

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

The Process

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 us from the General Synod Council and the *Church Herald* Editorial Council. Three options were given for consideration.

On Friday afternoon 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 Number	Yeas	Nays	Abstain
One	12	223	7
Two	75	149	14
Three	122	106	12
Four . . . 41*	?	?	?

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.

What We Heard

If there is a single observation to be made about the outcome of the process, it is the 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. This is but a small sampling of well over thirty-five voices that alluded to the impact of cost as influencing their advice.

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, seems 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, are we 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, we do not appear to be there yet.

But we do 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 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 appears that what delegates desire is more along the lines of overhaul.

We remind the delegates that when we sat in advisory committees, we had proposals before us, not recommendations. Thus, it was left to the whole General Synod—to all of us—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 to us 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 your collective wisdom and present it back to you. However, the ultimate decision is still yours. We recognize that this is the first time most of you will have seen the recommendations now before you, and we may have misread you. We humbly submit these recommendations, and leave it to you and the Spirit to find the best way forward for communication strategies in the RCA.

Recommendations

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

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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.

R-65

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-66

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.

R-67

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.

R-68

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.

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