

Report of the General Synod Council on Communication

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind..."

1 Corinthians 1:4-5

Throughout the year and through every aspect of Our Call, the RCA has been blessed. It has been blessed with incredible stories of the goodness and the faithfulness of God. In response we give thanks to God from whom all blessings flow, and we share these stories with each other.

GSC COORDINATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

MGS 2008, R-31 AND 32, P. 127-128

To direct the General Synod Council to report its overall communication policy and strategy, together with the rationale and funding assumptions undergirding that policy and strategy, to the 2009 General Synod.

Multiple Tools with Increasing Focus on Electronic and Web Communication

Throughout 2008 General Synod Council (GSC) staff continued a strategic shift toward a coordinated communication plan that emphasizes communication tools that align with RCA members' needs while increasing efficiencies through the use of electronic and web communication. This shift reflects the changes occurring in our world, our denomination, our churches, and our homes.

RCA Electronic Communication Changes to Meet the Needs of Leaders, Members, and Seekers

More than 30 percent of the GSC denominational communication budget supported web development, emailing, and blogging as well as social networking as effective means to facilitate two-way communication with RCA members and share information with the church. Through the website, blogging, and social network sites, voices from throughout the denomination can be heard, healthy discussions can occur, and editorial independence can occur in ways that are never experienced in print communication.

The RCA website continues to change to better serve leaders and members of the RCA. In the past year "Web 2.0" technologies have been added to the site to enable 1) the hosting of dozens of videos and general news and newsletter RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication feeds—syndicated content that updates automatically), 2) sharing of web-pages via email or by automatically adding a link to social networking sites, and 3) the addition of private areas where members of various groups can connect online (including chaplains, church planters, and members of the Church Growth Fund). In addition, the RCA website team sends out regular notices via Twitter to over two hundred followers and manages a Facebook page. The combination of web, blogging, and social networking allows the various voices within the denomination to be heard while offering editorial independence.

The RCA site also now offers Dear Friends letters via email, thus allowing anyone who wants to subscribe to receive updates from RCA missionaries at no additional cost to the Global Mission program.

The main RCA website continues to focus more and more on the needs of church leaders and members. Stories from throughout the denomination continue to be featured on the homepage, with new stories posted at least weekly. Practical resources, resource suggestions, newsletters, and various documents and forms are posted nearly every day. (The website currently has over 5,500 pages, an increase of 1,500 over the previous year.) Areas of the website that have been extensively reworked in the last year include Caring for Creation, Children and Worship, Church Multiplication, Development, Discipleship, Social Witness and Justice, and Women's Ministries.

Traffic to the site continues to increase. Comparing the first six months of fiscal years 2008 and 2009, site visits are up 4 percent while page views are up 13 percent. This translates into an average of 42,000 visitors viewing nearly 150,000 pages each month.

Two new complementary sites remain under development. "RCA Community" (www.rcacommunity.org) is designed to be a virtual gathering place for RCA leaders and members. Devoted to encouraging discussions and the exchange of ideas, it will both host and provide links to RCA-related blogs. Discussion forums (i.e. bulletin boards) on numerous topics will be available. If it succeeds, it will create a virtual community of RCA members, gathering our transcontinental denomination in a place where we can interact with each other, supporting ministries, exchanging ideas, and discussing topics.

The second site under development, "Discover the RCA," is directed at seekers and potential members. It will give an overview of what the RCA believes and stands for and help people find a local church through a new, map-based church search engine.

The website team continues to maintain the *RCA Today* and *Perspectives Journal* websites and to lend assistance to regional synods, agencies, and ecumenical partners.

***RCA Today* Magazine Created for Members and Congregations**

At the direction of the 2007 General Synod, a print communication piece called *RCA Today* was developed in order to communicate more fully with RCA members. The first issue of this magazine was distributed in April 2008. *RCA Today* focuses on stories, resources, praise and prayer, and small-group study opportunities specifically around the six elements of Our Call (multiplication, revitalization, discipleship, leadership, mission and a multiracial future freed from racism). Each section of the magazine also promotes two-way dialogue by offering email links for readers who want to offer feedback or request information.

Each of the eight regional synods receives four pages in the publication in which to support their work. The magazine is customized to ensure that RCA members receive copies of *RCA Today* that have their regional synod's pages. For those who wish to read the pages of the other regional synods, those pages are available on the RCA website. This cooperative effort between General Synod Council (GSC) staff and regional synods allows *RCA Today* to effectively communicate at a denominational and local level.

RCA Today is currently distributed three times a year to members' homes and to congregations. Within the past year, the initial distribution to 80,000 RCA member families has grown to a distribution to 110,000 RCA member families.

