Brethren,

A very warm welcome to the annual meeting of Provincial Grand Lodge this morning. This is your meeting and I am sure that many of you are here today to support the brethren whom I have had the honour of investing with their well deserved appointments and promotions. To all those brethren I say, welcome to the team, and it is a team. Neither I nor any of the other members of the Provincial executive can achieve anything without your help and support and I hope that you will all feel that your appointment represents an opportunity for further service to our Province over the coming years.

Talking of service, the MW Grand Master was pleased to appoint W Bros David Dey and Paul Wong to the rank of PAGDC and W Bro Brodie Swain to the acting rank of Grand Pursuivant at the annual meeting of UGLE in April. This reflects the hard work which David and Paul put in as acting Provincial Wardens and the contribution they are will , I know, continue to make as PGCStwd and APGM respectively and the fine work which Brodie did as the face of the Solomon Live series of online interviews. We also congratulate W Bro Mike Caseman-Jones of our Royal Logistics corps lodge on his promotion to the acting rank of SGD. Mike is of course an APGM in Northamptonshire. Last but by no means least we congratulate my Deputy PGM Keith Evans on his well deserved promotion to the rank of PGSwdB at the same meeting.

At a Provincial level you will have seen today that there have been one or two changes to our acting officers. I particularly thank W Bro Derek Owen who stands down today as our Superintendent of Works and welcome his able replacement Neil Gaskin. Derek has contributed greatly to the bank of knowledge available to all the brethren who volunteer to run our masonic halls and I know that his contribution has been greatly valued. Still, he will not be idle as he assumes his new duties as Provincial SGW! I do take this opportunity to thank all those brethren who work so hard to run and maintain our masonic halls in the face of the huge challenges which the energy and cost of living crises have brought. We should remember, brethren, that these teams are volunteers who give of their time freely and we should give them our whole hearted support wherever possible.

We also welcome our new Provincial Grand Chaplain W Bro Iain Strongman to the team. Ian, you have a very hard act to follow in our outgoing Chaplain W B the Revd Justin Parker but I know that you will carry our your new duties with your customary aplomb. Justin of course becomes one of my Assistant PGMs and I know that he will bring his usual enthusiasm and joie de vivre to our executive meetings and to our Province in his new role.

I have already thanked our other acting Provincial officers who are remaining in post but I would also like to mention the many other brethren , many of them in unseen uncollared roles behind the scenes, who contribute so much to our Province. Your contribution is greatly appreciated and does not go unnoticed. What has been evident today, however, is the magnificent work carried out by our Provincial DC Peter Broughton and his team. Thank you all for the work you have done today and I also thank all those who have helped to prepare this room and steward the event, particularly W Bro Chris Phillips who has assumed the mantle of logistics organiser! You have done us proud. A special mention also for our new Provincial Grand Secretary Jim Mulligan and his assistant Chris John for the excellent way in which they have dealt with the huge administrative task of the arrangements for this meeting. Thank you both.

When I look back at the last 13 months, I cannot believe how the time has flown by. It would take me far too long to list all the many activities and achievements which I have been privileged to witness already but suffice it to say that I have been welcomed with open arms whenever I have visited your Lodges and that it remains a privilege, an honour and my very great pleasure to serve you as your PGM. Now, brethren, however, it is time to look forward..

The December meeting of Grand lodge saw the launch of the Pro GM’s seven year strategy for Freemasonry with a vision to make our Order a thriving organisation which good men will aspire to join. It is built upon our core values of Friendship, Integrity, Respect and Charity and divided into three distinct pillars: Thriving membership, Coherent organisation and Community Engagement.

Our membership challenge in Worcestershire is significant. Over the last several decades we have seen a continuous, steady fall in our numbers such that, as at 31 December 2022 the gap between our gains and retrievable losses stood at 101%. In other words, we would need to double our number of initiates to break even. In practice, of course, the gap can be narrowed via a combination of increasing initiates and reducing the level of avoidable resignations. Although our challenge is significant it does, of course, ironically, present us with an opportunity to make a big difference to our Province and to UGLE. The Members’ Pathway will be key to this recovery and over the next few months our Provincial membership team, led by my Assistant PGM Mike Dykes and our newly appointed Membership officer John Fennell will be visiting every Lodge in the Province to assist your Lodge to make full and effective use of the resources and ideas which the Pathway provides.

