



LONG-RANGE PLAN 2017–2021

Updated August 25, 2017

MISSION

To promote the appreciation and enjoyment of music in all its forms and the art of choral singing within its membership, audience and the community at large; to present public concerts a minimum of twice annually; to raise money to fund the purposes of the Society, but to operate as a non-profit organization.

— Achill Choral Society Constitution

OVERVIEW

The Achill Choral Society's volunteer Board of Directors has determined many issues affecting the long-term sustainability of the choir. Within this living document, each issue is outlined and an action plan is proposed. At the Annual Joint Meeting of the incoming and outgoing Boards, each issue will be reviewed and revised, the status of each action will be updated, and any new issues will be added to the Long-Range Plan.

WHO WE ARE

The Achill Choral Society is an auditioned choir with a reputation for excellence in performance. We take to heart our mandate to bring music to the wider community through annual concerts, free community performances, and fundraising events. Our style ranges from classical to traditional to pop. The members of the Achill Choral Society welcome opportunities to challenge ourselves with music that helps us grow in musical skill, balanced with a repertoire that is simply enjoyable, both for our audiences and for the choir. The membership is enthusiastically involved in the ongoing direction for the choir through the Board of Directors and the Music Committee, in collaboration with our Music Director.

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1 ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

1.1 MAKEUP OF THE CHOIR

The choir continues to improve and has reached a level of performance that is rewarding to its members. We are at a challenging point in our history. We have the potential to grow musically and technically, building the remarkable esprit de corps within the choir.

To maintain the interest and enthusiasm of our current members and to attract and grow returning audiences, the Music Director, Board and choir members need to continue the focus on high standards of excellence in choral singing and concert production.

1.2 CHOIR SIZE

The optimal size of the choir should continue to be 80 members primarily because of the constraints of the venues available in the choir's geographical performance area.

1.3 MEMBERSHIP DEMOGRAPHIC

Our membership continues to age faster than our recruitment brings in younger voices. Increasingly, members are leaving our choir for age-related health and relocation reasons. For those members who remain, we need to be sensitive to their comfort and accessibility needs at all venues. All of this affects music planning and sequencing. It is important to note that our ageing demographic should not be the primary reason to change the quality and diversity of our choral performances.

Action

- Provide workshops that address changes in ageing voices, such as range, breath control, and tonal quality. Teach techniques for keeping voices fit over time, learning and memorizing music, and the physicality of singing for extended times.
- Select music that fosters fresh attitudes, sounds and energy, and that maintains the excitement of excellent choral singing.
- The issues around concert seating for choristers must continue to be explored, with options evaluated and actions taken.

1.4 EFFECTIVE REHEARSALS

Improving our learning process so that the choir reaches a level where members are less dependent on their sheet music will enable them to get their "heads up" to sing with greater attention to the Music Director and to the phrasing and shaping of each piece.

Action

- Renew the Music Director's mandate to devote some weekly practice time to warmups, vocal techniques and exercises to help singers maximize their potential.
- Strengthen part-singing skills by using a variety of strategies to allow singers to practice singing against different voices; for example, after break, return to random seating; after break, put chairs away and stand in small groups; have half the choir singing, half the choir listening and watching.
- Organize two vocal workshops per year (one per session) to help with voice production, technique, the maintenance of ageing voices, and other topics, as finances allow.
- The members should be encouraged to hold smaller sectional rehearsals, as necessary, outside of the regular rehearsal time.

1.5 PRACTICE MUSIC

Offering practice recordings of the music is a valuable tool for the members who primarily learn by listening to music. The weekly rehearsal recordings have been valuable to members, including those who have missed a practice, and for review in small sectional rehearsals.

Action

- Have practice music electronically available to members before the beginning of each session.
- Produce high-quality electronic practice music recordings, emphasizing clear voicing.
- Establish a routine of skilled members "proof-reading" the practice music to ensure accuracy.
- Continue the preferential use of web-based distribution of practice music while continuing to provide CDs for those without sufficient computer access or skills.
- Continue publishing recordings of the weekly rehearsal on the website for absent members and review during sectional practices.
- Explore MIDI playback tools to allow dynamic tempo adjustments while listening to the practice music.
- Maintain a library of electronic practice music.

1.6 COSTUMES

Our choir costumes require continued renewal to look fresh and smart. The current costumes are over 15 years old and will require major fundraising or grant applications to replace them completely.

Action

- Request the costume committee to regularly review the options for the next few years to help plan the timing of replacing our existing costumes.

2 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RENEWAL

The choir is at a crossroads, facing significant challenges that will require the attention and efforts of the Board and the support of the membership.

These challenges can be positively viewed as real opportunities for the choir to revitalize under a new Music Director and focus on creative ways to enhance the enthusiasm of our membership and increase our appeal to the audiences we would like to attract and grow.

The following recommendations are designed to address four areas of need:

1. Musical leadership.
2. Membership recruitment and retention.
3. Audience renewal.
4. Integrated planning to enhance revenue and rebuild a contingency fund.

