

Official Opinion of the Grand Master of Masons of North Carolina

P. Shaun Bradshaw

April 29, 2020

On March 16, 2020, I issued an order calling for the cessation of all Masonic meetings to go into effect on March 18, 2020, at high noon. This order was made as a result of the serious health risks posed by the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. Less than two weeks later, on March 27, 2020, the Governor of the State of North Carolina issued Executive Order No. 121, commonly referred to as the Stay at Home Order, which required all persons in the State of North Carolina to shelter in place with limited exceptions. This Order went into effect on March 30, 2020.

Since that time, several lodges have attempted to continue some level of Masonic activity by meeting for social purposes using virtual platforms, calling and emailing their brethren and widows of the lodge, and working with their communities to ensure the safety and well-being of others.

Despite these ongoing Masonic activities outside the lodge rooms, some lodges believe they have urgent business to attend to, which may only be accomplished in a Stated Meeting. Specifically, on April 6, 2020, Lux Libertas Lodge No. 772 made a formal request for an opinion from the Board of Custodians on the viability of holding a Stated Communication in a virtual (online) setting.

On April 17, 2020, the Board of Custodians met to review the report and recommendations of the sub-committee formed to investigate the request. In part, the report read as follows:

“Masonry in North Carolina, as well as everyone else, is facing a challenge that it has never had to endure. From our beginning through the Revolutionary War, Civil War, two World Wars, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War and other wars, as well as the pandemic of 1918 our lodges have always remained open. However, due to the current pandemic we are faced with the unique situation of having to close our Lodges. Our Fraternity has and always will thrive because of the Brotherhood among us. NC Masonry needs to find a way to continue to meet as a Fraternity. There is no way of knowing how long this current situation will last or if we will have a similar situation arise in the future. The Board of Custodians’ primary responsibility is to preserve the Authorized Ritualistic Work and lectures approved by the Grand Lodge and sanctioned by the CODE. Lux Libertas No. 772 has presented a proposal to the Board of Custodians seeking approval of online (virtual) meetings. After the two meetings of the Board of Custodians, our consensus is that the proposal from Lux Libertas, as it stands, falls outside the realm of Board of Custodians’ authority to approve...”

Although the Board of Custodians chose not to vote on the recommendations presented in the full report, all were in agreement that the request of Lux Libertas No. 772 to meet in a virtual setting was outside their power to decide and that the Grand Master should make the decision as to whether a lodge can meet in a Stated Communication using virtual meeting technology.

Upon review of the CODE, it is clear that no part, as written today, either permits or forbids a lodge from meeting in a virtual space. In fact, until relatively recently, the technology has not existed, which would even make such a possibility conceivable. However, given the current technological capabilities, as well as the current pandemic and the indefinite period that lodges may be unable to physically meet, the need has arisen for consideration of this matter. Therefore, pursuant to Sections 8-2 and 8-6.3 of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge and Regulation 13-2.2 and 13-2.15 of the CODE I am issuing an Official Opinion on this matter.

In making the determination as to whether a lodge should be permitted to meet in a virtual setting, I have thoroughly reviewed the CODE and find the following relevant sections:

1. Regulations 13-3.8(D) and 13-3.8(G) permit the Grand Master to grant a dispensation to a lodge to hold its communications in a room used for other than Masonic purposes, as well as “in case of extreme necessity” in a location other than that named in its charter or dispensation.
2. Regulation 43-5 states that “all lodge rooms shall in all respects be safe from cowans and eavesdroppers.”
3. Regulation 45-9 requires that all business of a lodge “shall be transacted in a Master Mason’s Lodge...”
4. Regulations 13-4.6 and 24-1.2 restrict the Grand Master from introducing or permitting any ceremony to be used which has not been approved by the Grand Lodge and forbids any brother from adding to or taking away any part of the Authorized Work.
5. Regulation 45-2.5 permits the Grand Master to grant a dispensation to a lodge to reschedule a Stated Communication “when inclement weather or a natural disaster compels [it]...to cancel its Stated Communication for the safety of the brethren...”

In reviewing the above cited references of the CODE several questions arise, which must be answered in order to form an adequate opinion on the matter.

1. Does a virtual meeting space constitute a “room” and how do you define the “location” of a virtual meeting?

When discussing a virtual meeting there are two aspects of the “space” that must be considered: the virtual meeting space and the physical space of each of the participants in the meeting. With regards to the virtual space, the virtual technology service provider establishes a UID (Unique Identifier) for each meeting space. These meeting spaces are commonly referred to as VMRs (Virtual Meeting Rooms). Some organizations may wish to have a persistent UID, while others may prefer a new UID for each meeting, but in either case, participants

may only enter the “room” if they have the proper UID. As such, a virtual meeting space constitutes a “room” which can be occupied similar to physical room.

