



MCME 2024

Survey Of Jurisdictional Reports 050124

Since 1949, The Midwest Conference on Masonic Education (MCME) has been a forum for Masonic Educators from various jurisdictions to confer, collaborate and commiserate. In the past, the conference asked member jurisdictions to give a yearly status report which often consisted of representatives just reading the report from their jurisdiction's Annual Communications. Since the 2021 conference, MCME has standardized the reports and reduced them down to a one page snapshot. Available on their website, they are a treasure trove of ideas, initiatives, and contacts. They also provide a unique opportunity to easily look at education across jurisdictions and get a more national perspective on Masonic Education.

I've looked at the reports from this year which will be available online at the conclusion of this weekend's MCME in Minneapolis as well as jurisdictional reports throughout their archives and there are some things that stand out. I want to be clear that these thoughts and opinions are solely my own and do not necessarily represent those of any entity whose membership is predicated on Masonic affiliation or membership. And, as with all educational endeavors, my thoughts and opinions may change in the face of new information, time, experience, or perspective.

Definition of Masonic Education: In many jurisdictions, Masonic Education is defined in relationship to Ritual, either solely concerned with or expressly anything but Ritual and Ritual Instruction. In jurisdictions where Masonic education is everything but Ritual Instruction, the definition of what qualifies can be very grey and can be a struggle. Ohio's official definition of Masonic Education is 'any activity, properly framed, that teaches Brethren Masonic values and how to incorporate them into their lives.' They emphasize that it is the 'properly framed' part of the definition that is the most important. A lesson on tying a bowtie is one thing, a lesson on tying a bowtie explicitly linked to our values is something else entirely. This struggle to define Masonic Education continues.

Role of Education: Jurisdictions have usually recognized the importance of Masonic Education, but they have often seemed unclear on the role. In the past, many jurisdictions viewed Masonic Education more like entertainment, something to give a little something special in Lodge Meetings. It has also been viewed as addressing areas of weakness in a Lodge such as Officer Training, Candidate Counseling, or Membership Training. Recently, more and more jurisdictions seem to view the role of Masonic Education as being important in two main areas; Membership and Standardization of the Masonic Experience.

Membership: Many jurisdictions are recognizing that Education has a role in Membership Retention and Membership Development. Minnesota, especially, is trying to use Education, Membership, and Service initiatives as a three-pronged approach to membership issues. There has been a rise in task-based, multi-directional initiatives that emphasize education and facilitate engagement.

Development: Missouri debuted their Thomas Fiveash Riddick Society, sister to Ohio's Royal Scofield Society, an educational honor society open to Master Masons where membership is earned by completing certain tasks at certain levels in areas like research, mentoring, service, travel, and producing original work. These programs, along with the Scottish Rite NMJ pathfinder program, Indiana's Illumination Program, and the now sadly-defunct Minnesota Light program seem to be focused on the Brother who is asking himself 'I'm a Master Mason, now what?'

Retention: There are similar programs specifically aimed at the newly-minted Mason, looking to facilitate his engagement and connection. Ohio's Zerubbabel Award and Indiana's Masonic Rookie Program are two prime examples. Ideally a mentor would facilitate and accompany the new Mason as they complete these programs, but it isn't necessary. New Brethren can follow this roadmap by themselves, earning accomplishments as they complete their journeys.

Standardization of Masonic Experience: There seems to be a push to make the Masonic Experience standard within a jurisdiction, not in a micro-management way; but in a way that establishes a baseline of expectations, information, and support. It is easy to assume that Masonry as practiced in your Lodge or your District is the same throughout your jurisdiction; but the reality is often different. There are Lodges that struggle with knowing what is expected, what they need to do and how to do it. Personally, I remember working

with a Lodge and the Master telling me ‘Don’t you think if we knew how to do X, we’d do it?’ These initiatives seem to be aimed at giving struggling Masons something to work towards and the ‘superhero’ Masons something to spark ideas off of. Examples:

- Illinois Intender Program: Created resources that mentors can use with candidates and Brothers so that there is consistent messaging and information topics such as Ritual, history, etiquette, symbolism, etc.
- Most jurisdictions have some form of Officer’s Training or Wardens and Deacon’s Training with Missouri and Virginia being excellent examples of in-person trainings. Likewise, most jurisdictions have Officer’s Manuals in some form.
- Most jurisdictions have some sort of monthly e-mailed newsletter with a specific section on education, including programs that can be shared in Lodges.
- Ohio has the ‘Lodge Year in A Box.’ Their Education Committee collects a number of programs of varying lengths and formats centered around the Grand Master’s theme. At the front of this collection is a set of ‘recipes’ for a Lodge Education Officer. These recipes guide the officer in using some of the pieces in the collection, some pieces archived in Grandview, or some external sources in creating an appropriate year of educational programs depending on the character of their Lodge. There are recipes for Lodges that loves history, that loves to talk, that is Ritual-focused, that is more service focused, etc.
- Wisconsin created Lodge Education Cards. These were education program starter cards to be used by Education Officers. The cards have a 400-500 word pre-built education topics with questions/discussion points. These are still in development.
- Many jurisdictions have a section on education either public-facing on their websites or member-facing within Grandview, MORI, or other membership system.