In addition, the Board should be open to, and carefully consider, new ideas coming from the membership and the Music Director, which might help achieve these goals.

2.1 NEW MUSIC DIRECTOR

Director Qualities

- Musicality, as well as technical ability.
- Ability to assess individual skills and improve the overall choir.
- Ability to manage a large choir in a sensitive and effective way.
- Ability to teach and effectively express their musical direction.
- The preference is for the Music Director to accompany themselves during the rehearsal, eliminating the need to hire a rehearsal accompanist.
- The Music Director should be actively involved in the choir's community concerts.
- Strong desire for a collaborative leadership style.
- Understands the need to market the choir.

2.2 MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Recruiting younger members may lead to a younger sound, a more sustainable membership, and in turn to younger and more sustainable audiences. Recruitment of secondary school students has been explored for the last several years; however, as the student is likely to leave the area to pursue post-secondary education, this has not given us the intended shift in the choir's make-up.

Action

- Explore other ways to attract younger members, particularly parents with middle-school and secondary-school-aged children.
- Consider producing a brochure for advertising membership opportunities.
- Some avenues to improve awareness of the choir:
 - Welcome Wagon
 - Local Parks and Rec departments
 - Church bulletins and announcement inserts
 - Local music stores
 - Radio opportunities on local stations
 - Improve recruitment visibility on the website
 - Lawn/bag signs for promotion of concerts
- New members should be “buddied” with an established member to help them learn the choir’s culture and style.

2.3 PROGRAMMING GOALS

Achill’s Music Committee plays a significant role in working with the Music Director and Board of Directors to promote the continued development of our musical performances. Setting down concrete musical goals and working up a music plan for at least two years allows the Choir to be better organized, efficient and creative. Goals of the Music Committee should include maintaining the diversity of our repertoire, bringing in new music including music by 21st Century composers, balancing the new with the familiar, and with the entertainment interest of our existing and potential audiences in mind. The Choir needs to continue to address what it is that local audiences may want to hear. To maintain the interest and excitement of choir members and audiences alike, we need to review constantly and evaluate the music selection, limiting how often and how soon a piece of music can be repeated. The programs should provide a significant proportion of music new to the choir while still including choir favourites from our library.

Achill’s musical planning must be integrated with our financial planning.

2.4 VENUES

Finding suitable venues for our performances is increasingly challenging. The requirement to offer chorus seating during performances and the disappearing availability of rental organs require larger venues with a suitable instrument. These venues are rare within our local performance area and they tend to be faith buildings that sometimes require a more restricted repertoire, limited to sacred music. There is a low likelihood of new appropriate venues being built in the foreseeable future.

Action

- Efforts should continue to explore alternative venues in our performance areas.
- While our key factor is to continue to perform for local audiences, this should not preclude our singing outside our performance areas (e.g., Toronto, Mississauga, Newmarket).
- The Music Committee and Venues Officer will continue to consult regularly on the instrument requirements of local venues.
- As funding permits, the choir should work towards presenting three concerts per term, one in each of our primary catchment areas (Orangeville, Alliston, and especially Bolton). To reach our Bolton audience, we may have to plan some concerts without organ accompaniment.

2.5 TWO-YEAR CONCERT PLAN

Having the concerts planned at least a year in advance (preferably two) makes the selection of musicians and venues easier, and offers several opportunities for advertising.

Action

- Mandate the Music Committee to work in consultation with the Music Director to develop a two-year plan that includes the goals above and is integrated with financial planning.
- The plan should be presented to the Board before the end of the choir year so that the musical plans for the following year can be presented to the members at the AGM.
- Aim to perform a major choral work every two years. The budget factors must be clearly considered before committing to a major work. A major work is a single work requiring half of a programme or more, and may require additional professional accompaniment or professional soloists.
- Continue to include shorter works in our programs that have broad appeal.
- When repeating music, the Music Committee should consider prioritizing music from our library that has been donated with a dedication.
- In addition to the instrumental accompaniment required for major works, continue to enrich our concerts with additional instrumental accompaniment where effective and when financially responsible.
- Consider using and developing talent from within the choir, balanced with the hiring of professionals.

2.6 MUSICAL GUESTS

Inviting outside groups to perform with Achill offers an opportunity for our audiences to experience a different breadth of music. Having a guest musical group also gives opportunity for the choir to rest during demanding performances.

Action

- In conjunction with the Board and the Music Director, the Music Committee should consider planning concert programs that include works we can sing with a guest choir or other musical ensemble.

2.7 PUBLIC AWARENESS AND OUTREACH

Although the choir has been in existence for 35 years and operates in relatively small communities, and not withstanding the best efforts of successive Publicity Chairs and their committees, additional work needs to be invested in developing public awareness of Achill.

