



The Role of the Lodge Almoner

Provincial Grand Lodge of Suffolk

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Contents	Page No
Introduction	1
The Five Elements	1
Why Almoners Exist	2
The Holy Royal Arch Almoner	2
Pastoral Care	2
The Approach to Appointing a New Lodge Almoner	3
Putting the Five Key Elements in Place	3
1. Understanding the key skills and duties of the Lodge Almoner	
2. Has the right person been selected for the job?	
3. Is the person selected able and willing to carry out the job at the time?	
4. Is there a support structure in place for the Lodge Almoner?	
5. The Assistant Lodge Almoner	
Conclusion	7
Useful Contacts	7

Introduction

One of the most frequently asked question to any Provincial Grand Almoners is “what is my role?”

This is either asked in person or expressed in behaviour, usually the latter. There is always a vast range of Almoner experience in place, ranging from an Almoner who has done the job for 15 years to an Almoner who is newly appointed.

This paper sets out generalisations in thought and direction and should be considered as a template for guidance.

Generally, to be in office for more than 10 years is probably too long as it prevents others from taking office and applying a new approach. For long serving Almoners, and indeed it is the case in every office, there is always a danger that change becomes harder to accept and implement.

For new Almoners, it can initially be a bewildering job, especially if there has not been an Assistant Lodge Almoner in office.

The need for an update and further guidance on the role is therefore important and it is not due to any lack of effort or endeavour from the many people who have attempted to convey the message. Indeed, some thoughts are from the Masonic Charity Foundation (MCF) and other Provincial Almoners. The MCF over the last 3 years has issued many bulletins and even a booklet called “The Role of the Lodge Almoner”. The Suffolk Provincial Almoners Team have also issued many messages about the role and held Conferences & workshops to expand on the subject.

So why is there still a need to explain the role?

There are five elements to having an effective Lodge Almoner in place, and all five must be correctly applied with each other. This document will help to explain the five elements in one document.

There are many Lodge Almoners who have an exceptionally good understanding of the role and are doing a fantastic job. The principal reason for their success is that the five key elements below have, by design or by good fortune, been applied.

The Five Elements

For the Almoner’s role to be done well, the following building blocks should be in place:

1. Are the key skills and duties understood?
2. Has the right person been selected for the job?
3. Is the person selected, able and willing to carry out the job at the time?
4. Is there a support structure in place?
5. Is an Assistant Lodge Almoner in place?

This all sounds very straightforward but in practice there are hurdles which may not always be easy to overcome.

Lodges are all private entities and as long as each follow the Book of Constitution and their own By Laws, then only suggestions can be made to a Lodge about how it is run, and nobody has any authority outside of the Lodge to impose.

This, of course, is one of the great strengths of Freemasonry, but it does present its own challenges.

So why does an Almoner exist?

Why Almoners Exist

Freemasonry encompasses three basic principles; friendship, integrity, and charity. At the heart of it all is caring for others and looking after the health and welfare of poor and distressed freemasons, their wives, widows, and dependants.

Like all effective organisations there needs to be a person responsible for each of the activities that are to be carried out and the Lodge Almoner is responsible for the care and welfare of its members. In a way therefore the Lodge Almoner is a central and key figure, let us remember this as we read this paper.

Individual Lodges, Provinces and masonic charities all facilitate the provision of care to those in need, but the eyes and ears on the ground must be provided by the Lodge Almoner to identify the cases in the first place.

The Lodge Almoner is not expected to be an expert in solving every problem, but he is expected to be able to signpost applicants to help and be a contact point for those in need.

The Almoner is the most important person in the chain, who can keep a watchful eye on, say, 40 members & widows in his Lodge. However, the Provincial Almoner alone cannot watch over 3,000 masons, plus widows by himself, and the central Masonic Charity Foundation cannot be the eyes and ears across all 49 Provinces.

The Holy Royal Arch Almoner

This paper concentrates on the role of Lodge Almoner and refers only to the Lodge Almoner but it does not exclude the important work of the Holy Royal Arch Almoner (HRA). Where the Lodge Almoner is mentioned it also includes the work of the HRA Almoner. The one main difference in focus between the Lodge and HRA Almoner is that the HRA Almoner will involve himself much more with the overall welfare of his Chapter; establishing who is missing and encouraging their attendance; not letting them drift into the habit of not attending and letting them know they are missed. Attendance and involvement are key to the welfare of the Chapter and the enjoyment of its members.