The world of print communication is rapidly changing with the options of electronic communication and the increasing costs of printing and mailing. GSC staff realizes that this reality is a critical factor in the ongoing strategy of the denomination and will in all likelihood lead to a reduction in print material. As we move in this direction, it should be noted

that *RCA Today* is available on the RCA website for those who prefer an electronic copy. Efforts continue to increase electronic copies and decrease print copies to better serve the denomination and reduce costs.

Translation Efforts Increase

An integral piece of the RCA's coordinated communication strategy as it relates to the goal to build a multiracial future freed from racism includes the urgent need to translate resources into the languages spoken throughout the denomination.

With the encouragement of past General Synods, the support and involvement of regional synods, and the ongoing cooperation of the racial/ethnic councils of the RCA, the number of communication pieces that were translated increased dramatically in 2008. Particular focus has been placed on translating constitutional documents as well as Reformed creeds and confessions. The translation of creeds and confessions has increased rapidly through coordinated translation efforts with other denominations (e.g. the Christian Reformed Church, Korean Presbyterians, Taiwanese Presbyterians, etc.). Additional translation work was done with respect to commissioned leader and commissioned pastor resources. In order to make these resources available to the largest audience, the majority of the translated material is posted on the web in lieu of printing. This is cost effective and allows translated material to be made available more quickly. This momentum will continue as we look to bring RCA communications into the languages in which our members worship the Lord.

Reformed Church Press

Reformed Church Press (RCP) is organized as a separate corporate entity of the General Synod. However, for more than a decade it has functioned with the oversight of the General Synod Council. It provides means for the RCA to continue to produce selected resources to support specific RCA mission and ministry in fulfillment of both the Statement of Mission and Vision, and Our Call. It is the imprint used on all RCA produced materials including books, General Synod documents, DVDs, CDs, promotional and communication vehicles, and *Perspectives* (a theological journal).

In 2008, RCP produced and updated more than 50 resource products for the RCA, including a growing number of DVDs, resources translated into Spanish, Chinese, and Korean, and resources that support congregations around the elements of Our Call.

RCP also supports the efforts of the Commission on History and its publication of historical resources. In the past year, the Commission on History reprinted *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies*, by Gerald F. DeJong, and published three new resources: *Chinese Theological Education, 1970-2006*, edited by Marvin Hoff; *Old Wing Mission*, edited by Robert P. Swierenga and William Van Appledorn; and *Herman J. Ridder: Contextual Preacher and Seminary President*, edited by George Brown Jr.

Report of the Board of Editors of *Perspectives*

The Board of Editors and the contributing editors of *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* thank the Reformed Church in America for all of the ongoing support we receive in our endeavor to publish a quality publication of Reformed thought and reflections. *Perspectives* is published ten times each year and continues to be available in an online format, which attracts a steady stream of readers all year long.

As reported in previous years, *Perspectives* has witnessed a decline in subscribers across

the last dozen years. Hence in early 2008 we engaged a Chicago-based public relations and marketing firm (whose clients include *The Christian Century* and *Sojourners*) to conduct a targeted mail subscription campaign. Even though the results of this campaign did not yield quite as many new subscribers as we had hoped, we nevertheless were able to add a sizeable number of new names to our subscription list. We were sufficiently encouraged by the results to conduct another round of even more focused mailings in 2009 to boost our subscriptions still more.

Although *Perspectives* generates a good amount of subscription income, the continued viability of the publication is further shored up through the institutional support of a number of colleges and seminaries including Calvin College, Central College, Dordt College, Hope College, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Northwestern College. The Board of Editors typically includes representatives from each of these institutions.

In 2008 *Perspectives* welcomed Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell to the editorial team of James Bratt (Calvin College history department) and Scott Hoezee (director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary). Mathonnet-VanderWell is currently the copastor of Second Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa, and is also an adjunct professor of religion at Central College. Joan Zwagerman Curbow, who has been the managing editor for several years, has now completed her term of service with the board and will be replaced by Phil Tanis (RCA General Synod Council communication staff), who will assume many of the responsibilities previously done by the managing editor. Meanwhile, our poetry editor, Rhoda Janzen, will also soon be replaced as she has had to withdraw from the board for health reasons.

The Board of Editors currently includes nine individuals in addition to the three main editors, the review editor, the poetry editor, and the managing editor. This group meets twice each year to review recent issues and plan for upcoming editions of the magazine. The board also revised the bylaws of *Perspectives* this past year and transformed them into a new organizational charter that better reflects the board's operations as well as its relationship to other institutions, including the Reformed Church in America.

Perspectives remains grateful to the RCA for all its help and support and to the efforts of Phil Tanis, whose skills and advice have proven invaluable across the years he has served our publication. We look forward to continuing our work into 2009 and beyond.