For the purposes of determining the location of the lodge utilizing a virtual meeting space, we can look to Reg 87-14 of the CODE, which defines a lodge as “a society of Masons meeting by authority of a charter or warrant from a regular grand lodge...” From this definition we see that a charter or warrant is required for a lodge to meet and therefore the member who is in physical possession of the charter (most likely the Master or Secretary) would constitute the official physical location of the lodge.

2. Can a virtual meeting space be considered “safe from cowans and eavesdroppers” and by what standard do we compare the security of that space?

Similar to answering the first question we must consider this from two perspectives. First, each person joining the meeting must ensure their physical space is safe from cowans and eavesdroppers. This may be accomplished by ensuring that each member who accesses the virtual meeting has secured (tyled) their personal space from non-Masons, that they utilize headphones or keep the volume turned down to a level where an individual outside the physical space cannot hear the activities of the meeting, and that they have a camera which is always on so all participants can see if there is any breach of a member’s physical space. If a breach did occur, the member’s access can be immediately revoked and he can be placed in a “waiting room” outside the virtual meeting space until the physical space can be re-secured.

Second, and more importantly is the question of security of the virtual space and is it any less secure than a physical lodge room. At the time much of the CODE was written, the brethren could not conceive of the level of technological advances that have been made over the last 20-30 years. In decades past, the biggest concern for the security of a lodge room was that someone might be able to spy or listen in on a meeting by being physically close to it. As a result, most lodge rooms do not have windows and per Regulation 43-5, lodges may not be on the “ground level of a building...without the express approval of the Grand Master.” While these may have been sufficient precautions to safeguard the security of a lodge meeting in the past, today’s technology makes these types of concerns almost meaningless. It is nearly impossible to guarantee the security of our lodge meetings in a physical space when practically every person who enters a lodge room carries with them a device capable of recording and videoing all lodge activities. Further, technologies exist and are readily accessible to any cowan or eavesdropper who wishes to invade the security of our lodge rooms. The reality is that our physical lodge rooms are only as secure as our preventive measures to secure them. That is, as Masons we are obligated to keep the secrets

of Masonry as safe and secure as we possibly can, but that does not preclude someone who truly wants to spy on us from recording or videoing our proceedings.

In terms of securing a virtual space, it is incumbent on the brethren to ensure their meeting is as safe and secure as possible. To that end, lodges meeting in a virtual space must adhere to the following measures established by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to prevent eavesdropping by unauthorized parties:

- Follow your organization’s policies for virtual meeting security.
- Limit reuse of access codes
- If the topic is sensitive, use one-time PINs or meeting identifier codes, and consider multi-factor authentication.
- Use a “green room” or “waiting room” and don’t allow the meeting to begin until the host joins.
- Enable notification when attendees join by playing a tone or announcing names.
- Use a dashboard to monitor attendees – and identify all attendees.
- Don’t record the meeting
- Use only approved virtual meeting services. (**see Appendix A – The NC Grand Lodge Tech Committee Response to COVID19**)
- Lock the meeting once you have identified all the attendees and lines in use.

3. Can a lodge effectively open and close a Master Mason’s Lodge in a virtual setting and maintain the integrity of the ritual without “adding to or taking away any part of the Authorized Work”?

As noted earlier, Regulations 13-4.6 and 24-1.2 restrict the Grand Master and lodges from introducing new ceremonies or modifying our existing rituals. Further, Regulation 45-9 is clear that “All business shall be transacted in a Master Mason’s Lodge...” With this in mind, I requested that the brethren of Lux Libertas Lodge No. 772 demonstrate for the Board of Custodians how they would open a Master Masons Lodge, conduct various votes, and then close the lodge. On April 21, 2020, Lux Libertas No. 772, for coaching and demonstration purposes only, opened a Master Masons Lodge in a virtual setting with members of the Board of Custodians, several Grand Lodge officers, and myself present. During the demonstration several questions regarding procedures (particularly with regard to the “Red Letter” work of the OSW) were asked, which the members of Lux Libertas No. 772 attempted to answer and demonstrate further. On April 23, 2020, the sub-committee of the Board of Custodians met and prepared a report for review and vote of the full board (**see Appendix B – Board of Custodians Subcommittee Report on Lux Libertas Lodge No. 772 Proposal to hold a Virtual**

Lodge Meeting). The consensus of the subcommittee was that, with certain changes and restrictions, Lux Libertas No. 772 had sufficiently demonstrated it is possible to open and close a Master Masons Lodge in a virtual setting. On April 28, 2020, the Board of Custodians met and, by majority vote, approved the report.

