



# THE GRAND LODGE OF MARK MASTER MASONS

of England and Wales and its Districts and Lodges Overseas

## GRAND SECRETARY'S OFFICE

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**To: Members of All Orders administered from Mark Masons' Hall**

Dear Sir and Brother

### **Further Guidance following the announcement of the Relaxation of the General Suspension of Masonic Activity**

Last week's announcement that the General Suspension of Masonic Activity will expire on 17 July 2020, has drawn a mixed response from many. Some have greeted the news as a positive step whilst others have expressed concern that this development has come too soon.

We consulted on the legal and public health grounds for considering this course of action and it was only after we were satisfied that there was a sound basis to relax the restriction that we decided to go ahead.

It is going to take some time for Masonic Centres to ready themselves to begin hosting meetings and there will be many Brethren, particularly those in a high-risk category, who will not want to attend public gatherings at least until they feel it is safe to do so. Our decision simply marks the beginning of a period of preparation for meetings to resume and where that cannot happen for the time being, we have made provision for specified masonic activity to continue in a virtual rather than a face to face setting.

The accompanying 'Frequently Asked Questions' factsheet should answer most of your questions but there are several significant points which I feel require a more detailed explanation.

### **Virtual Business Meetings**

This scheme was introduced at the beginning of June to enable Units to transact administrative business via video conferencing platforms and I am encouraged that so many have made use of the scheme already. At the end of June, a similar scheme was made available to Provinces, Districts and Divisions to transact administrative business that would have been dealt with at their annual meetings. This too, has proved to be very successful.

In both cases, the schemes were intended to remain in place only for so long as the General Suspension lasted but the Management Board is conscious that they will have an important role to play in the coming months. We have therefore decided to extend their availability to the end of this year subject to a regular review of their continuing usefulness.

## **Holding Lodges of Instruction via video conference**

I have been approached by several Brethren keen to understand why the Units belonging to the Orders administered from Mark Masons' Hall have not been allowed to conduct Lodges of Instruction via video conference, as Craft Lodges have.

The UGLE scheme has been very successful with many Craft Brethren embracing the opportunity to hone their ritual skills while enjoying the company of their fellow Lodge members.

Clearly, the ability to meet in this way would be welcomed by our members which is why the Management Board has agreed to this scheme being made available to our Units with immediate effect.

Lodges of Instruction must be conducted in accordance with the published ritual of the respective Order. No signs, tokens or words are to be communicated or exchanged and where blank spaces appear in the ritual text, the missing words must not be spoken.

## **Covid-19 adaptations to our ceremonies**

In the fullness of time, an increasing number of Units will begin meeting again with a view to carrying out ceremonies. The principal bar to this happening is the observance of social distancing which is why the Grand Directors of Ceremonies of all our Orders have been asked to prepare guidance notes to be used in conjunction with the published rituals of each Order. Their guidance should make it easier for Units to carry out ceremonies safely and with dignity.

We expect to issue guidance notes for each of the Orders administered from Mark Masons' Hall by the end of July. In the meantime, no ceremonies are to be conducted in any Order until that guidance is published and complied with.

## **Wearing of Unit Officer's Collars**

To minimise direct contact between individual Brethren, Officer's Collars should not be worn until further notice. Brethren who have attained Provincial/District Grand Rank should, instead, wear the collar appropriate to their rank.

## **Abandoned and Postponed Meetings**

In the coming months there will be many instances of Units unable to hold the regular meetings set down in their By-Laws either because the meeting place isn't open, or the members do not yet feel it is safe to attend.

Where this happens, Unit Secretaries must follow the guidance issued on 23 March 2020 and issue a Summons in the regular manner, declaring the meeting abandoned and noting the Minute Book as directed.

Postponed meetings are likely to require a Dispensation to enable them to take place later than prescribed in the Unit By-Laws. In all cases, Unit Secretaries should consult their Provincial Secretariat for advice.

## **Annual Dues and Other Fees**

Financial considerations will undoubtedly be important for many Brethren when considering whether to resume their masonic activities once the suspension has ended. The Management Board are concerned that we take all necessary steps to encourage Brethren to retain their memberships while, at the same time, aiding our efforts to recruit new members.

An announcement regarding Annual Dues and other Fees will be made soon.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

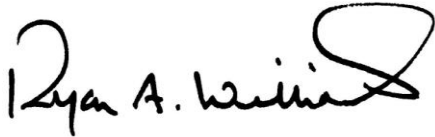
The decision to relax the General Suspension will have raised many questions in the minds of our members. It is impossible to provide answers to every concern within the limits of this document, nevertheless I have prepared a list of the most frequently asked questions and provided answers which should address the most common concerns expressed so far.

### **Summary**

I cannot emphasise enough just how important it is to set last week's decision to relax the suspension into context. It is not a coercive measure, but it does clear the way for Units and Masonic Centres to begin the process of preparing to resume meetings.

The Management Board has approved the availability of several measures which will ensure the administration of our Orders can continue regardless of when face to face meetings resume and we will shortly publish details of Covid-19 adaptations to certain of our ceremonies, as mentioned previously. Information about our plans regarding Fees and Dues will be communicated separately in the next few days.