Report on the Faith Alive Christian Resources Partnership

A recent review of reports indicates strong sales of resource material in all regions of the RCA. RCA staff meet regularly with Faith Alive Christian Resources leadership to ensure the partnership is working well and supporting the resource needs of both the RCA and Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC). Staff cooperation between Faith Alive and the RCA is strong. The RCA receives revenue from Reformed Church Press materials sold through Faith Alive and this continues to be used to produce additional resources to support the RCA and other Reformed congregations throughout the United States and Canada.

RCA DIALOGUE ON COMMUNICATION

At its meeting immediately after the adjournment of the 2008 session of the General Synod the General Synod Council proposed a consultation with the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald* for the purpose of determining how best to serve the church in the future with the range of information currently provided through the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* at a time when the costs of print communication continue to escalate and the

resources to support these forms of communication in the church are limited. Following the fall meeting of the GSC, John Ornee, the GSC's moderator, and general secretary, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Doug Van Bronkhorst, president of the *Church Herald* Editorial Council agreed to the establishment of a dialogue team. The dialogue team met on January 26-27, 2009. The team produced the following report:

RCA Dialogue on Communication and the *Church Herald*

January 26-27, 2009, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Participants

Representatives from the General Synod Council (GSC) and the *Church Herald* Editorial Council (CHEC):

- John Ornee (GSC moderator)
- Ned Beadel (GSC)
- Ron Vande Bunte (GSC)
- Doug Van Bronkhorst (CHEC president)
- Mary Wisner (CHEC)
- Robert Van Voorst (CHEC)
- Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, facilitator

Our Shared Goals

1. Excellent communication within the RCA.
2. Joint recommendations from GSC and CHEC to the 2009 General Synod with respect to communication and the *Church Herald*.

Background

When the every-member plan was adopted by the 1992 General Synod, no thought was given to the *Church Herald's* role in a comprehensive communication plan for the RCA. The *Church Herald* received a large portion of denominational resources but continued to function independently from denominational staff. This led to frustration and conflict, and attempts to rectify this inherent instability have not yet been successful.

The General Synod of 2007 took the *Church Herald* out of the denominational budget in favor of subscriptions as its only funding. The 2008 General Synod then asked the CHEC to submit a subsidy proposal (*MGS 2008*, R-33, p. 129) and GSC to submit a comprehensive communication plan (*MGS 2008*, R-32, p. 128) to the 2009 General Synod. We take this to be a positive and helpful way of saying, "Get your act together."

Shared Values (in no specific order)

1. Broad coverage—there are some things every RCA member should have the opportunity to know to help them affirm a vision for mission as part of a denominational family.
2. The *Church Herald* is important to a comprehensive communication strategy, especially the *Church Herald's* mission to serve congregations and members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
3. *RCA Today* is important to a comprehensive communication strategy, presenting denominational agencies and programs in a way that builds support and promotes

good will, serves RCA agencies and institutions, and supports the commitments of the General Synod such as Our Call.

4. Journalistic freedom for the *Church Herald*, which has a special call to be seen as a trustworthy source of information and views not controlled by any group or faction.
5. Financial responsibility with minimal duplication of effort between GSC and *Church Herald* staff and resources.
6. Accountability for GSC staff and the *Church Herald* editor, with checks and balances to keep the necessary tension between them a positive and creative dynamic, helpful to members, congregations, agencies, and the church as a whole.
7. Cooperation between the GSC communications staff and *Church Herald*, supported by appropriate changes in our structure and working agreements.
8. The expression of diverse opinions and different voices within the church family, providing a way for the opinions and concerns of individual members to be heard.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Publish one magazine, the *Church Herald*, incorporating the current mission and goals of the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today*. This could take the form of a certain number of pages devoted to the information and stories currently in *RCA Today*, or be implemented in other, more seamless ways.

Reasons:

1. The *Church Herald* is a valuable resource. The loss of this familiar voice would lead to ill will and the loss of a large portion of our family history. It would also mean one less opportunity to understand what it means to be meaningfully connected to a church family larger and more diverse than one's local congregation.
2. Values number 1, 2, 3, and 8 above support this recommendation.

Recommendation 2: Form an implementation team chaired by the director of communication and including the *Church Herald* editor and associate editor, the electronic media coordinator, the production coordinator, and others invited by the director of communication. This team will shape the "new" *Church Herald*. This will include producing a business plan detailing budget, recipients, size, frequency of publication, support staff (number and roles), use of electronic media, integration of *Church Herald* content with other communication initiatives and needs, and other decisions inherent to Recommendation 1.

Reasons:

1. The world has changed dramatically in the last year. The recession is being felt on every level of the church. After a strong start (topping 20,000) year-two subscriptions to the *Church Herald* are decreasing. A subsidy, as discussed at last year's General Synod, will now not be enough to enable the magazine to survive. At the same time, there are severe strains on the GSC's budget, with a 4.5 percent cut this past year and further reductions for fiscal 2010. Effective communication within the RCA, including the complementary mission and goals of the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today*, absolutely demands excellent stewardship. The business plan mentioned in Recommendation 2 will be a challenge for the communications team, especially since *RCA Today* (which has been sent to every household) is only published three times a year and the financial reserves of the *Church Herald* will be depleted

by the time a new budgeting arrangement is in place. Funding will be a major issue on both the revenue and expense sides. The best possible efficiencies and cooperative efforts are required, beginning immediately.

