



Is Our Association Prepared for the Next 100 Years?

By Tony Sadler, Salisbury Circle, Director Province 11, UK Development Officer

The Catenian Association started life in a small way in 1908. During its hundred years of life it has expanded at varying rates and suffered decline in some places. What can be said with some certainty is, that if a small group of men with vision could devise an organisation that would survive for over 100 years and spread to the other side of the world, then they must have created something very special.

That being so, how can we ensure that the Association remains relevant for the next 100 years. We need to be looking at both a short term and a long term strategy. The longer term strategy might well involve more radical changes to the Association but I want now to look at the shorter term.

The Association has been growing at a more or less steady rate over the last few years. That rate has been in the order of 1%. The most recent edition of Agenda (March 2008) indicated that we are attracting new members at the rate of 4.04% but after resignations and deaths are taken into account, the net growth is 1.56% which is 50% higher than it has been for some time but these figures beg a number of questions: Why is it that, in a year when Grand President asked us all to be committed to attracting new members and examining whether or not the creation of new Circles or Groups might be possible, the statistics are not showing even better results? Why is it that some Circles are attracting new members whilst others are not and some are even in decline? Why is it that some Provinces are able to found new Circles and Groups whilst the majority do not?

It seems to me that if we are going to thrive during our next 100 years we need to do two things. Firstly we need to examine our current situations at both Circle and Provincial level and then work methodically towards improvement. I refer of course to the need for a Development Plan. Secondly we need to look further into the future and examine whether our structure is likely to be appropriate for our second hundred years and pose questions about the possibility of essential and radical changes. I propose to leave any discussion on the latter to another time but readers of Agenda will have noticed that members of the Membership Work Group are engaging in preliminary discussion on the possibility of establishing "The Young Catenians".

Within the report in Agenda lies the following:

404 Enrolments; 134 Deaths; 93 Resignations; 21 Forfeitures

- Why are there as many as 93 resignations in less than 12 months?
- Why have 21 Brothers been allowed to forfeit their membership?

These are important questions that need to be asked. When I look at the details of these resignations and forfeitures I find that some of these men have been Brothers in our Association for 10, 12, 15 and even 32 years! Admittedly some resign after only a short period of membership and in respect of these Brothers we must ask whether they were right for the Association or perhaps more pertinently, were we right for them? And this is where the development plan begins. A "Development Plan" is not merely a "Recruiting Plan". No, it is much, much more. It is recommended that each Province and each Circle develops its own Development Plan. Where such plans already exist then perhaps they need to be re-visited and where necessary adapted or even re-written. These should answer such questions as:

- What is this Circle good at?
- What do we do well?
- Do we each introduce prospective members to our Circle?
- Do all members of the Circle welcome the prospective member and show him courtesy, hospitality and care?

- Do we continue to look after those men after enrolment so that they continue to feel welcomed and do we encourage them to become involved in all activities of the Circle?
- Do we put off prospective members by being insular and by creating cliques? Do we notice those Brothers whose attendance at meetings begins to wane?
- Do we have a system of making contact with Brothers who begin to miss meetings without any satisfactory explanation?
- Do we show due care for our Brothers following the death of their wife or other family members? Is this care a lasting care or does it only exist for a short time?
- Do we involve the widows of our deceased Brothers as fully as possible in all the social life of the Circle?
- Do we see how the Circle might be able to assist a Brother to continue his membership when times become difficult?
- Are we proactive in offering transport to and from Circle meetings and other events?
- Do we consider waiving a Brother's fees to avoid his resignation or forfeiture?
- Do we have a full and varied social programme looking after the needs of all our Brothers and widows?

I could go on but the asking of these and other similar questions is the important start of the Development Plan.

Knowing what we are doing well and what we are doing not so well and where we need to improve are the starting points. These are the first key issues involved in successful retention and recruitment.

After carrying out this self-audit and making any improvements that we need to make within our Circles we should be more confident a) that we are meeting the needs of all members, the widows and families and b) that we will be presenting a more attractive face to all the prospective members we choose to invite to our after Circle dinners/socials and thence to future membership. We then need to build into our plan a systematic recruitment plan. We need to have a strategy.

Can it be done? I am sure that it can be done. One small Circle had just 22 members. For a number of years it failed to recruit effectively. The average age of the Circle continued to increase and the same individuals were circulating in office year after year. After devising its Development Plan the Circle increased its membership by 27% and currently has four more visiting gentlemen. The next two phases of its parish-based recruitment campaign have been agreed and there is no reason why they should not be successful. It is anticipated that within two years this Circle will have attracted another four or five members building its numbers up to 36 in the space of just over 18 months. It should be noted that all bar one of these new members are new to the Association, only one being already enrolled in another Circle. Because the Circle has undergone its self examination prior to recruitment, it feels confident that it will be a Circle that will thrive into the next Catenian century.

The members of the Membership Work Group of Grand Council have developed a PowerPoint presentation aimed at assisting Circles to understand and develop a Circle Development Plan. They are also developing some draft documentation in the form of templates that might assist Circles in the process. If any Province or Circle would like members of the team to visit them with this presentation please contact the Chairman of the Group, Brother Tony Godden or Brother Tony Sadler, the UK Development Officer.