

Parliament's secret temple revealed

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Cape Town - On the grounds of Parliament, close to Tuynhuys in the heart of Cape Town, is an old, white, plastered building. The Lodge De Goede Hoop is hidden behind a parking lot filled with shiny ministerial cars.

Only the Freemason symbol on the window and the Star of David above the large wooden doors show that this is not just another parliamentary building. The building was inaugurated as the first masonic temple in South Africa in 1803 and is still used daily by its members.

This week, City Press took a tour of the temple with the newly appointed Grand Master of the SA Freemasons, Geoff Edwards. On a table in the foyer are a square and a pair of compasses – well-known masonic symbols. On the wall is an engraved list of the names of former masters and the wall beside the front door is adorned with a framed photograph of Watty Watson, former DA chief whip and retiring Grand Master.

“People say we’re on parliamentary grounds, but that’s not true. Actually, Parliament is on our grounds,” he says. Edwards is right because this mysterious organisation has been in South Africa and Cape Town for much longer than Parliament. The first Freemason lodge was formed in Cape Town in 1772 and the temple was built about 30 years later.

The Cape government of the time and the Freemasons were so intertwined that the Cape Parliament used the masonic banquet hall as a venue from 1854 to 1884 until the old House of Assembly was completed. The organisation, regarded as among the most mysterious in the world, is all about money, power and secret handshakes, its detractors whisper. There are many conspiracy theories, alleged links with murders, and those who believe the Freemasons “planted the seeds” of apartheid.

Others say that from the organisation’s inception in the 14th century, it has been the secret hand that is quietly ruling the world. Not true, according to Edwards, taking us into the meditation chamber with its sinister statue of a dead man with a dagger, a book and an hourglass, and the words “know thyself”.

Two artificial human skulls add a chilling edge to the room. “People say the Freemasons have ruled the world over the centuries, but the truth is that many rulers were simply masons,” he says. But where do secret handshakes and rituals fit in 2014? “I’m reluctant to use the word ‘secret’,” says Edwards, a businessman who runs his own recruitment agency.

“We don’t make the way we operate known publicly because that will spoil things for the candidates, but we aren’t trying to hide ourselves from the world. “Like many other organisations, we have been attacked aggressively in the past. During World War 2, Hitler tried to wipe out the Freemasons.

“Even in South Africa, there was a time when we were targeted. That made our members cautious. Nowadays, we encourage members to speak about it. The world has changed,” Edwards says. The most fascinating room in the Lodge De Goede Hoop is undoubtedly the middle chamber. With only two small windows letting in a sliver of light, the room is dark even in the middle of the day. Here, ceremonies are held at night in the pitch dark to remind members just how fleeting their lives are.

The organisation is open to all races, but does not accept women as members. There are female lodges in some parts of the world, but they are not recognised by the Freemasons’ constitution. No atheists are permitted to join. Members believe in the “life hereafter”, so atheists aren’t welcome. “To become a member, the person is required to believe in a ‘higher power’, but we do not say who that must be. Freemasonry is not a religion. We offer no path to heaven.”

Edwards says the Freemasons believe in tolerance, and promoting peace and harmony. “In our lodge we have members of Parliament from three different political parties and they all get on tremendously well together,” he boasts. Then, with an almost disappointingly ordinary handshake, he says goodbye.