

CHAPTER GROWTH

Publish or Perish, Talk or Tumble, Change or Die

Like any good Presbyterian sermon, this talk today has three points and an introduction.

To **introduce** myself, my name is Howard Slenk. I taught organ at Calvin College for three years in the fifties. From 1967 to 1997, I taught music history, music theory, and conducted, at one time or another, most of the choral groups at Calvin. During that time I also was Organist and Director of Music at a local church. After retirement from Calvin, I was a full-time Interim Director of Music at three large downtown churches. While holding one of these positions I became Dean of the Grand Rapids Chapter of the AGO, and held that office for three years.

The reason that I am standing here in front of you this morning, is that during the three years that I was Dean, the Grand Rapids Chapter experienced **the highest rate of membership growth** in the nation. These were the three years of the "Each One, Reach One" campaign. We were the winners for the first two years, and at the top the third year, but did not survive the drawing.

I have been asked to speak to you informally on several occasions, but this time I was asked to **present a formal speech** on why we were so successful. Today, instead of speaking off the cuff, I've prepared this three-point sermon, which I'm hoping will be of help to you. Each one of my three points will include a story of an unhappy experience I had as an AGO member, followed by suggestions on how to prevent such stories from happening.

I. PUBLISH OR PERISH

In the spring of 2005, the Dean of our chapter approached me at a meeting and asked if I would be willing to **become a member of the Executive Committee** of our chapter. I agreed to serve. I didn't know anything about the AGO's By-Laws then, therefore did not realize that I should have been elected, not just asked to join. Evidently, the Chapter had been operating this way for some time, because it had been difficult to get people to serve. I later heard that during one season, another Dean had run the Chapter all by himself, without the support of an Executive Committee.

In September of that year, at the first Executive Committee meeting there were **two situations that seemed to me unhealthy** for an organization.

1. The first was that almost all of the six Members-at-Large were **members of the same denomination**. Even though it was my own wonderful denomination, and all six members were admirable, capable people, surrounding oneself with only like-minded people is seldom healthy, and will be unavoidable if Executive Committee members simply ask other members to serve.
2. The second undesirable situation was that the **slate of programs** for the current year was not in place. Quite a few events still had to be either voted on and confirmed or--at this late date--suggested.

During that year, both the Dean and the Sub-Dean announced that they would be stepping down. As soon as I heard this I spoke with a colleague of mine whom I knew would make **a good Dean** and really twisted her arm. She agreed, but for only one year, so I promised to take her place in 2007. I then talked to three full-time organist-choir directors (two of them new in town) who were not members of my denomination, and convinced them to **become Members at Large** during the coming season. One of these people

became our highly-skilled Webmaster and eventually the electronic publisher of our monthly newsletter. Once again, no elections.

But in September 2006, we had a **new gung-ho Gang of Four** from four different denominations, that included an enthusiastic, capable new Dean. Most of the programs for the current season were in place. As soon as they were all nailed down, we started planning for 2007, and by May of that season, all seven programs for the next season were in place, and could be advertised on our web-site and in the final newsletter of the current season. So when we asked members to re-register in June, we could give them a complete program for the following season. We **published like mad:** in our newsletter and on our website, constantly talking up the guild.

In September 2007, I became Dean, while working at St. Mark's Church in Grand Rapids as Interim Director of Music. One day in September, the Organ Scholar at St. Mark's, who was also a member of the Executive Committee, said to me: "You know, Howard, Grand Rapids is a city of churches, and there are scores, perhaps even hundreds of organists in this town who are not members of the guild. **We should go after them.**" So we did. We promised each other that we would each contact ten organists we knew who were not members

of the guild, and urge them to join. We wrote them personal letters, included a copy of the newsletter, and called them to talk up the guild. It worked. Not with all twenty of them, but with quite a few.

We made **publishing a high priority** that year.

1. We followed the good example of the previous Dean, and made sure that all **seven programs were in place** by the time the final newsletter of the season was published, so that they could be announced and promoted.
2. We replaced our print Newsletter with one **online**, constructed skillfully each month by our new Webmaster, who also sent out reminders of concerts and choral events. He mailed printed versions to members without computers.
3. There was always **a printed agenda** for the monthly meetings of the Executive Committee, sent out to the members ahead of time, along with a reminder to those members who were expected to report on a particular assignment they had.
4. This mailing included **a copy of the minutes** of the last meeting, which also served as a reminder of assignments.
5. Each Member-at-Large was requested to be in charge of all the **physical arrangements for one** of our monthly meetings:

arranging food, venue, welcoming the guest speaker, printing arrangements, and a suitable room for the Executive Committee meeting, which always preceded the monthly dinner and chapter meeting. **A printed time-line of responsibilities** was sent to that person at least a month in advance.

6. Our monthly meetings were advertised as **open to the public free of charge**.

My advice to all Deans and chapter officers would be: “Do all you can to give the impression **THIS IS IMPORTANT**. With the clothes you wear, with a timely, well-organized printed agenda, with punctuality, with preparedness, with friendly reminders, with thank-you notes, and with an enthusiastic attitude. Remember, enthusiasm filters down from the top.

In October of that year I was at the Ann Arbor Organ Symposium and spoke with a former student of mine, Marcia van Oyen. She was then a member of the National Membership Committee and told me about the “**Each One, Reach One**” competition. We entered and won.

