

William O. Ware Lodge of Research

REBUILDING A MASONIC LODGE

Jacob Fields, Master, Crittenden-Dry Ridge Lodge No. 694

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Good morning, Brothers. My name is Jacob Fields, and I am from Crittenden-Dry Ridge Lodge No. 694, down in Crittenden, Kentucky. I'm a third generation Mason, and an eight-time Past Master at Lodge No. 694. I'm here today to talk to you about rebuilding a Masonic Lodge, through the experiences my Brethren and I have had at our Lodge during this process.

Many Lodges all over the United States are having a magnitude of problems, whether it be attendance, maintenance of the Lodge, or the lack of Masonic knowledge, etc. The Brothers of Crittenden-Dry Ridge Lodge No. 694, otherwise known as CDR No. 694, were no different, and, in fact, had all of these problems and more.

Before I go too far into the steps, changes, problems, and successes my Brothers and I have had, I want to acknowledge that these are not the only possible ways, and I'm not writing this to say that we at CDR No. 694 have perfected Masonry. We see and know that this is, and should be, a never-ending process that has to be continually adjusted to keep things fresh and working. What we do today might not work best for your Lodge but is a reference of what has worked for ours so far.

In 2009, CDR No. 694 reached its highest membership with 107 members. The very next year, CDR No. 694 had its largest decline in membership, losing 15 members. CDR No. 694 currently sits at 57 members. The first-hand experience I can give you starts in December of 2009, when I was raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason. My first full regularly stated meeting as a Master Mason was in January 2010, and I had already been elected Tyler. The District Deputy Grand Master that year was from our Lodge.

Our Lodge did Fireworks sales, chili suppers, handed out Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, had a Mother's Day meal for mothers and widows, and held a blood drive. We were doing the same things we had done for years, and it was working for us at that time. We took money in and we sent money out. We continued to do these exact same things for years and membership began to decline, but we did things "the way we've always done it."

We used a progressive line and kicked last year's Master out to Tyler, and gave our new Master little to no help or guidance. We kept doing this until one day we worked our way out of new Junior Wardens and Senior Wardens. We started throwing new Master Masons in line, and they

William O. Ware Lodge of Research

started falling out. Lucky me, in 2014 I made it to Worshipful Master. My dad and grandpaw were both members of CDR No. 694, and the one thing I was set in stone on was that I wouldn't let the Lodge close under my time as Master.

Little did I know that it would take us all the way up to present-day. I'm still Master, skipping only 2 years in which my dad and another long-time member shared the Master's role so I could take a break. Our Lodge had made its way into such stagnation. I once opened the Lodge with me and 3 other members. We read the minutes, the treasurer's report, and communications. We had no new or old business because we were doing the same old things and would just talk to make it seem somewhat worth the trip up. The members we had would be in jeans and a polo, at very best. There were side conversations, three people showed up to the chili super, and Covid killed the Mother's Day breakfast. The food baskets were going to the same families year after year, and the blood drive was dwindling year after year. We were dying, but "that's how we always have done it." Did I want change? YES. Did I know how to change it? NO. Anything new would have likely been shot down. Even as Master, it is nearly impossible to change a culture; and is impossible without support.

We all come into Lodge on a level, but if we're honest there is always a special respect for our veteran Brothers, and we tend to hold their opinions in a bit higher esteem. Especially when those Brothers pulled out of their own pockets to pay the mortgage for years.

Finally, one day a few Brothers were talking, brainstorming, venting, and they decided enough. They decided to try something, because trying nothing wasn't working. Our very first attempt of any kind to try to do something different came in January 2022. We set up a meal outside of the Lodge. Friends, families, and fellow Brothers from local Lodges were all invited. We met at LaRosa's. Everyone paid their own way, so it didn't cost the Lodge, and about 23 people showed up, counting spouses, kids, and friends. It got us seen outside of the Lodge. We got to meet each other's families and it gave us an opportunity to talk and be friends outside of a stated meeting.

Next, we wanted to get Brothers to the meetings. So, the evening of our stated meeting we put out the word and had a huge seafood boil. This brought Brothers in from all over and attendance that night was much higher. We were trying things and they were working, but were they sustainable? One Brother footed the bill for the entire seafood boil, and our budget doesn't allow for a steak dinner to bring Brothers to lodge every meeting. So we continued to try and tweak things.

Our meetings still had no substance and we needed something to draw Brothers back to Lodge and to add body to our meetings. We at least needed something to better the Brothers who would attend. We decided to start having a speaker for education. This is one of the biggest improvements we have made to our meetings. We have found at CDR No. 694 that these education portions work best for us if the topic allows for conversation. We also decided we will open Lodge in long form, then go straight to ease and allow our Brethren of lower degrees to join in these educations (topic permitting).

William O. Ware Lodge of Research

Then, the idea of trying to be a morning lodge came up, so we tried it. This works amazingly well for our lodge. Remember, no move will be the perfect move and work for everyone in the Lodge, but the mornings on Saturday just seem to work way better than the evenings on Saturdays did for a large majority of our Lodge members. It allows us to put more substance into our meetings and not take everyone's Saturday night with their families. Personally, my kids are still in bed now when I go to Lodge, and the dew is still on, so you can't be doing much yard work anyways.