The Members’ Pathway will challenge your lodge to plan for the future, to consider where you meet, at what times you meet and what kind of lodge you want to be. It will encourage you to embrace change and to try new ideas. Remember brethren, it is “yes if”, not “no because”.

You will not be left to navigate this alone and we are here to support you. When any strategy is launched there is always the temptation to say, “what is in it for me or my lodge?” I know that the membership team will be able to answer that question positively for you so please do engage constructively with the Team when you receive your visit. The Members’ Pathway works. It is your Province, your Lodge and your future, brethren, and we all have a responsibility, if we possibly can, to make the Members’ Pathway the success it deserves to be.

The Province will also be generating membership interest via its own digital marketing campaign. This will be run in Kings Heath and Northfield over the coming months and the team will also be assisting halls to run events for prospective members. However, brethren, please do not rely solely on the Province to produce leads. The Members’ pathway is the real key to your Lodge’s future success.

In terms of Coherent organisation, the Pro Grand Master has been very clear that he regards the Craft and the Royal Arch as one organisation and that the passage through the three Craft degrees and exaltation into the Holy Royal Arch should be regarded as one journey with four elements. The Grand Superintendent and I are absolutely at one on this and the Craft and Royal Arch provincial teams have already met to discuss how we can work even more closely together in the future. Work is also underway to incorporate the Royal Arch into the Craft website and to further modernise and improve the site for both orders and more of that in a few months’ time.

I know that many of you are also members of the other Companion orders within Freemasonry and I recommend them to you once the time is right for you. I meet regularly with the Heads of all the other Orders within the Province. In Worcestershire we have traditionally enjoyed very happy relations with all the other Masonic orders and long may that continue. We are all in the same boat, brethren and I am pleased to see so many Rulers of those Orders here today to support the Craft.

Our community engagement continues apace. Plans are already in hand for our very successful Charity regatta at Worcester Rowing Club in July and our provincial gazebo will once again be on tour over the Summer months at some of the county’s most well attended Festivals and Galas. Recently our Library and Museum chairman Phillip Serrell and I met with the Chief Executive of Worcester City Council to explore ways in which our magnificent collection might be made more accessible to the wider public.

Our main interaction with our communities, however, remains our charitable giving and, of course, this year saw the climax of our Festival 2022 appeal for the MCF , so ably led by W Bro Patrick Firminger. The magnificent result of over £2.1m represented £879 per capita putting our appeal in the top echelon of appeal results per capita. Can I, on behalf of the beneficiaries who will benefit from your generosity, express my grateful thanks again to all of those who played a part in the appeal and most importantly to you all for responding so magnificently to it. In this connection I must mention our Provincial lottery under the stewardship of W Bro Derek Taylor for the contribution they continue to make. Please support them and, if you have not yet joined brethren, please do. It is (relatively) painless and for a great cause.

I mentioned at this meeting last year that we are embarking on a reorganisation of our Worcestershire masonic charities. I am pleased to say that this work is now well underway and will be overseen by our new APGM, Justin Parker. Further announcements will be made in the Autumn, but it remains our intention to launch the new Worcestershire Freemasons charity in the next calendar year. Now that our 2022 Festival has concluded we can, rightly, turn towards some of those local charities who have suffered so much during recent years and where we can do much good.

In conclusion, brethren, this is an important time for our Order. We have a new Pro GM and a new team of Rulers at Grand Lodge, all of whom, I know, are determined to arrest the decline in membership which we have seen over recent decades. I share their determination. I know that, with your help, we can arrest our membership decline and take this Province forward once again. Freemasonry is a wonderful organisation. It has given me so much and it is only right that I should now put something back. I hope and believe, brethren, that you feel the same. Together, I am sure that we will succeed.

Enjoy the Summer and may the Great Architect of the Universe keep you and your families safe in his care until we meet again.