II. TALK OR TUMBLE

When I finished my three years as organ teacher at Calvin College in the 1950s, **I dropped out of the guild** and joined other professional organizations instead. One day in Grand Rapids, however, when I was back at Calvin College as the director of choirs, I received a call from a former organ teacher of mine. She said: "You know, Howard, you teach at a local church-related college, and you have a position in our denomination as one of the few Directors of Music; you should be a member of the AGO."

She was right, and I took her advice. My re-entry into our chapter, however, was **less than cordial**. I attended the September meeting with two other new members, each from a sister college in Grand Rapids. Even though I knew many of the people at that meeting, no one welcomed me, very few spoke to me, and even the Dean did not give the three new members any sort of welcome or even a personal greeting. On the way out, one of the new members said to me, "Howard, do I have BO? No one spoke to me." Neither one of those two persons attended any subsequent meetings, or renewed their membership the following year. I'm sure none of the persons attending that meeting disliked us, or tried to avoid us. It just

didn't occur to them how important it is to make newcomers feel welcome.

Shortly after that experience, I had to take my turn as chairman of the Calvin College Music Department for six years. Fortunately, just before I started, I came across a very good article on leadership. It said: the three most important words for an effective leader of an organization are TALK, TALK, TALK. This was extremely helpful advice for me, because I tend to be a do-it-myself type of person. So I made a point of frequently visiting the offices of my colleagues, just to chat, to ask about their duties, to discuss a few ideas for the department, their ideas and mine.

Following these same procedures as Dean was very fruitful, and leads me to make the following suggestions:

1. Talk, talk, talk with the **officers** of the Executive Committee, the Web-master, and the editor of the Newsletter.
2. Talk with the **six Members-at-Large**. Encourage them to welcome new members at your monthly meetings. By initiating a Buddy-System, each Member-at-Large can shepherd a new member for a meeting or two.

3. Talk, talk, talk, if a **meal** is served. Ask the six Members-at-Large and the officers to each sit at a separate table, and encourage friendly interchange among everyone.

4. Encourage all members to talk about the guild to their **friends and acquaintances**.

5. Serve **good food (and wine, when you can)** at the monthly dinners. They promote camaraderie and stimulate conversation.

6. Talk, talk, talk with the persons who are full-time **directors of music** in the big downtown churches. They have budgets, and perhaps a concert series, and maybe even patrons. Ask them to schedule their concerts on the same weekend that the chapter is meeting. With this system of piggy-backing, we were able to have at our meetings all within one season: Raymond Haan, Marilyn Mason, Janette Fishell, and Paul Jacobs. The following season included appearances at our meetings by Huw Lewis, Gillian Weir, Matsuaki Suzuki of the Japanese Bach Collegium, and Martin Neary. For a city the size of Grand Rapids, these are outstanding rosters, probably not equaled by any other guild chapters those two years. They were the result of TALK, TALK, TALK.

III. CHANGE OR DIE

My oldest son is an engineer for the Boeing Space Corporation in California. He told me once that the plant where he works has as its motto: **Change or Die**. This was a very helpful motto to have when President Obama cancelled the space shuttle a few years ago, something my son had worked on for decades. He still has his job because he was prepared for change.

We have been told by our AGO leaders for a very long time, that **our organization is shrinking**. The statistics are pretty scary. We need change badly.

1. Our monthly journal needs drastic change. Do you realize that the format of the TAO is basically the same as that of the Diapason that I read when I was a teen-aged member of the guild, sixty-five years ago. Think of how often Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report have changed their format. Over and over again, sometimes much to our disgust. But people still read them. I don't know about you, but I have little interest in our monthly journal. I am a visual person, and I find it unattractive, even with the new color. It doesn't have to be glitzy, but it should at least change from time to time. One should have the feeling that one has when he picks

up *Time* or *Newsweek*: THIS IS IMPORTANT, which he won't have if a distant organ is pictured on the cover.

2. The formats of our regional and national conventions should change and have new types of presentations. Chapters should change the types of monthly programs we present, and not rely on simply repeating projects and workshops and lectures and recitals that we've heard before. Our chapter, for example, initiated a very successful Composer of the Year award, and devoted an entire meeting to the choral and organ music of that person. Each one of the four was a local person, but it doesn't have to be. We also began an season-opening Guild dedication service involving all the AGO chapters of Western Michigan.

3. We should appoint young people to be our Members-at-large, to be our presenters, to be our local, regional, and national officers. Even though they are few, we should use the ones that we do have. Too many college and high-school students have said to me that when they attended a guild meeting, no one talked to them.

4. Promote audience-friendly organ recitals. During my deanship I wrote a lengthy editorial entitled "The Organ Recital in America," which was a sharp criticism of the typical organ recital in

our country. It was radical enough that I expected there might even be a letter or two to the editor in our monthly Newsletter. One member called me and told me she agreed with my point of view. I have several copies here if any of you are interested in reading it.

While I was working on this editorial, I ran some ideas past my daughter. She said: “Dad, I don’t understand it. You have this large and magnificent instrument. It’s an orchestra at your disposal. You play it with both hands and both feet. The organ should be WAY COOL. Why isn’t it?” You can read why I think it isn’t in this editorial.

In conclusion I repeat: Change or die. Take your pick. We love our profession. We love church music. We love the organ and the music for it. And we are under attack. It is a noble cause we represent. American Guild of Organists, PUBLISH—TALK—CHANGE. And please, don’t die.