

R-31, R-32, R-33—Report from the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald*

October 2, 2008

The Rev. John Ornee
Peace Reformed Church
9530 Woodbridge Street
Zeeland, MI 49464

Dear John,

The attached document was approved as a first draft by the *Church Herald* Editorial Council at our meeting last week. While it is still a work in process, it does represent the Council's best response at this point to last year's General Synod recommendation R-63. It is our hope this response will be supported by the GSC and RCA staff. We believe a united front on this matter is in the best interest of all parties, including General Synod and the RCA as a whole.

Please understand, while this document was carefully prepared and wholeheartedly endorsed by all Editorial Council members, it is not our official response to General Synod. We are providing it to the GSC as a first draft for purposes of discussion and joint effort. Also, the \$200,000 is a good faith figure related to both reason and our need. It is not a "padded" figure for purposes of negotiation.

As briefly noted, this document also expresses hope the *Church Herald* can be meaningfully involved in formulating the response to the related action from last year's General Synod, namely R-62. We fully expect the GSC and RCA Communication staff to take the lead, but believe giving the *Church Herald* a place at that table will serve the best interests of all concerned.

As you process this information, we also respectfully ask that a *Church Herald* Editorial Council representative be invited to personally introduce and speak to our request before the GSC. We are, of course, willing to talk about this in any other way and venue that might be helpful to GSC and its leaders.

Gratefully yours,

Doug Van Bronkhorst
President, *Church Herald* Editorial Council

Cc: Chris Van Eyl, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Paul Boice, Ken Bradsell

To the General Synod Council: A draft of the *Church Herald* Editorial Council's proposal to next year's synod regarding assessment subsidy (October 2008)

**Recommendation to General Synod 2009:
Sustained General Synod Support for the *Church Herald***

The *Church Herald* Editorial Council recommends that the General Synod support the *Church Herald* annually from an assessment subsidy, beginning with \$200,000 in the next fiscal year.

Background:

A brief history of the funding of the *Church Herald* for the last 50 years indicates that the *Church Herald* had been continuously supported financially by the General Synod before the ending of all support in 2007.

Until 1992, the General Synod directly supported the *Church Herald*. For example, in 1950 it appropriated \$7,000, and in 1965, \$10,000. This represented a significant portion of the *Church Herald's* budget. In 1992, the *Church Herald* received \$86,700 from the General Synod. If the equivalent in buying power were provided today, that amount would be \$136,000.

Between 1993 and 2007, the General Synod supported by assessment almost the entire budget of the *Church Herald*, and the magazine was sent to every household in the RCA at no cost.

The General Synod of 2007 ended all funding for the *Church Herald*. Not only did the every-member-plan funding arrangement end, but no subsidy of the *Church Herald* from the General Synod was provided. Most of the subsidy was transferred to other communication projects in the RCA. Since 2007, the *Church Herald* has supported itself almost completely by subscriptions. For the first time in five decades, the *Church Herald* has tried to exist without the financial support of the General Synod. This has led to a perilous financial situation.

Upon reflection of history, and witnessing the current reality, it is not reasonable to expect a denominational magazine to exist solely on subscriptions.

The Proposal:

We are seeking a restoration of this time-honored method of supporting the *Church Herald* as an important part of RCA life. An assessment that generates around \$200,000 annually for the *Church Herald*, adjusted annually for inflation, would put the *Church Herald* on sustainable financial footing.

Reasons:

- A. The *Church Herald* has a valued, important place in the overall communication efforts of the RCA.
- In reader satisfaction surveys, one most recently done in 2007 by the Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research at Hope College, the *Church Herald* is widely valued by its readers. (This 2007 survey is particularly important in that it surveys the readership while its readership was the entire membership of the RCA.) In national journalistic award competitions, the magazine has consistently been recognized with prizes.
 - The *Church Herald* is a common, trusted voice for the RCA. Not all readers agree with everything—which cannot be expected in any church communication—but in the past and today, it is one of its key connectional pieces.
 - Other RCA publications have a role in promoting the RCA, in particular “Our Call,” but they cannot replace the role or function of the *Church Herald* in the RCA. The *Church Herald* is unique, and uniquely valuable.
 - The *Church Herald* has been supported by the whole denomination even though it is sometimes controversial. As the minutes of the General Synod show, overtures and objections to various policies and articles of the *Church Herald* have been made regularly throughout the twentieth century.
 - The *Church Herald* connects us to our past, providing an ongoing historical record of the ministry of the denomination and the conversations regarding that ministry.
 - The *Church Herald* is read by ecumenical brothers and sisters in the wider Christian world, spreading our impact and connecting us to the global church. It goes to readers in homes, churches, and libraries throughout North America.
 - Level of assessment would not be burdensome, and would be a good investment in maintaining dialogue within the Reformed Church.
- B. Need for RCA funding through the General Synod
- The *Church Herald* is seeking to make a major transition during a time of declining denominational connection and difficult economic times. Our goal is to persist in offering excellent communication with, to, and for all those in the RCA, and recognize that we must continue to evolve in order

to accomplish this. Without financial assistance, such growth will be difficult.

- The Editorial Council has made the decision to maintain the publication's quality with the current bare-bones operation. Some cuts to the magazine and its budget could perhaps be made (a staff position has already been eliminated, for example), but we would soon be cutting into the bone.
- When the *Herald* was first eliminated from the assessment budget, the staff and council anticipated a level of response that has not been realized. Although we continue to work to increase our subscription base, we are a long way from the 40,000 subscribers we anticipated when budgeting for a subscription-based magazine.
- As church multiplication efforts increase the number of RCA members, this new audience may increase subscriptions to the magazine. In the interim, a subsidy will ensure viability so the magazine will be available to serve and include these newer members of the RCA.
- Projections for 2008 indicate a \$200,000 deficit for the year (more accurate numbers will be provided at year's end). This represents more than half of our available reserves. The RCA deserves a strong *Church Herald*, but without fiscal support it likely will have no *Church Herald* at all by the end of 2009.

Special to GSC: Regarding the request for subsidy, the council identified three potential means of including this in the General Synod budget. We agree with others who have said raising assessments is a bad practice, and would like not to be the culprit in doing this. To accomplish this, the GSC would need to reduce its assessment budget, and we understand the ramifications of this on the overall budget of General Synod Council. We also ask the GSC to recognize that for fiscal years 2008 and 2009, the *Herald* has received no subsidy, which has allowed the GSC two years of additional revenue.

The *Church Herald* assessment subsidy request could become a separate line item in the budget, as are the subsidy requests for theological education and pensions. This would be a good way to reflect the *Church Herald's* accountability to General Synod. It would set the number apart in the budget, which has both advantages and disadvantages for all parties.

A *Church Herald* assessment subsidy could also be lodged as part of the GSC's communication budget, as it has been in the past. This would be more reflective of a cooperative communication effort between CAPS and the *Church Herald*. In our conversations, the council was in favor of this method of accounting. It is, of course, GSC's prerogative, but this suggestion represents the council's best thinking at this moment.

The Editorial Council of the *Church Herald* considers the magazine to be an important component of denominational communication, and welcomes the opportunity to work with the GSC and its staff to develop a plan for RCA communication as requested by General Synod.