Role of Proficiencies: Proficiencies vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, with few requiring long-form memorized proficiencies as a prerequisite to advancement in the degrees. Jurisdictions report that roughly 25 years ago there was a push to remove memorized proficiencies as a barrier to membership. Many jurisdictions have a short-form proficiency with just modes of recognition or some sort of alternative proficiency separate from the Ritual, few require memorization. Some jurisdictions are rethinking proficiencies as part of membership development. The point of the proficiencies isn’t just memorizing Ritual, it also facilitates a mentor and candidate making meaningful connections, which is why men join and why they stay.

Education From ‘Non-Traditional’ Sources. There is a lot of good Masonic Education being done in the world, many jurisdictions are embracing the efforts of other Masonic educational entities. Examples:

- Lodges of Research seem to be coming to the fore with regards to a state’s Masonic Education, especially in Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Kentucky.
- Since the pandemic, there is a return and increase in Masonic symposia like the different MasonicCons, Minnesota Masonic Camp, Nebraska’s Yearly Education Breakfast among others.
- There are a number of excellent or unique educational experiences such as Spes Novum Lodge in Illinois, Pentalpha Lodge in Indiana, Goose and Gridiron in Ohio, Castle Island Virtual Lodge in Manitoba among many others. Brethren seem willing to travel for the kind of experience they value.
- Online educational meetings have continued since the pandemic, from entities such as the Rubicon Masonic Society in Kentucky, Virginia’s Lodges of Research, Missouri’s Truman Lecture Series, Castle Island Virtual Lodge in Manitoba.
- Many jurisdictions have outstanding online libraries with the Grand Lodge of Iowa, the John E. Fetzger Digital Library in Michigan, the Montana Masonic Library and Research Center among many others.
- A number of jurisdictions have official podcasts or YouTube Channels. Grand Lodge of Michigan’s Trowel Time on their Michigan Masons YouTube Channel is an excellent example of communicating and connecting from the grand Lodge to the Lodge level.

Lingering Issues. As much phenomenal work is being done, there are still issues that remain and jurisdictions are still searching for appropriate solutions.

- Declining Attendance: Multiple jurisdictions report a decline in attendance and engagement since the pandemic. This results in a bigger strain on Lodges, especially in having Brethren to hold Lodge Offices, conduct Lodge business or proficient enough in the Ritual to confer degrees. Education has a piece in this, but it is difficult to get a Lodge engaged in a presentation on Sacred Geometry when they are more worried about being able to remain open.
- Establishing a Baseline : The quality and consistency of Masonic Education, however defined, can vary throughout a jurisdiction. Ideally, a newly-raised Master Mason in Milwaukee should have a similar baseline of knowledge as a newly-raised Master Mason in Rhinelander. A Senior Warden in Munising should have a similar baseline of expectations and tools as a Senior Warden in Ann Arbor.
- Technology Issues: There is no perfect platform for all Brethren. Whether it is videos, e-books, e-mails, virtual libraries, or on-demand printing, it is difficult to get resources to Brethren in a way that is easy and accessible. With many jurisdictions moving to Grandview, the system does allow for wider access to educational materials within that jurisdiction; but removes those resources for anyone outside that jurisdiction.
- Facilitating Connections: This gets expressed in many forms, such as: getting Lodges to engage with the wealth of materials and resources around them, getting Brethren to travel or participate; or just getting Brethren outside their bubble. Masonry is about meaningful connections; it is why men join and it is why they stay. More and more, Masonic Education is being freed from the confines of the Lodge Building and Stated Meeting, there are many different opportunities to make those

meaningful connections that go unnoticed or underutilized. At last year's MCME, one Brother described is as if he had just found the most beautiful beach in Hawaii, but he can't get the guys in his Lodge to leave the hotel sandbox.

- Combatting Fatigue and Frustration-Jurisdictions aren't race cars, they are aircraft carriers. Changes in direction are slow and require an incredible expense of resources, the same is true with Lodges. After a year of work, you may have only changed course two inches. But a two-inch change today becomes a three-foot change next year and a four-mile change the year after that. The challenge is keeping that perspective.

The state of Masonic Education is strong, but evolving. There are common problems, creative solutions, and outstanding resources out there which you discover through looking across jurisdictional lines. The reports tell one part of the story, it is the conversations with Brethren from those jurisdictions that tell a richer and more complete one. As Masonic Education is something that thrives in connection and dies in isolation, I would encourage you to look at these reports, connect with Brethren and form your own conclusions.

Best wishes for safe travels

BIO: Chad Kopenski is something of a professional Masonic Has-Been. He is as Past Master of Paramuthia Lodge #25 in Athens, Ohio, Past District Deputy Grand Master and Past District Education Officer of the 17th District of Ohio, Past Chairman of the Grand Lodge of Ohio Education Committee, Past Regent of the Royal Scofield Society, and is the Immediate Past President of the Midwest Conference on Masonic Education. He holds memberships in Amesville Lodge #278 in Amesville, Ohio, as well as Oregon Lodge #151 in Oregon, Wisconsin. Chad is an educator by trade, a proud autism dad, and resides in Appalachian Ohio with his wife, daughter, and an impressive number of critters. Known for his captivating Masonic presentations that emphasize the personal and intentional aspects of Freemasonry, Chad is currently engaged in the development of a comprehensive history and biography of artist and publisher John Sherer.