More than 90% of all case work carried out by Provincial Group Almoners to alleviate a person's distress, is generated by the Lodge Almoner and not the HRA Almoner.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral Care is at the heart of the Lodge Almoner's role and this simply means offering intentional friendship, listening, contact and support.

There should be no boundaries of difficulty to who we offer help to. In this sense every mason is an Almoner.

It is a role that tries to anticipate possible loneliness and hardship, be it financial or medical. In this sense the Almoner needs to build up a relationship with his membership so that he can either be aware, or be made aware, of possible distress.

One of the skills in offering such care is being available, speaking, having a contact and just being present with an individual.

The story below illustrates pastoral care at its absolute best:

A member of a certain Lodge, who previously attended meetings regularly, stopped going. After a few months, the Almoner decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening, and the Almoner found his brother at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for the Almoner's visit, the brother welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The Almoner made himself comfortable but said nothing.

In the grave silence, they contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After several minutes, the Almoner took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth, all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. His host watched all of this in quiet contemplation. As the one, lone embers flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow, and its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead. Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The Almoner glanced at his watch and chose this time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead, ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately, it began to glow once more, with all the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the Almoner reached the door to leave, his host said, with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your fiery summons, my brother. I'll be back in our Lodge at the next meeting".

The story illustrates that you cannot give pastoral care via email and social networking, it is just plain old-fashioned contact with people.

The Approach to Appointing a New Lodge Almoner

In appointing a Lodge Almoner, it would seem sensible to be aware of what the description of his job looks like. The risk of not doing so will almost certainly result in the job not being done to its full potential and the members will not be served well. From experience this will often and probably be a case of a Lodge Almoner just phoning, prior to a Lodge meeting, some members who are known to be in distress, so that a report can be given in Lodge. The report will often contain lots of personal details about the distress so that members think the Almoner is in control.

This is of course all quite wrong and illegal unless permission has been previously given to the Almoner for such personal information to be read out.

The Lodge report alone is not the criteria on which an Almoner should be judged, it is the pastoral care that is offered and managed that matters.

The Lodge Almoner is not expected to be a master of all the support work that is available; he is however expected to be aware of who may need help and to direct the person to the appropriate sources to receive help. In most cases this will be to the Group Almoner in the Province, more about these roles later under the heading of "Support Available".

Putting the Five Key Elements in Place

1. Understanding the key skills and duties of the Lodge Almoner

Not only is the Silent Summons, mentioned earlier, a useful image about the role of the Almoner, the prayerful message below is a powerful thought as well.

"Lord help us to understand that loneliness and some distress is something we are all prone to at times. Often, we assume that someone else, somewhere, is offering generous support to the person in need, but that person may not exist. Help us please to find a way to be that person and to try and relieve their suffering".

Duties

1. To be the eyes and ears of the Lodge and to identify members who may be in distress.
2. To understand and deliver the role of pastoral care (in conjunction with the Lodge Mentor).
3. To understand how to signpost people to get help and to be aware of local charities in the area that can be called on to help members and their dependants who are in distress.