2. This will give us the best opportunity to respond to rapid changes in technology affecting communication, including the interface of print and electronic media as it applies to all communication and publications.
3. Values number 5, 6, and 7 above support this recommendation.

Recommendation 3: Form a Communication Coordinating Committee on a governance level to assist the director of communication and the editor of the *Church Herald* in making final decisions regarding any disputes over *Church Herald* articles that may be controversial. The coordinating committee will not create or implement policy.

This coordinating committee will include three members of the GSC, three members of the CHEC, and a seventh member, appointed to be its chair for a one-year term. The chair will alternate between GSC and CHEC appointments and will only vote in case of ties. A meeting to adjudicate a dispute will include the *Church Herald* editor and director of communication. It may be called by either of them, the GSC moderator, or the CHEC president.

Reasons:

1. This supports the goals of denominational staff, agencies, and programs while also insuring the *Church Herald* is not controlled by any one faction or group within the church. The intent is not to erase all controversy. The term “articles” in this recommendation generally refers to the major pieces unique to each issue of the *Church Herald*, not typical letters to the editor, news items, or “Platform” (op ed) pieces, which by their very nature may be “controversial.”
2. Values 4, 7, and 8 above are related to this recommendation.

Accountability and Structure

1. The director of communication will function as the publisher of the *Church Herald*, responsible for producing a high quality magazine in keeping with the shared values outlined above and as part of the “overall communication policy and strategy” requested by General Synod. The editor of the *Church Herald* will be responsible for its content and be the spokesperson for the magazine.

Decisions of the editor regarding content will ordinarily be final (see Recommendation 3). The *Church Herald* editor and director of communication will work together to review *Church Herald* content prior to printing to insure the GSC’s vision, mission, agencies, and institutions are appropriately represented.

2. The editor of the *Church Herald* will be accountable to the director of Communication for day to day operations and with respect to the *Church Herald*’s role in RCA communications. It is expected that the *Church Herald* editor and denominational communication staff will work together to produce a magazine that meets the goals outlined in this report. It is also expected that meetings of the Communication Coordinating Committee will be rare, with most issues worked out on a staff level. As the *Church Herald* workload permits, the editor of the *Church Herald* and *Church Herald* staff will lend expertise, input, effort, and support to denominational communication projects, as coordinated by the director of communication.

3. The *Church Herald* will continue to be a separate corporation, accountable directly to the General Synod, and responsible for oversight of the *Church Herald's* mission and policies. The CHEC, in consultation with the director of communication, will have final authority to hire and fire the *Church Herald* editor. Performance reviews for the *Church Herald* editor will be done cooperatively by the CHEC and director of communication.
4. The *Church Herald* budget will be an integral part of the GSC communication budget, including salaries and benefits, equipment, supplies, etc., under the overall responsibility of the director of communication. The editor will be responsible for managing the *Church Herald* staff and the *Church Herald* portion of the budget, as is true for other department heads.
5. The business plan developed as a result of Recommendation 2 must be approved by GSC and CHEC. The CHEC will review and amend its bylaws as necessary to reflect the changes to structures and working relationships outlined in these recommendations. Any future changes to structures or the business plan directly affecting the *Church Herald* must be approved by the CHEC.

Summary

These recommendations do not answer every question or concern but do move us in a positive direction. Our ultimate concern is what's best for effective communication within the RCA, for congregations, members, and the church. It's not about magazines per se—much less personalities or past mistakes—but a vision for achieving excellent communication and cooperation, which the church rightly expects from its leaders.

Note

These recommendations are very much like the arrangements made by the Christian Reformed Church when it decided to send *The Banner* to every household. We take that as confirmation that we are on a reasonable track. It also means some of the verbiage in this report is similar to statements in CRC documents about structures, accountability, etc. It saved valuable time to gratefully use a few of their best phrases.

The report calls for a communication resource that combines elements of the RCA denominational communication *RCA Today* and the *Church Herald*. (The report can be found in the *Church Herald* report in the Communication section, pg. 217-221.) GSC noted that the report offers an opportunity to create a coordinated communication strategy but emphasized that the report needs a specific funding plan before it can be offered for consideration.

