**CGMNA Speech 2019**

**Rapid City, South Dakota**

SLIDE 1

My brethren and friends; I thank you for the opportunity to once again address this august convocation.

Five years ago, I stood before many of you in Baltimore and suggested that the world about us was becoming increasingly uncivil, and that if left unchecked, we may well find that society has deteriorated to the point where it is no longer the type of place we wish to leave to our children and grandchildren.

I further suggested that, as members of the Masonic family, we have the values and tenets, the teachings, working tools and language of civility.  And as such, it is our duty to work to repair our world by helping to restore civility to society.

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Unfortunately, I cannot state that our world today is more civil than it was five years ago. In fact, in many ways, we seem to have plunged deeper.

In this country, we are once again on the cusp of a primary election season that seems destined to evoke even more incivility than the last election cycle.

We witness acts of incivility at every turn, both spoken and physical.

We often tolerate being talked at instead of talking with each other. Listening has become an endangered skill. We have allowed divisions to grow into chasms so deep that simply getting people into the same room to talk has become difficult, and at times impossible. We have allowed ideological intolerance to evolve into self-righteousness, condemnation and, ultimately, persecution — and we all know that’s wrong.

And let’s admit it: This incivility even makes its way into our lodge rooms. I believe each of us has been witness to situations where brothers have disturbed the harmony and sanctity of our lodges by bringing inappropriate and undesirable behavior and attitudes across the threshold.

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Much has been written regarding the cause of this epidemic. We can blame social media, the economy, or our self-imposed isolation. We usually travel alone in our cars and, even when we ride on trains or other mass transit, we surround ourselves in an echo chamber of the sounds of our “preferred” attitudes through our noise-cancelling headphones. We lay fault at the feet of our educational system, the media, government, the political parties. There is certainly no shortage of finger-pointing; but the common thread seems to be that it is always the fault of someone other than ourselves.

I have been told that the level of incivility we are experiencing is simply cyclical, and that it will, in due time, return to “normal.” I have two concerns with this theory: First, while it may be right, what is the harm with us doing what we can to shorten this nasty destructive cycle?

Secondly, what if this theory is wrong? I fear if we don’t address this state of affairs now, incivility will soon become our “new normal,” a part of our moral fabric as a society. And when this happens, we may be within just a single generation of it becoming so ingrained in our collective psyche, that our children and grandchildren may not know any other way. Do we really want to imagine such a world?

We seem to be completely devoid of statesmen, and I lament this deficiency. And yet, we continue to accept this ugly condition. Why? Why are we willing to concede that this is simply the way it is and that nothing can be done to stem the tide? Could it be that we, along with so many others in society, feel powerless to do anything about it?

We are not alone in this feeling of helplessness. But we are also not powerless to reverse the course. We can make a difference and help to restore civility to society. We do this, not in the name of Masonry, but because we are Masons. In my opinion, we have the moral duty, as Masons, to right wrongs when we encounter them. This is the legacy of our forefathers, and the Masons upon whose shoulders we stand.

I am pleased to report that through the Civility Task Force that we formed five years ago, significant progress has been made via our Masonic Family Civility Project.

And while we have certainly made progress, we still have much work, hard work, ahead of us. Today, we invite you to take this journey with us.

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It is my fervent belief that Masonry teaches us how to treat others with dignity and respect. We meet on the level. We agree to act upon the square. We use the trowel to spread the cement of brotherly love and affection. The plumb admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations before G-d and our fellow man. We use the compasses to remind us to circumscribe our desires, and to keep our passions toward all mankind.

Mind you, none of this suggests we squelch our passions. For very little would be accomplished if we did so. But we do need to pay attention to the impact our actions have upon others; and when our passions begin to infringe upon the rights and enjoyment of others, we need to engage in a different way, and listen to each others’ objections. If we allow our zeal to inflame the anger of others, the dialogue is ended, along with the learning, the exchange, and the potential for any growth or understanding.

Freemasonry also teaches us to gently admonish each other of our errors; to whisper good counsel in their ear; and, in the most friendly manner possible, attempt to bring about a reformation.

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To me, this is about mentorship. None of us in this room today is here on our merits alone. Each of us is here only because we are standing on the shoulders of others.

Mentorship can be either intentional or incidental. We can formalize a mentoring relationship when somebody, typically a younger person, approaches us and seeks our guidance and advice.

And then there are the unintentional mentorships; the times when we don’t even realize we are serving as a mentor to another person. This happens frequently in Masonry. Our brethren are watching us. They are paying attention to how we treat them and one another. Are we demonstrating the civil behavior we wish they would emulate? Do we behave in a way that entices “one to ask one?”

Over the years, I have had many people tell me that being civil simply means being nice, polite, or courteous. That it is nothing more than “etiquette.” Others have told me that politeness and courtesy have nothing at all to do with civility.

I take issue with both of these positions. I don’t think one can be civil unless they also treat others with basic respect and dignity, no matter their station in life. This is a Masonic ideal. However, civility goes much deeper than that.

Masonry teaches us that civil dialogue is the cornerstone that allows us to see things from a more enlightened perspective. This is not about avoiding difficult and complex subjects. It is not about just “being nice” and keeping the dialogue on a superficial level. It does not silence those who wish to be heard. Instead, civil dialogue allows all voices to be heard and valued, including, and perhaps especially, minority or unpopular views, or those with which we disagree. Indeed, democracy is a vehicle to protect the view of the minority, insofar as it provides for malice to no one.

As Masons, we have a long history of fostering civil dialogue among people of divergent thought and opinion. We have been present in the rooms where governments were born, and where leaders were created from ordinary men and women such as ourselves. They were not better people than we are, and we must answer the call of their legacy. Our Craft enables ordinary men to accomplish extraordinary feats.

