



The Grand Lodge of **WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

What is Freemasonry?

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The official traditional answer – the one you will probably get if you go and ask a Grand Lodge about the Craft – is that Freemasonry is “a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illuminated by symbols”. There’s no denying that the answer sounds evocative, but what does it mean and more importantly, what does it quietly imply?

At its simplest level, Freemasonry is one of the world’s oldest surviving secular fraternal societies. Although it is specifically not religious, its members are concerned with developing themselves morally and spiritually in order to become better people. Over the course of time as members, they are taught the society’s principles through a series of ritual dramas, rather like prewritten plays. These make use of ancient words, actions and settings, and are explained through allegorical reference to the trappings of the stonemason’s craft, particularly its tools and customs.

The single most critical qualification required to become a Freemason is that you believe in God or some other supreme deity. It doesn’t matter what religion you follow, or how dedicated you are to it. All belief systems are welcome, and how strictly you follow your religion’s dictates is left entirely up to your own conscience. The important thing is that you have faith in a supreme being. The reason should be obvious – if you don’t believe that there is a spiritual side to life, you can’t genuinely claim to be interested in your spiritual development, and so the whole thing would be a bit pointless for you.

Apart from that, what you believe absolutely doesn’t matter. Freemasonry never pries into a member’s religion – in fact, all religious discussion is utterly forbidden during Masonic meetings, as is any political debate. Such matters are deeply held personal issues and are likely to prove divisive.

There is, of course, far more to Freemasonry than just a series of moral and spiritual teachings. There are a number of other “sides” to it that arise from it’s core purpose. One of the most important of these is that Freemasonry is a very charitable organisation. In Australia and New Zealand, charitable activities are distributed across different levels of the organization. Regional Grand Lodges have their own programmes, that operate in addition to a variety of charitable organizations and to the efforts of individual Lodges. Even so, the total efforts across the two countries are thought to raise more than \$6,000,000.00 annually.

Another important aspect of Freemasonry is that it is a social experience. All Freemasons know in advance that they share certain attitudes and expectations in common, and that provides a good base for getting to know one another. To be accepted as an initiate, an existing Freemason has to vouch for you as a decent, socially responsible person, and you then have to convince the majority of the lodge of the same.



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Every other Mason will have had to pass similar examination. As a member, you know that the people you will meet are interested in learning and improving themselves as human beings, and that you will have had similar experiences in lodge ritual. That all comes together to provide a strong basis for friendships, even before you take into account the social aspects of the meetings.

Freemasonry does not claim to offer a route to salvation or a means to contact God. It does not have any solutions for the world's ills, other than to try to be decent, upstanding people. It does not claim any understanding of evil – or of good, for that matter. It has no answers for sorrow, or grief, and claims no knowledge of what happens to you when you die. It does not know anything of the punishments for transgression. It has no dogma whatsoever. All religions, by definition, must offer some way of mediating and explaining the spiritual world and its requirements. Masonry merely tries to help its members to become better people.

Despite the wild rantings of the occasional Internet loon, Freemasonry is not a single, united body. In fact it is about as far from being a coherent entity as it is possible for one movement to be. Each Grand Lodge is its own supreme authority. No Grand Lodge or United Grand Lodge has any influence over any other. There is no ranking system or precedence. The officers of a given Grand Lodge are the sole authority over Freemasonry in their territory. Each Australian territory, each country or subdivision is its own Masonic world.

Finally a point that may surprise some readers is that Freemasonry is not a secret society. If it were it would keep its existence secret. On the contrary it goes out of its way to make itself as accessible as possible. You'll find local lodges listed in most telephone directories, and certainly most of the Grand Lodges have a very heavy presence on the web, complete with contact numbers. That's hardly very secret.

Membership isn't even secret – while it's usually left to any given Mason to confirm membership, most are proud of the organisation and will cheerfully tell anyone of their involvement. There's no central members' register of freemasons worldwide, but then as mentioned above, there is no central anything.

So what actually is Freemasonry?

Freemasonry is a path, clothed in the trappings of the ancient stonemason's craft, blind to faith, ethnicity and social standing, that leads toward morality, humanity and love. The benefits and good works that grow out of it are almost incidental, by-products of striving toward better things. It is a cooperative effort to improve the world, by taking responsibility for yourself and the world around you, and working alongside like-minded people to make things a little better.

The ultimate truth, strange and wondrous as it is, is that Freemasonry is not a religious order, or a secret society, or even really any organisation at all. It is a glittering journey – one that leads, optimistically and circuitously, to a better world for all of us.