To that end, GSC considered the resources available in its budget and analyzed the communications budget in particular. The amount allocated to print communication for *RCA Today* is \$240,000. Given that the *Church Herald* projects to spend its remaining resources by the end of 2009, leaving it without revenue for either salaries or publication costs, this leaves only the existing funds in the GSC budget for the proposed print publication. These funds are totally inadequate for publishing the integrated print magazine envisioned by the *Church Herald* Editorial Council–GSC team. Therefore, GSC's position is that the team's proposal only be offered for consideration by the General Synod if it includes a request for new revenue. To do otherwise would be irresponsible and would create false expectations. It would also violate General Synod's practice and procedure of informing delegates of the potential cost of any new proposal.

GSC, in its deliberations, decided that the fairest way for this issue to be brought to General Synod would be to present delegates with clear options.

The options generated from this meeting are as follows:

Options for Implementation of a Joint Agreement

In January 2009, three representatives from the General Synod Council (GSC), John Ornee, Ned Beadel, and Ron Vande Bunte, met with three representatives from the *Church Herald* Editorial Council, Doug Van Bronkhorst, Mary Wisner, and Robert Van Voorst. They drafted a joint agreement for a coordinated communication plan that would combine the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* magazines into one communication piece.

In early March, the *Church Herald* Editorial Council approved the agreement. At its March 2009 meeting, GSC also approved the agreement and asked that it include funding options to offer a clear and defined business/funding plan. To that end, and in consultation with the representatives of the *Church Herald* Editorial Council, the following three options were created for General Synod delegates to consider as alternative ways to implement the joint agreement:

Option 1

Based on present costs, and utilizing the \$240,000 in assessment funding already in the budget, the first option would allow for the publication of the *Church Herald* as an integrated magazine, under the joint agreement. This would require additional funding which would be raised through an assessment of \$5.30 per member.

Assumptions

- Produced eleven times per year in both print and web versions.
- A combined magazine that reflects the goals and values of both the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* magazines.
- One combined communication staff including a staff of two to four who are committed to work on the *Church Herald* magazine the majority of their time.
- Use the current *RCA Today* base of 110,000 households/subscribers
- Funding source (beyond current \$240,000) is an increase in assessments.

Estimated cost to produce: \$1,115,000 – existing \$240,000 = \$875,000
(Assessment increase of \$5.30 per member)

Option 2

A second option would be similar, but the magazine would be published six times a year. Based on present costs, and utilizing the \$240,000 in assessment funding already in the budget, the second option would allow for the publication of the *Church Herald* as an integrated magazine, under the joint agreement. This would require additional funding through an assessment of about \$2.85 per member.

Assumptions

- Produced six times per year in both print and web versions.
- A combined magazine that reflects the goals and values of both the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* magazines.
- One combined communication staff including a staff of two who are committed to work on the *Church Herald* magazine the majority of their time.

- Use current *RCA Today* base of 110,000 households/subscribers.
- Funding source (beyond current \$240,000) is an increase in assessments.

Estimated cost to produce: \$710,000 – existing \$240,000 = \$470,000
(Assessment increase of \$2.85 per member)

Option 3

A third option, if no additional funding is approved, would merge the content of both print magazines and migrate it to an online, electronic format. Based on present costs, and utilizing the \$240,000 in assessment funding already in the budget, the third option would allow for the publication of the *Church Herald* as an integrated magazine, primarily in an electronic format, under the joint agreement.

Assumptions

- Produced as an online e-magazine eleven or more times a year.
- A combined magazine that reflects the goals and values of both the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* magazines.
- One combined communication staff.

Estimated cost to produce: \$240,000

Report of the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald*

In 2008, the *Church Herald* became a subscription-based publication, after fifteen years of full subsidy and denomination-wide distribution. The transition has been difficult and costly, but the magazine survives and continues its mission and ministry of service to the Reformed Church and its members.

When the *Church Herald* began the conversion back to subscriptions, it was hoped that 40,000 of the 92,000 RCA households that had been receiving the magazine would continue as paid subscribers. The *Church Herald* offered two price structures: a significantly lower price per subscription if churches would enroll at least 80 percent of their families, and a higher price for individual subscriptions.

The Magazine in 2008

In 2008, the *Herald* had 20,000 subscribers, of whom about 65 percent enrolled through church plans. While this is a respectable commitment from members of the denomination, a higher subscriber base will be necessary for the magazine to move forward. Regrettably, at the beginning of 2009 those numbers had dropped significantly, by all accounts due to the weak economy. The *Herald* has been proactive in cutting expenses, but without additional subscribers and advertising revenue, the council predicts another year of deficit spending.

The *Church Herald* published eleven issues in 2008, at an average cost of \$50,000 per issue. Given anticipated income for 2009 and its reserves, the *Church Herald* would be able to publish eleven issues (assuming same size and quality) in 2009 before its resources are exhausted. A joint Editorial Council–General Synod Council plan has been formed with these projections in mind, along with corresponding publication costs for *RCA Today*.