4. To welcome all new members (in conjunction with the Lodge Mentor) and network with all in the Lodge.
5. To maintain contact with those in distress with health or finance.
6. To maintain contact with Lodge widows throughout the year, recognising Christmas with a gift and possibly their birthdays and involving them in Lodge social events.
7. To maintain contact with country members.
8. To keep contact with those who may have resigned or are absent from Lodge meetings (after liaising with the Lodge Mentor).
9. To make immediate contact with the family of a recently deceased member and to notify the Lodge of funeral arrangements.
10. To give appropriate reports in a discreet way to Lodge members about members in distress but only if permission has been previously granted.
11. To ensure that all communications relating to care and help for a member is directed through the Lodge Almoner and not the secretary unless specifically asked for by the claimant.
12. To include in lodge reports the work and activities of the Provincial Almoner's Team.
13. To maintain a range of accurate records of widows and members so as to help with the carrying out of the duties. It is essential that a good working relationship exists between the Almoner and the Secretary.
14. To manage the Lodge Almoner accounts if that is a duty agreed by the Lodge. This is encouraged by the PGA as it enables the Almoner to provide such things as flowers and cards quickly when necessary. The accounts must be examined each year and presented to the Lodge members.
15. To consider and recommend to the Lodge Committee that a Deputy Lodge Almoner be appointed to plan for succession and to help ease the work load. Keeping in touch with members and widows can be a time-consuming role.
16. To understand the structure of the Provincial Almoner's Team and to use them effectively especially in times of need.
17. Should the Lodge hand in the warrant and close, then the Almoner will be responsible for ensuring that the widows are looked after and where possible arrangements made for them to be adopted by another Lodge. This can be done in conjunction with the PGA.
18. To understand the purpose and aims of the Masonic Charitable Foundation (MCF) and the Suffolk Provincial Benevolent Fund (SPBF) and to promote them both to the members in and out of Lodge meetings.
19. To try and attend and support the Almoner's conferences held in the Province.
20. To invite the PGA and his officers to visit their Lodge and give talks as required.
21. To be involved in all discussions where a member's membership status is likely to change. This may include Honorary Membership, exclusion etc. The reason for this is so that appropriate care and advice can be given about the consequences of such change.
22. To be a member of the Lodge Committee so that liaison and communication between officers can be more effective. Especially important between the Charity Steward and Mentor.
23. The Lodge Almoner should be able to claim reasonable out of pocket expenses in carrying out his work in looking after members.

Skills

1. The Lodge Almoner must understand that communication and care is best delivered face to face and on the phone. This pastoral skill is essential.
2. A successful Lodge Almoner will possess considerable tact, courtesy, diplomacy, discretion, patience, and humour and above all a sympathetic demeanour with a willingness to put others first.
3. To be able to actively listen, ask questions and summarise clearly. This is important both with a person in need and when giving confidential reports to others.

4. To observe confidentiality at all times.
5. Lodge Almoners should ideally live in the vicinity of most of the members and be in a position where they can visit the widows at least once a year.
6. To be able to find the time to give the pastoral care.
7. To be able to communicate accurately and with brevity.
8. To have a basic understanding of GDPR and Safeguarding legislation to fulfil the Almoner's role.
9. To understand how to create and maintain conversations, especially when looking out for signs of financial and medical distress.
10. To gain the trust and respect of all members and that confidentiality, when dealing with a distressed person, is paramount.
11. To have an awareness to one's own limits when it comes to handling complex issues like depression, debt etc and knowing when to seek help and let others, such as the Provincial Almoners team, take over.

2. Has the right person been selected for the job?

There are some offices in Freemasonry that require specific skills such as the DC, Treasurer and Secretary. There will be other roles, and the Almoner is no exception.

Great thought must be given to this appointment, it is, after all, about leading all the members in pursuit of delivering masonic values of brotherly love and relief of suffering.

Unfortunately, some Lodges select a man for the job who has nothing else to do and who it is felt, needs to be engaged in the Lodge, possibly due to a combination of his seniority, long service, and past work; this is admirable but quite wrong.

The PGA will always offer advice to a lodge if help and guidance is needed.

3. Is the person selected, able and willing to carry out the job at the time?

A person may be well suited to the role of Lodge Almoner and his skills may well be a perfect match, but if he is not able to carry out the role when offered the job, there is no point giving it to him just so that a box may be ticked, and the office filled on the summons.

Circumstances that may prevent a person from carrying out the role may include work commitments, domestic pressures, other social commitments, and his own health issues.

It is in these circumstances that another person should be found or that an Assistant Lodge Almoner be appointed to ease the work load of the Lodge Almoner who is well suited but too busy.

The role of Lodge Almoner is wide ranging and, as has already been said, it is an especially important role. An Assistant Lodge Almoner role is therefore encouraged and is now accepted in UGLE and the Province.

4. Is there a support structure in place for the Lodge Almoner?

The PGA has a team of 12 Provincial Group Almoners & assistants made up as follows and which covers 9 geographical areas in the Province of Suffolk. The team work closely together with regular monthly communications and are all trained by the MCF and the Province in each other's work.

