the Jose Rizal Lodge was established in the tradition of the legendary Filipino independence figure; Ye Olde Cup and Ball Lodge, which meets at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, is for Masons with an interest in performing magic.

WE'RE HOLDING LECTURES AND DISCUSSION GROUPS. At lodge and online, Masons hear from expert speakers on a wide range of subjects, from philosophy and self-improvement to history and symbolism. Among these educational events are an annual academic conference and an ongoing online lecture series.

WE'RE HELPING OUR COMMUNITIES. As they have for centuries, Masons continue to get involved in their communities. Statewide, Masons give to several programs through the California Masonic Foundation. Chief among those are Raising A Reader, which promotes early childhood literacy and family engagement reading programs; and Masons4Mitts, an annual giving drive to support the charitable foundations of four Major League Baseball clubs and help kids in their communities.

WHAT IT TAKES TO JOIN

BE A MAN AGE 18 OR HIGHER. Masonic Youth Orders serve younger people.

BE OF STRONG MORAL CHARACTER. Applicants with certain criminal histories cannot join a lodge.

BE RECOMMENDED BY TWO MEMBERS. Once an applicant is nominated by two members, he must be unanimously voted into the lodge. That's why it's important to get to know members before applying.



How Can I Apply?

THE BEST WAY to get started is to learn about the lodges near you. To do this, fill out a request for information form at freemason.org and we'll reach out to help answer any questions and connect you to a lodge in your area. If there are multiple lodges near you, it's often a good idea to visit several. Since each lodge has a unique identity, you'll get a better sense for which one suits your personality and needs.



How Can I Learn More?

The easiest way is to ask a Mason! They'll be happy to discuss the organization with you and answer any questions. There are also lots of resources available online, all free and easily accessible:

FREEMASON.ORG

Discover more about what Freemasonry is, sign up for an event, and learn about becoming a Mason. You can also find a lodge near you and request information about membership.

CALIFORNIAFREEMASON.ORG

Our award-winning quarterly member magazine is online! Digital subscriptions are free, with each new issue emailed to you. Find out what's happening in California Masonry, meet our members and lodges, and check out in-depth features on Masonic history, trends, and so much more. Subscribe at californiafreemason.org/subscribe.

MASONICFOUNDATION.ORG

Learn more about our philanthropic partners, the charities we support, and the good work Masons are doing together all around the state—and donate.

In Review

WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

Freemasonry is an organization of like-minded members dedicated to improving themselves and their communities.

WHAT IS A MASONIC LODGE?

A lodge is the local meeting place—and group—of Masons.

WHAT DO MASONS DO?

Inside the lodge, Masons advance new members through the degrees. But most of Freemasonry happens out in the world.

HOW IS MASONRY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS?

Masonry combines public service with a cultural and philosophical tradition unlike any other.

WHAT CAN—AND CAN'T—MEMBERS SAY? Members cannot discuss the specifics of the ritual, or handshakes and passwords.

IS FREEMASONRY A SECRET SOCIETY? No.

IS MASONRY A RELIGION? No. Masonry is open to people of all faiths and traditions.

WHAT IS THE DEAL WITH POLITICS AND RELIGION?

To preserve harmony between members, politics and religion are not discussed while in session.

ARE THERE WOMEN FREEMASONS? There are. A list of women's and co-ed lodges can be found at freemason.org.

WHAT IS PRINCE HALL MASONRY? A historically Black branch of the fraternity.


WHAT CAUSES DO FREEMASONS SUPPORT? Primarily, public education and senior care.

IS ANYONE TURNED AWAY FROM MASONRY? Yes. All Masonic organizations have specific membership requirements.



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