So far, we haven't had much kick-back. The first disagreement of any kind was changing the meeting time, which was mostly just the thought that it wouldn't help anything. This is a common rebuttal to any change a Lodge tries to make, but the motion passed fairly easily with the assumption that we would just change it back if it was a failure.

Now that our meetings had more purpose, we decided to go with a consent agenda for minutes and bills so that we could shorten the formalities and have more time for learning. Lodge had been to the point that minutes and bills were all that we had, and we wanted to step as far away as possible from the "this is how we've always done it" mentality. We started emailing and posting our reports before Lodge, and it streamlines things very well.

Next, we got to a point where some brothers of CDR No. 694 wanted to make a visual change. Since we had added education and changed meetings to the mornings, our core Brothers wanted to keep going. Our Lodge was fortunate enough to have a decent amount of money in investments. We came into the money in 2001 when Dry Ridge Lodge merged with Crittenden and sold their building. The money had been invested in CDs at the bank, or in stocks, and hadn't really grown any. We all can see how inflation is dwindling the dollar, and the money wasn't getting us anywhere, just setting and not growing.

Like many Lodges we brought money in and gave charity, but completely ignored the state of our Lodge. The building is 31 years old and by 2022 it hadn't been touched much at all since being built in 1992. Many things needed attention, and it just wasn't all that welcoming of a building.

One Brother started talking about pulling some of the investment funds and remodeling the lodge building. We brought up the idea to all active members over the course of a month and went into the next meeting confident that we would get the motion passed to remodel the lodge.

We started our meeting, had our education, then brought the motion to the floor. BOOM. No sooner than the motion was made, a Brother moved to table it until the next meeting. The Brothers who had been working on the plan had the air knocked out of them. Even though there had been some conversation before the meeting, our biggest mistake was not working harder on an itemized list of costs. It's EXTREMELY hard to list everything and the cost of a project like that, so it's understandable where Brothers might get concerned when talking about spending a large sum of funds.

This caused quite the blood pressure rise for a few Brothers, but, as Brothers should, we worked through it. Long story short, we regrouped and got it passed at the next meeting. This

William O. Ware Lodge of Research

was a huge undertaking, and we are still working on some changes, but we have brought our Lodge from 1992 hand-me-downs to a modern, fresh Lodge that is comfortable and welcoming.

We've brought in technology with sound, lighting, and a monitor in the East, along with capability for videos, zoom meetings, and presentations. We've added theater seating, resurfaced flooring, changed cabinets and countertops, painted, changed decor, and much more. We finally decided to put the work into improving our Lodge, ourselves and our Brothers. We believe you can't make good men better without investing in yourself and those men. Many Lodges believe sending money to external charities will make us better, and it might, but we believe we must also invest in ourselves and our fraternity.

We wanted to implement a dress code, but decided not to as, for some reason, this has started a large debate multiple times. We still wanted a standard, so a group of Brothers decided that we will lead by example and wear a suit to our meetings. It's not 100% effective but has caused most brothers to start doing the same.

Another problem we were having was the retention of new members. We had heard of some Lodges taking their time with their lower-degree Brothers, and not trying to push them through in 90 days, but rather taking their time and teaching the new Brothers much more deeply.

We have decided to take this path. We started to implement a rule that a candidate must attend at least three meals before they are eligible for a petition. Then, with the help of some of the members of our local Lodge of Research, we are putting our lesser-degree Brothers through a very lengthy education process between degrees.

With all of these changes, many of our Brothers have rekindled their love for masonry. Many of them have joined our local William O Ware Lodge of Research. Many are traveling quite often, going to special events together like festive boards and Grand Lodge sessions.

I want to add that none of this would have been possible without my fellow Brothers' push and help. I might be the one telling the story, but my Brothers are the ones who made it happen. Some spent countless dollars of their own money. Some spent countless hours of their time painting, wood working, cleaning, and decorating. Some have taken on the role of learning to teach our new members, and others the role of technology and promotion. Without these Brothers, none of this would be happening. We now have a Warden line ready to start again, but this time we will definitely be assisting our Wardens and Master.

As you can see CDR No. 694 has tried and taken a ton of steps in just over a year to rebuild a Lodge. Some of these are not obtainable for every Lodge, but the most important step to rebuilding a Lodge is to start being true Masons and conducting ourselves as such, which is obtainable for every Brother. The biggest accomplishment CDR No. 694 has achieved from this endeavor is we have so many Brothers who have turned from members to Masons. They are now truly my friends, Brothers, and family, not just members. Our average attendance is 3-4 times what it was before we implemented these changes. Our Brothers are excited to come to Lodge and learn. We contact each other every week through a group text to make sure everyone and everything is okay, and that no one needs anything.

William O. Ware Lodge of Research

Masonry isn't about being perfect. It's about being better today than you were yesterday, and I truly believe that the steps we have taken at CDR No. 694 are assisting our Brothers in doing just that -- being better husbands, fathers, sons, men, and better Masons.

Jacob C. Fields, Past Master, Crittenden-Dry Ridge Lodge No. 694, Crittenden, Kentucky
(Crittenden-Dry Ridge Lodge No. 694 consists of Crittenden lodge No. 694 and Dry Ridge Lodge No. 849, consolidated on July 26, 2001.)