With fraternal regards and best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan A. Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

R.W.Bro. Ryan A Williams, P.G.J.W.  
Grand Secretary

## **FAQs – General Guidance for the Resumption of Meetings**

- Q. The suspension ends on 17 July 2020, does that mean my Unit has to resume meetings?**
- A. No. The decision to relax the suspension simply creates the right environment in which individual Units and Masonic Centres can begin their preparations to resume meetings but that will take longer in some cases than in others.
- Q. What happens if my Unit is unable to hold its next regular meeting after the suspension ends e.g. because the meeting venue remains closed/members don't want to attend?**
- A. The Secretary of the Unit should issue a Summons in the usual way but as the meeting cannot take place, it should be declared abandoned and the following note made in the Minute Book: *'the Regular Meeting of the Lodge on [insert date] was duly called but abandoned due to the incidence of coronavirus'*.
- Q. Once the suspension has ended, can my Unit hold an additional meeting before the next regular meeting to deal with any outstanding business?**
- A. Yes. As a rule, the Worshipful Master (or equivalent) has the power to summon an Emergency Meeting to attend to specific business. You should refer to the Constitutions & Regulations of the Order for further guidance.
- Q. Does my Unit need permission to start meeting again after the suspension has ended?**
- A. No. The Unit simply reverts to its normal pattern of meetings as provided for in its By-Laws.
- Q. Will the virtual business meeting scheme still be available to Units unable to meet in the short term?**
- A. Yes. The scheme has been extended to the end of this year but will be subject to regular reviews to assess its continuing usefulness. In all cases, Units wishing to hold such a meeting must seek permission from the Provincial Grand Master (or equivalent) before proceeding to issue a Paper of Business.
- Q. What happens if my local area is subject to lockdown in the future?**
- A. There may be instances when specific areas are locked down to control a localised spike in Covid-19 infections. Where this happens, it will be the responsibility of the Provincial/District Head of Order (in conjunction with the Grand Secretary) to decide what action should be taken relating to Masonic Units.
- Q. Will Units be permitted to work ceremonies when meetings resume?**
- A. Yes, but only ceremonies to admit Candidates (e.g. Advancement, Elevation, Induction etc.) and install the Worshipful Master (or equivalent) will be permitted for the time being. Guidance notes detailing Covid-19 adaptations to these ceremonies will be issued by the end of July.
- Q. UGLE has permitted Craft Lodges and Royal Arch Chapters to hold Lodges of Instruction using video conference platforms. Are there any plans by MMH to do the same?**
- A. Yes. The accompanying guidance note confirms that Units are permitted to do this with immediate effect.

**Q. The latest guidance states that festive boards cannot be held after meetings. How long will this be the case?**

A. The legal position on dining after a masonic meeting suggests that it may be unlawful at the present time. In the circumstances, we have decided to ban all dining after masonic meetings, but the situation is under constant review and our guidance will be updated as soon as there is any change.

**Q. Several of the Orders administered from Mark Mason's Hall have Grand Investiture meetings scheduled for the autumn. Will these meetings go ahead?**

A. The decision whether to hold these meetings will be determined by the prevailing government guidance. Unless the government significantly increase or remove the cap on indoor gatherings and dining, it is likely that these meetings will not go ahead. However, as soon as a decision is made in each case, you will be notified.

**Q. What is the position regarding handshakes when meetings resume?**

A. All physical contact should be avoided, including handshakes.

**Q. Should I wear a face mask and gloves when attending a Masonic meeting?**

A. Government guidance on the wearing of face masks is changing and you must act in accordance with the advice applicable to the country in which you live. In the notice confirming the relaxation of the General Suspension, we stated that face masks may be worn when attending masonic meetings, but surgical gloves should not. In those Orders where fabric or leather gloves form part of the regalia, these may be worn.

**Q. The latest guidance states that there should be no singing at meetings until further notice. Why is this?**

A. The World Health Organisation recently confirmed the results of its research which suggest that coronavirus is transmitted through airborne droplets. By placing a ban on singing for the time being, we are reducing the risk of infection in confined spaces such as Lodge Rooms.

**Q. Finance is a concern for many Brethren. Is Mark Masons' Hall planning to make a statement about Annual Dues etc. as UGLE has done?**

A. Yes. An announcement of our plans relating to Fees and Dues will be made soon.

**Q. The venue where my Unit meets is closed for the time being and I need to issue a Summons for the next regular meeting before it re-opens?**

A. Where this is the case, the Summons should be issued stating the usual meeting place. The fact that the venue is closed will require the meeting to be abandoned with a suitable note being placed in the Minute Book of the Unit.

**Q. Will the fact that my Unit has not met during the period of the suspension affect its record of continuous working?**

A. No. The records of our Orders will reflect the special circumstances that have prevailed during the period of the suspension and all Units unable to meet during that time will be treated as having continuous working provided the correct recording of virtual/abandoned meetings in the Minute Book has been observed.