Action

- The Board will provide the Publicity Chair with necessary information in a timely fashion.
- Continue the publication every couple of years of an updated brochure.
- Review the cost effectiveness of current publicity efforts.
- Maintain musical involvement in large community events (e.g., disaster relief concerts, major festivals, Achill-led fundraisers) when possible.
- Give complimentary tickets to media outlets, local politicians, and arts organizers as a way of generating exposure.
- Perform a community outreach concert at least twice a year within our performance areas.
- Update the graphic presentation of the Choir; establish a working committee to work with our graphic artist and publicist.
- Capitalize on the reality that 70% of our ticket sales come from members' word-of-mouth promotion by providing useful tools for members to spread the news (e.g., digital newsletters, electronic cards, etc.)
- Investigate the best uses of the various social media platforms.

2.8 INTEGRATED PLANNING AND REVENUE

To keep operating in a sound financial manner and accomplish the goals laid out in this Long-Range Plan, the Board will need to review current and potential revenue streams, including sources such as foundations, corporations, advertising, ticket sales, membership fees, fundraising and donations. All aspects of the operation of the choir, including musical goals and all purchases and expenditures, must be integrated with our financial planning.

Action

- Distribute the choir's financial position to the membership at the beginning of each session and at the AGM to ensure awareness of our ongoing financial situation.
- Apply for a Trillium grant or similar grants to fund costumes or other major capital expenditures (such as a new digital keyboard and trailer.)
- Investigate all relevant grants and subsidies that may be applicable to the choir.
- Continue to seek donations from our audiences.
- Establish a fund-raising committee to explore and propose new and effective fund-raising opportunities.

2.9 PRODUCTION OF A STUDIO-QUALITY RECORDING

After the choir's new Music Director is well established, consideration should be given to whether the Choir will produce another studio-quality recording, to be distributed through CD/DVD/online or as video. The value may be in promotion and publicity, rather than the revenue that may be generated.

3 CODE OF ETHICS AND PRIVACY POLICY

The Code of Ethics document was last amended in 2003 and needs to be reviewed and updated. In recent years, provincial and federal legislation has been approved and enacted that requires all organizations to have a formal Code of Ethics and Privacy Policy. The documents must be publicly available.

Action

- Create an action group mandated to consult with appropriate professional resources to create and update the following documents:
 - Code of Ethics
 - Privacy Policy
 - Other documents required by law or best practices

4 WEBSITE AND ARCHIVES

Achill's website (achill.ca) should be expanded to be a central communication hub for the Board, committee members, the membership and our audiences. Integration with social media has become an expected norm and should be encouraged. Likewise, cloud storage has become inexpensive and should be used as central location to securely store critical documents and files.

Action

- Expand online ticket sales to include automatic emailing of the tickets.
- Provide a section to host selected public documents:
 - Constitution
 - Code of Ethics
 - Privacy Policy
 - Long-Range Plan
- Allow other members to contribute and administer the website.
- Determine policies and best-practices on the use of cloud storage.

5 SUCCESSION PLANNING

Looking ahead to the next ten years, the Achill Choral Society wants to ensure its sustainability as an active and valued community choir. This involves the succession of leadership, including our Board, Music Director, and Accompanist(s).

We have been fortunate to have talented choir members serving on our Board over the past years, many of whom have donated long terms of service. We need to continue to encourage members to take positions on our Board where they will learn how the Board functions and have a voice in discussing and voting on Choir issues. At the same time, we need to be careful not to “burn out” existing Board members, and be cautious about requiring such long terms-of-office to avoid discouraging members from considering Board duties. (It is quite possible for a President to have served six years on the Board by time they leave the Board.)

Action

- Care and recruitment of non-elected and crucial volunteers who assume complex responsibilities (e.g., staging, programme layout, etc.) need to be considered over the short- and long-term.
- As Board members leave positions, they should be expected to prepare materials carefully for incoming replacements.
- We need to maintain suitable contacts within the musical community for concert accompanists. While historically we enjoyed having two fine accompanists, their skills are in great demand and they may be unavailable for our concerts.
- Attend workshops, concerts and festivals showcasing other choral directors and accompanists. Invite workshop leaders, accompanists and guest conductors to work with our choir.
- Maintain a file of potential candidates who would suit our choral needs as accompanists, choral leader, or workshop leader.
- Consider changing the Constitution to permit an outgoing President to serve only one year as Past President. When the Past President position is vacant, allow the Board to appoint a current member with recent Board experience to serve as Assistant to the President.
- Support the annual Board nomination process, as outlined in the Constitution.

6 ONGOING REVIEW

The issues outlined in this document will change in priority over time. New issues will arise which need to be addressed by the Board. This document should be reviewed and updated annually or bi-annually as necessary. The review should occur during the annual Joint Board Meeting, or by a specially formed committee to report to the Board at the beginning of the fall session.

As a public organization, the membership should be regularly updated on the actions of the executive. The Board should also remind all members that informal and confidential feedback on any topic is welcomed and encouraged.