Even given added fiscal stress and marketing responsibilities, as well as the elimination of a full-time staff position, the magazine continued to offer strong content in 2008. The January issue included an in-depth look at the RCA, with articles on history, polity, theology, and mission. Churches are encouraged to use this issue as a resource in new member classes. In February, the *Herald* launched a five-part series on Our Call, the denomination's ten-year goal, offering a mid-term update on each of the goal's major foci. The magazine also offered some of its perennial favorites, including General Synod coverage and Advent devotions, as well as covering topics of interest to the denomination as a whole, including evangelism (September 2008), the missional church (February 2009), and the Belhar Confession (May 2009).

The *Church Herald* also began digital subscriptions in 2008: print subscribers can access the digital version at no additional charge, and digital-only subscriptions are also available. About two hundred people subscribe to the digital version. Later in 2008 the *Herald* added blogs to its website, providing another opportunity for members of the RCA to converse about the issues important to them. Traffic on the blogs continues to increase steadily.

The Future

At synod 2008, an overture from the Synod of New York requested a subsidy for the *Church Herald*. Synod's response to that overture was to ask the *Church Herald* to provide a report to this year's synod offering a rationale for such a subsidy. The *Church Herald* Editorial Council began crafting a report; a draft of this initial report is found in Appendix A. A representative of the Editorial Council brought this report to the fall meeting of the General Synod Council (GSC) as a step toward coordinating a recommendation to the 2009 General Synod. GSC heard the report and then recommended the convening of a task force to discuss the matter further.

In January, three members of the Editorial Council met with three members of GSC and RCA general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson to consider next steps for coordinating the denomination's communication needs. The group developed an outline for the marriage of the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* to produce a publication that would reach a wider audience. It would contain both the promotional material featured in *RCA Today* and the reader-driven content of the *Herald*. The resulting plan, discussed and affirmed by the Editorial Council (and GSC), is the report found on pages 212-217. Implementation work has already begun on the plan. Delegates are being asked at this meeting to consider implementation options found on pages 216-217, or to determine another option to ensure continuing publication of a magazine for the RCA.

Why It Matters

Today's culture is hungry for communication, for dialogue, and for collaboration, and the *Herald* is uniquely positioned to foster these gifts within the Reformed Church. Without expanding communication channels, the Reformed Church faces an uncertain future. If we cannot learn to talk to each other, we limit our global effectiveness as a body, becoming instead community-based institutions. As much as our polity and our theology, we are bound together by our common ministry.

Beyond promoting the work accomplished through Our Call, the *Herald* provides the church with a place to discuss other issues important to local ministry and personal spirituality. Its pages are open to voices that may not be heard elsewhere.

As we as a denomination consider a print vehicle that combines the *Church Herald* with *RCA Today*, it will be critically important that the *Herald* maintain its independent voice.

Being accountable to the General Synod and the church as a whole allows the magazine to host open, two-way communication from across the denomination. Communication of this type will continue to serve the overall health of the denomination as the RCA continues to expand its mission and ministry.

Appendix

The 2008 meeting of the General Synod requested the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald* to submit a proposal and rationale for ongoing assessment subsidies, to be considered by the 2009 General Synod (*MGS 2008*, R-33, p.129). The Editorial Council fulfilled that request and brought the following report to the fall meeting of the General Synod Council (GSC) as a step toward coordinating a recommendation to the 2009 General Synod.

GSC heard the report and then recommended the convening of a task force to discuss the matter. The report of the joint Editorial Council/GSC task force including options for implementation and funding is found on pages 212-217.

From the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald*:

RECOMMENDATION TO GENERAL SYNOD 2009 REGARDING SUSTAINED GENERAL SYNOD SUPPORT FOR THE *CHURCH HERALD*

(Reviewed and discussed with the General Synod Council in October 2008)

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 fifty 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.
- The 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 we 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 Communication and Production Services 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.

Report of the Advisory Committees on the RCA Dialogue on Communication and the *Church Herald*

This year the delegates of the 2009 General Synod were offered the unique opportunity to participate in a historical decision to ultimately make a recommendation that will affect the communication vehicles of the Reformed Church of America. This opportunity to offer advice on the appropriate level of funding to provide for denominational communication came to delegates from the General Synod Council and the *Church Herald* Editorial Council. Three options were given for consideration.

In twenty advisory committees, the report and its three options were discussed. Since no single option stood out as the top option, and because no recommendation had been offered for advice, new options were allowed to be presented.

The results of the votes on options one, two, and three were striking.

Option	Yeas	Nays	Abstain
1	12	223	7
2	75	149	14
3	122	106	12

In percentage terms, 5 percent of the synod voted for option one (to allow for the publication of the *Church Herald*, eleven issues per year, as an integrated magazine under the joint agreement, for an assessed cost of \$5.43 per member); 32 percent for option two (to allow for the publication of the *Church Herald*, six issues per year, as an integrated magazine under the joint agreement, for an assessed cost of \$2.92 per member); and 51 percent for option three (to merge the content of both print magazines and migrate it to an online, electronic format, offering print copies on a self-funded, per request basis, under the joint agreement). In addition to tabulating the raw data from the first three options, the drafting committee compiled the reasons given both for and against voting for these options.