- Provincial Grand Almoner (PGA)
- Deputy Provincial Grand Almoner (DepPGA)

- Group Almoners (GA) (9)
- Initiative Leads & AST (2)

The Group Almoners look after and mentor the Lodge Almoners. Some are also Visiting Volunteers which help prepare the funding applications.

Several Group Almoners also lead on various service initiatives including Bereavement, Mental Wellbeing, Widows and “A Very Good Friend”.

The Masonic Charitable Foundation (MCF) is the central national masonic charity, which offers support to Lodge Almoners and Provincial Teams, as well as providing large grants to claimants and their dependants to alleviate financial and medical distress. The Visiting Volunteer will deal with such applications with the claimant and these will be subject to a means test so that masonic reserves can be protected.

The Suffolk Provincial Benevolent Fund (SPBF) is managed by the PGA, the PGM and a board of Trustees. In practice the daily activities are dealt with by the PGA. His responsibility is to provide immediate relief to a mason or his dependants distress on a short-term basis, whilst looking for more sustainable long-term solutions. In most cases some form of means test is carried out and considerable input is made by the Lodge Almoner.

The support system is reliant on the Lodge Almoner using his eyes and ears to signpost those in distress and, with their permission, to involve the Group Almoner so that a process of help can be considered and delivered in a proper manner. The PGA and his team are well trained in giving advice and help and it is essential that a Lodge Almoner uses the team to help a person in distress.

The two charities (MCF and the SPBF) are not insurance companies or savings societies and Lodge Almoners should be aware of how they operate and be able to advise members.

The Lodge Almoner is a crucial part of the PGA’s team. In reality, they (and the Group Almoners) make up the full team. It must be stressed and has been said before, that the Lodge Almoner is the eyes and ears and is usually at the starting point of every call for help. The Group Almoners are simply there to support their work and provide effective communication and training about the ever-changing role of the Lodge Almoner.

The PGA will arrange the necessary pastoral care to members and widows who may have moved away from Suffolk (Adoption Scheme) and the Lodge Almoner must use the PGA to facilitate this.

Each year there is a conference for Lodge Almoners. This is run by the PGA and is designed to engage with the Almoners in activities to enhance learning. It is attended by leading national speakers and the Provincial Executive on matters that involve the work of the Almoner.

5. The Assistant Lodge Almoner

As has been stated, the role of Almoner is wide ranging, and for the members, widows, and dependants to receive the best support and care, the Lodge Almoner may require support.

The role is an official one, it can be shown on the Lodge summons but as yet it does not have a collar.

The role may be to compliment the strengths and weaknesses of the Lodge Almoner, especially in the time that he may or may not be able to give to the role.

The Assistant and the Almoner must have clearly defined roles, and both should receive the same training and support from the Provincial team.

The role could be a natural successor to the Lodge Almoner, but it does not have to be seen as such.

In many Lodges the Assistant will assist in visits, pastoral care, maintaining contact with widows, sending cards to widows and members on their birthdays, etc. The list is endless, but it must dovetail in with the work of the Almoner.

Conclusion

This paper has covered the role of the Lodge Almoner, the importance of the function, the person who may be best suited to the role, the selection criteria, and the support that he has available from within the Province and the two central charities.

It has been ratified by the Suffolk Provincial Executive and the Masonic Charity Foundation and is commended to Lodges and Chapters.

Useful Contacts

The Department for Work & Pensions

Call the Helpline on 0800 731 0469.

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions

Cruse Bereavement Care

Offers support after the death of someone close. Call 0808 808 1677.

www.cruse.org.uk

Turn2Us

Helping people access the money available to them through welfare benefits and grants.

Call 0808 802 2000.

www.turn2us.org.uk

Winston's Wish

Services to bereaved children and young people. Call 01242 515 157.

www.winstonswish.org.uk

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

Men's support line, especially if suicidal

Call 0800 585 858

thecalmzone.net

The Masonic Charitable Foundation

Call 0800 035 60 90 to discuss gaining access to the Counselling Careline.

www.mcf.org.uk

The MCF's Advice and Support Team

Offer advice, guidance, and support on a range of issues. Contact them by calling 0800 035 60 90. Your Provincial Grand Almoner may be able to signpost you to local support and assistance.



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