4. Under what circumstances would a lodge find it necessary to meet in a virtual setting rather than utilizing Regulation 45-2.5 to request a dispensation from the Grand Master to meet at a later date when it can be done safely in a physical space?

Aside from the question of the security of a virtual lodging meeting, this is the most frequent objection to permitting a virtual meeting. If the brethren of a lodge wish to meet for social purposes, they are free to do so virtually without the necessity of opening a lodge. If there is some business that a lodge must conduct, as in an emergency situation where a lodge may have to expend funds that are not recurring or currently budgeted, then the lodge could request dispensation to meet on a date other than their regular stated meeting in order to transact that business. While this is a valid argument it does assume that the situation which caused the lodge not to be able to meet has a definite end time. That is, in order to request a dispensation to meet at a later date, there is an assumption that the lodge can specify the date on which they plan to meet. Our current situation with the pandemic is evidence enough that such an assumption does not stand up to reality. At this point we are uncertain when lodges may be able to again safely meet – it could be weeks or it could be months – and there is a very real possibility that another wave of this virus could disrupt our lodge business again in the near future. If that were to happen, lodges that only meet on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis may find that they are, again, unable to meet to transact any lodge business.

Based on the answers to the above questions I believe it is in the best interest of the fraternity for there to be some mechanism whereby a lodge may meet in a stated meeting to conduct such business as it may find necessary during a time when the members are unable to physically gather together. While my preference would be for the CODE to specifically address the instances where this is allowed and that the Authorized Work were updated in a way to make it easier for lodges, in those circumstances, to ritualistically open, that is not the situation we are in.

Accordingly, it is my Official Opinion that lodges, under extraordinary circumstances, may hold a Stated Communication in a virtual setting given the following restrictions:

1. Pursuant to Regulation 13-3.8(G) a lodge must request a dispensation from the Grand Master to hold a Stated Communication in a virtual setting. Such requests must include a detailed explanation as to why the meeting may not be postponed until a later date.
2. The Grand Master may grant the dispensation if, in his sole discretion, he believes permitting the lodge to meet in a virtual setting is in the best interest of the lodge;

otherwise, he may suggest that the lodge seek relief through a request for dispensation to meet at a different time pursuant to Regulation 45-2.5.

3. A lodge which intends to meet in a virtual setting must use one of the approved virtual technology service provider platforms identified in **Appendix A – The NC Grand Lodge Tech Committee Response to COVID19**.
4. Unless or until the CODE is amended to permit lodges to transact business on a degree other than that of Master Mason, the lodge must open and close a Master Masons lodge ritualistically as described in the Authorized Work. At no time shall a lodge open “symbolically” or by proclamation.
5. When opening a Master Masons Lodge in a virtual setting, lodges must follow the guidelines of the NIST (listed above), as well as follow the procedures identified in **Appendix C – A Practical Guide to a Virtual Lodge**.
6. Prior to meeting in a virtual setting and agreeable with Regulation 43-6 the Master of the lodge shall give due notice to all members of the lodge of the change of location to a virtual setting. Further, per Regulation 45-4, such notice may be sent electronically if the member has a valid email address, otherwise the member must be contacted by telephone service or mailed under sealed cover. Finally, the notice must specify the procedure by which the member may attend the virtual lodge meeting.
7. Aside from the Secretary in the performance of his duties as specified in Regulation 59-12 and pursuant to Regulation 86-2.9 no portion of the meeting held in a virtual setting shall be recorded in any way or manner whatsoever.
8. The charter empowering the lodge to work must be clearly visible to all members in the virtual meeting. It is suggested that either the Master or Secretary have the charter physically present with them during the meeting.
9. A lodge may conduct such business as the Master may deem necessary with the following exceptions:
 - a. A lodge shall not perform any degree work in virtual setting.
 - b. A lodge shall not examine a candidate in a virtual setting.
 - c. A lodge shall not conduct a secret ballot in a virtual setting.

Given under my hand and seal this 29th day of April, 2020, in Greensboro, North Carolina

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul J. Bradshaw". The signature is stylized and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

P. Shaun Bradshaw
Grand Master of Masons in North Carolina, 2020