Because the business before the advisory committees consisted of proposals, the committees were empowered to offer proposals of their own. Forty-one separate additional proposals were put forward by the advisory committees. The drafting committee posted these additional proposals and pored over them for several hours. The committee clustered trends and noted interweaving networks of commonalities among the forty-one distinct new proposals.

There was nearly universal concern about the cost of continuing the publication of both the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today*. Group after group reported that cost was highest on its list of why people voted “no” to proposals one and two. “Too expensive.” “We are not interested in increasing the assessment.” “The value of the magazines doesn’t match the cost.” “How can we vote down General Synod and then raise the costs of publications?” “Dollars are too tight in this economy.” Those who found some increase in assessment to be acceptable indicated that it would have to be smaller than the \$2.92 per member proposed in option two. Some offered caps for additional assessments, while others declined to offer a specific number.

At the same time, people appreciated and valued the connection that the magazines have brought to the life of the RCA. Sometimes that was expressed as anxiety: “Is this a slippery slope? Will the RCA survive?” Others stated the issue more positively: “Communication is the glue that holds us together.” “We need good denominational communication.” This, combined with the generally positive responses to Our Call, seemed to

indicate that there is a strong desire to be connected by some means of communication. Some delegates expressed strong appreciation for the editorial independence of the *Church Herald* relative to the “in house” nature of *RCA Today*, but that concern, while felt deeply by those who cherish it, was not significantly widespread. It seems that *RCA Today*, by reporting on the progress of Our Call, fills the expressed desire for the kind of connection currently desired.

In the course of discussion, many delegates noted the societal trend away from print media. “If the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are having trouble, is it any surprise we are?” Others noted that the current plan is “not sustainable, because print is going out of business.” “The direction of society is digital.” “We’re mindful of print media phasing out.”

Addressing this trend, five new proposals from four groups built upon option three (web publication only), offering possibilities for local congregations to assume the considerable costs of printing. “Allow congregations to determine how to communicate this information to the congregation.” “Offer individuals and congregations the option of download and printing.” Even those who indicated that the all-electronic communication is our likely future indicated that the RCA needs to have a website that is easier to navigate.

Nevertheless, is the RCA ready to go strictly digital? It does not seem so—at least not yet. Option two presented the possibility of offering printed communication to all members of the denomination six times a year. The desire to have something, rather than nothing, in print found expression in the fact that of the forty-one new proposals, thirteen proposals from eight different groups were variations on the theme of reducing the number of print publications without completely abandoning the medium. Many offered comments like “Some still like hard copy.” “We need to honor our fathers and mothers.” “Some rural populations won’t have Internet access.” “The mature generation is not Internet savvy.” “We can’t go cold turkey on print.” “We need a temporary bridge.” “The plans presented to us are not comprehensive enough to make a permanent decision.” “Option three is the future, yet many still value print material.” While the day may come when communication will happen solely electronically, the RCA does not appear to be there yet.

But delegates did not know exactly where “there” is. Nine proposals from five groups spoke to the desire for a newly envisioned publication. Newness was described on a continuum from total revamping to becoming competitively stronger. We heard voices like “Maybe we should look at something entirely different.” “We’re not going to fix this problem by taking a middle road.” “Go back to the drawing board.” “We should build in a trial period, and reevaluate everything after two years.”

Six groups offered options that spoke to the possibility of *RCA Today* continuing as the sole publication of the RCA, only one of which desired this publication online only. One suggested that *RCA Today* add a sense of historical perspective and a “People and Places” section.

One proposal suggested that funding should be done “the way it was before.” Another proposal challenged the staffs to either “merge and keep journalistic freedom, or don’t merge and tackle controversies.”

We noted, with some sadness, several comments about what has happened to the *Church Herald* since it went to a subscription-only basis. Some saw the options presented to the synod as “just a means to keep the *Church Herald* in existence,” and “there is not enough demonstrated readership for *Church Herald* subscriptions.”

The *Church Herald* has blessed the church with many strengths. It has presented “theologically informed but widely accessible” articles. Its Bible studies and devotional materials have “helped many church members through times of joy and trial.” Personal perspectives, from columnists to the more recent conversational approach, have “brought insight into the lives” of countless Christians, both within and outside the RCA. “I’ve read the *Herald* since I was a teenager, and I still love it,” said one delegate.