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Through the Masonic Family Civility Project, we have made hundreds of presentations to thousands of people. These presentations have been inside lodge rooms, Job’s Daughters Bethels, Rainbow Assemblies, and DeMolay Chapters. And these presentations have been conducted in classrooms, community libraries, at chambers of commerce and Rotary meetings. We have heard the most improbable viewpoints emanate from the most unlikely of diverse individuals.

The message is being shared, and received, with appreciation and enthusiasm. The movement is growing, spreading, and inspiring the best in those with whom it resonates. We are developing a Masonic Speakers Bureau, and invite you to add your name to the list.

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The movement has inspired a network of Civility Ambassadors across the globe. Recognizing the autonomy of each grand lodge, these are brethren who are taking the resources that the Task Force identifies and creates into their own jurisdictions and communities in ways that fit their needs and sensibilities. This way, Grand Lodges and local lodge leadership are free to decide which resources they wish to utilize and how to deploy them. If your jurisdiction has yet to appoint an ambassador, I ask that you do so, and share that person’s contact information with me. Likewise, if you are a brother in a jurisdiction without representation, I invite you to go through the ambassador training and join us.

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We have also developed the Civility Scorecard which, through a dynamic software tool that analyzes oration for civil attributes, provides an objective rating of the level of civility contained in debates, speeches, articles and news report quotes. The goal of this effort is to encourage the restoration of civil dialogue and behavior so that the difficult issues facing our nation may be addressed. This is also a good tool for Grand Masters who might want to analyze how their messages are likely to be received. It is possible to prevent that unfortunate situation wherein a good, decent and much-needed message is unintentionally lost in the way it is heard.

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Since there are no footballs scores to check, I know none of you have your phone out, but please take it out now. We have created MasonicCivility.org as the “go-to” resource for our lodges and brethren to find and share materials. These resources have been developed by and for lodges and Masons, as well as the greater community, and are hosted online by the generous efforts of Oakland Durant Rockridge Lodge No. 188 in California. The website includes documents, pintables, videos, discussion guides and many other very practical files and links.

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We have also built the Civility Shop, where you can find some great swag to help spread the message and keep it foremost in all of our minds. The other great thing is that at least 10% of all sales go to support our non-profit efforts.

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Not only is the Masonic Civility Effort helping our lodges and communities, it is also providing another means to engage the brethren, whether they be newly minted Master Masons, or 50-year members. Masons of today are clamoring for inspiration, and concrete tools for improving themselves in the context of their lodge and community. They yearn to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Stated meetings are important to the maintenance of a lodge, but let’s face it—the excitement of attending them wears off after a decade or two. The opportunity to create change and inspiration will excite the minds of the brethren, and bring them to lodge with hope and anticipation. It won’t hurt if they also find a steak dinner accompanying the good work.

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Among the first things we recognized some five years ago was that the path toward achieving a more civil society would be an ongoing journey, similar to the Masonic journey each of us has chosen to take. This journey has proven to travel over a rough and rugged road, but we are confident that, with our investment of time, patience and perseverance, we will continue to make significant progress. Nothing worth having is created in haste, and our social evolution is no exception. With one interaction at a time, the fabric of our lives is strengthened.

In these intervening five years, we have definitely made a difference. But our work is not done. We aspire to continue to repair the world.

There is another lofty objective of mine that is finally coming to fruition. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of organizations that are trying to restore civility in some segment of society; be it government, education, community or in the home. Frankly, most are meeting with only moderate success.

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In April, we will launch the Urgency of Civility conference at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia. “Civility” is a goal of many organizations throughout the free world. This conference is an opportunity for many of them to engage in productive dialogue with the goal of enhancing the good work of these groups, spreading their reach through potential cooperative projects, and creating a higher awareness of the Civility Movement.

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The really cool thing about the conference is that we will open it on the exact 230th anniversary of President Washington’s first inauguration. Masons will re-enact the ceremony, complete with Washington’s inaugural address. I can’t think of a better way to kick off this very important conference.

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So, what can each of us do to move forward in this effort?

* Identify forward-thinking, action-oriented brethren to serve with us on this journey as Civility Ambassadors.
* Be willing to mentor others, and spread Masonic light in ways that bring admiration to our gentle craft.
* Presume decency in others. The golden rule tells us to treat others as we hope to be treated, and it begins with decency.
* Support the Civility Shop. Again, a portion of all sales helps support the civility effort, and there is cool stuff there.
* Explore the Civility Scorecard. I will be happy to provide you a voucher to use it at no cost if you send me an email.
* Live it. Breathe it. Observe our own actions and look for those rough and superfluous parts of our behavior to chisel away. Pledge to improve in the way we treat our family, friends, brethren, and the stranger. Always work to hone your rough ashlar.
* Attend the Urgency of Civility Conference at the Washington Masonic Memorial this coming April. Volunteer with us. Bring those of like mind with you.
* And if you haven't already done so, I invite you to visit our booth outside. Where you can learn more about these various efforts and how you can roll them out within your own grand jurisdiction.

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My brethren, our work today is even more important today that it was five years ago; and perhaps more important than it has been in the 300-year history of our beloved Craft.

It is no longer sufficient that we simply move the needle; we must work to move mountains. Raindrops create rivers, and rivers etch their paths into stone.

Simply put, if we stand by, idly hoping and praying the situation will resolve itself, we run the risk of being wrong; and the state of society continuing to deteriorate.

The time is now, and because of our values and teachings, we are the proper people to right the ship. If we fail to stem the tide, what kind of world will be leaving for our children, and our children’s children?

Let us, each of us, drop that proverbial stone into the placid waters of society; thereby sending ripples to the far shores, and thus, by our actions, do our part to repair our world.

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I thank you for your time and attention.