At the same time, some voices were openly disappointed with the content of the *Church Herald*. “I can understand reporting on issues, but too often it seems like the *Church Herald* is stirring up controversy.” “New people who come into my church don’t like to see the squabbling that goes on in the pages of the *Herald*.” “The *Church Herald* hasn’t met expectations.” “People just don’t like the *Church Herald*.” “I’d rather read the *Banner*.”

These feelings were not universal. “I’m not ready to accept that the *Church Herald* is gone.” “I’ve loved the *Church Herald* since I was a teenager, and would be sad to see it go.” Five additional proposals expressed a desire to see the *Church Herald* continue on its own on a subscription basis.

Finally, a number of delegates expressed disappointment that the issue was placed before them in the form of several proposals, when General Synod of 2008 had told the *Church Herald* Editorial Council and the General Synod Council (GSC) to come to an agreement and recommend a clear plan to this General Synod. This they did not do. Options one to three all presented proposals for integrated strategies, but none gained more than a slight majority. In light of the general lack of support for integration, in light of the desire to start anew, and in light of the other values expressed this report, it appeared that what delegates desired was more along the lines of overhaul.

When delegates sat in advisory committees, they had proposals before them, not recommendations. Thus, it was left to the whole General Synod to develop its own recommendations, working with a process that attempted to discern the common mind of over two hundred people. Given the breadth of options presented and the varied nature of the data in hand, that process was necessarily a bit messy. The recommendations that follow are the best attempt of the moderators of the advisory committees and their drafting team to capture delegates collective wisdom and present it back to them.

Recommendations

The moderators of the advisory committees, on behalf of the delegates of the General Synod of 2009, recommended the following:

R-46

To instruct the General Synod Council to contract for an independent formal evaluation of all denominational communications, both print and web-based, in order to devise a comprehensive communication strategy that incorporates the best aspects of the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* and explores options for moving into an online future, to report to the General Synod of 2011. (NOT ADOPTED)

A motion was made to amend R-46 as follows:

To instruct the General Synod Council to contract for an independent formal evaluation of all denominational communications, both print and web-based, in order to devise a comprehensive communication strategy that incorporates the best aspects of the *Church Herald* and *RCA Today* and explores the 41 options, R-47, R-48, R-49, R-50, and R-51

for moving into an online future, to report to the General Synod of 2011. (NOT ADOPTED)

VOTED: To adopt R-46 (from the report of the advisory committee) (yes 112, no 111).

A motion was made to conduct a voice vote regarding R-46. The General Synod:

VOTED: To not conduct a voice vote regarding R-46.

Following a recess the president ruled that the vote for R-46 would be retaken electronically due to delegates' concerns regarding proper functioning of key pads.

VOTED: To not adopt R-46 (from the report of the advisory committee) (yes 112, no 117).

Editorial changes to R-47 and R-48 were made because R-46 was not adopted. The agreed upon editorial changes were as follows: R-47, delete "during the transitional period from General Synod 2009 to General Synod 2011"; and R-48, delete "during the transition time between 2009 and 2011."

R-47

To instruct the General Synod Council to continue the print publication of *RCA Today* on a three-publication-per-year basis ~~during the transitional period from General Synod 2009 to General Synod 2011.~~

R-48

To instruct the General Synod Council to explore ways to enhance current online offerings ~~during the transition time between 2009 and 2011~~, especially by promoting online conversations by means of an open blog and increased use of online social networks, inviting current writers from the *Church Herald* to participate.

A motion was made to further amend R-47 as follows:

To instruct the General Synod Council to ~~continue~~ allow the print publication of *RCA Today* on a three-publication-per-year basis.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R-47.

A motion was made to further amend R-47 as follows:

To instruct the General Synod Council ~~to allow the print publication of *RCA Today* on a three-publication-per-year basis,~~ in cooperation with the *Church Herald* Editorial Council, to offer a print and online publication combining the best of the *RCA Today* and the *Church Herald*, within existing budget constraints.

VOTED: To adopt the further amendment to R-47.

R-47

To instruct the General Synod Council, in cooperation with the *Church Herald* Editorial Council, to offer a print and online publication combining the best of the *RCA Today* and the *Church Herald*, within existing budget constraints. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

R-48

To instruct the General Synod Council to explore ways to enhance current online offerings, especially by promoting online conversations by means of an open blog and increased use of online social networks, inviting current writers from the *Church Herald* to participate. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

R-49

To instruct the communications staff to conduct a readership review of *RCA Today* to determine the quantitative level of actual readership as well as the levels of satisfaction with the qualitative issues of content and layout, in time to report to the General Synod of 2011. (ADOPTED)

R-50

To instruct the General Synod Council, in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, in cooperation with the *Church Herald* Editorial Council, to facilitate an orderly cessation of publication of the *Church Herald*; and further,

to ensure that the orderly cessation include appropriate severance for *Church Herald* personnel. (ADOPTED)

R-51

To offer thanks to God for the ministry of the *Church Herald*. (ADOPTED)