

# The Problems and Potential Of the Union Papers

by Bonnie Dwyer

To inform Adventist church members about denominational news, union conferences in the United States will spend approximately a million dollars this year printing and mailing union papers.<sup>1</sup> Additional overhead costs, such as salaries, will be absorbed into the union budgets.

In the Pacific Union, a news-style paper will be mailed every week to 48,000 homes. Columbia Union Conference members will receive their *Visitor* as part of the *Review and Herald*. In the Southern Union, members will receive a four-color glossy monthly magazine. In whatever form, every church-member household will receive free a periodical from the local union.

As a Loma Linda University journalism student, in 1975, the author made two studies of the nine union papers in the United States, first an overview and, secondly, a survey of the editors, to learn what the papers are doing and why.<sup>2</sup> This article is based upon those two studies.

Besides being big business, union periodicals are a tradition that began around the turn of the century. Some areas of the country

even had papers before their organization into formal conferences. Evolving from mimeographed sheets to four-color magazines has not changed their ability to keep "the family" posted on all the latest news. A majority of the stories contain news about church members, with notices of church programs running a close second. Only one paper carried a letters section, and editorials about current specific issues, such as women in the ministry, are rare. Some union presidents write columns with devotional or news items not included elsewhere in the journal.

The author surveyed the editors of all nine union papers as to their objectives, receiving a variety of responses.

"My goal for the paper is that it stimulate loyalty to the message, the movement and to the organizations and programs of the denomination and the union by keeping the members interestingly informed," said one. Others agreed. "Strengthening the work and bringing the church family together," was the answer of one-third of the nine.

Three editors isolated promotion of church programs as an objective. One editor qualified the promotional aspect, however. The union paper "is primarily a news-information medium, only secondarily a promotional medium. It is a promotion in-

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strument from time to time, but we try to hold it down so that when it is so used it is more effective than if that were its primary use. I believe that, after all, the best promotion of any program is in action and human-interest stories of people and success in the program.”

Informing members of significant news events was the objective of a third of the editors. One respondent included evangelism as a goal, because the paper goes to thousands of homes where non-Seventh-day Adventists live. “It also helps remind inactive members of the church, and lets them know the church is advancing in its mission to reach people with the gospel,” he wrote.

To produce the news stories and inspirational articles in their papers, the unions depend on the local conferences, which, in turn, rely on the local churches for copy. One editor described the process this way: “We look to conference communications secretaries to submit all news from their conference. Churches send news items and advertising to them, they edit it, rejecting some of it, and send it on to us. We edit further, rejecting some of it, sometimes because we consider it inappropriate, but more often due to space limitations.”

So, while the papers are finally put together at the union level, much of the writing is done by local church communication secretaries. This system provides good stories, but limits the scope of the news coverage at the community level. Very few stories appear about conference policies or business dealings. The author’s survey noted only one report on a constituency meeting in which money matters or actual votes taken were discussed. Published news releases from the General Conference, the two universities and institutions such as the Voice of Prophecy provide readers with information from outside their region.

Some publications produce general interest stories which appear outside the conference news sections—the *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, for instance. *Southern Tidings* asks its conference correspondents to pro-

duce one feature story each issue in addition to the typical news notes.

Coverage of the Vienna General Conference varied greatly. Some editors used the news releases prepared by the General Conference, some wrote their own copy. A few stories before the session named union delegates, and during the session changes in union personnel were faithfully reported. Controversial issues, however, such as whether members can bring other members into court, were not even hinted at.

The present system has kept paid staffs small—because most of the hard work of finding and writing stories is done by volunteers.

“To produce a good publication requires, in my opinion, a minimum of four or five full-time writers and editors, or the equivalent,” lamented one editor, who is the only paid staff member on his publication. But three other editors said they need no additional help.

The editors of the union papers were asked what their readers expect.

“They expect what we have conditioned them to expect—conference news sections and feature stories of interest,” was one reply.

“Would you believe the laymen in our Union seem to expect us to be the voice of the church,” wrote an editor from a large union. “For example, if we publicize a new book or a new record, they believe it will be strictly kosher—and that’s difficult when it comes, say, to music standards. . . . Members also expect accuracy, and while we have material separated by conference, we do know that many would like to have more in general news because ours is a mobile church with members thinking nothing of traveling scores, even hundreds of miles, to attend a meeting or anniversary or open house.”

Only one editor mentioned surveying readers about their expectations and reactions. He said first on a readers’ list of desires is news of churches, institutions and people within the union, and to a somewhat lesser degree, pertinent news from the church at large. “In personal comments, the readers are overwhelmingly in favor of more materials on what laymen are doing,” he noted.

“We get almost no complaints from our readers—laymen or workers,” wrote another editor. “In fact, I wonder sometimes whether there is some ill omen in the lack of criticism. As far as I know, judging from the commendations that we get somewhat more frequently, we must be giving our readers what they expect.”

The editors were asked whether there should be some sort of coordination among the union papers. “Would it help to have an Adventist News Service to help provide a wider variety of copy?” one question read.

“Union papers are a valuable communicative organ. They should meet the specific needs of the union they serve. I don’t see how they could be coordinated because of the local nature of the news they print,” said one.

“I think it is great for the various union papers to be independent and to work independently. It makes for interesting color locally, unionwide and nationwide. News is received from Andrews University, Loma Linda University, the publishing houses, General Conference, various unions and other institutions. . . and I feel that this is central enough and adequate for informing the people of the activities of the organizations,” another commented.

A third suggested an organization of union paper editors in lieu of coordination from a central location. “Circulation policies, advertising policies, as well as editorial policies could be more consistent on the part of all the publications if there could be a free, across-the-table exchange of ideas,” he said.

It has been suggested the papers could meet a greater need by becoming part of the *Review and Herald*, thus expanding news coverage and adding devotional material. Charles Beeler of the Columbia Union recommends it. He says his union has been pleased with their combination publication.

“We are thoroughly persuaded that this has been a worthwhile objective—that there are definite results in the spiritual uplift of the constituency with consequent increase in loyalty and support of the whole church program,” he wrote.

Other editors are not so enthusiastic about such a plan.

“This has several excellent features,” said

one concerning the *Visitor-Review*, “and a number of drawbacks. In my judgment, it is not practical for any other union conference to attempt the combination, due to distance, scheduling, proofreading, financial and other problems—which would increase as one got farther away from the editorial and publishing facilities of the *Review and Herald*.”

Beeler says these problems could be negated by unions’ doing their own typesetting, layout, pasteup and then sending fully complete page negatives ready for offset printing to the *Review*.

In summary, the picture of the union papers projected by the survey and questionnaire is of public relations periodicals attempting to keep the “family” together by disseminating good news about people and programs. They cannot be compared fairly to weekly news magazines, because summation stories combining unionwide efforts into an overall picture do not appear. Since commentary and letters are missing, they do not perform like newspapers, either.

As presently structured, the papers virtually lock out discussion of ideas and issues. Obviously, the local church secretary cannot

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be expected to write about, say, the church’s official position in a court case. And as long as the union and conference communication secretaries delegate the duties of writing to the people down the line, the union papers will continue to be local newsletters.

Are these “family letters” worth a million dollars a year? They do perform an important function by attempting to make members feel as though they are part of the church

movement; business and industry depend on similar “house” publications to maintain good relations with employees, government and customers alike. But do the papers in their present form meet adequately the needs of the members and conferences? Since the conference officials oversee production of the present copy, it would seem the publications are fulfilling their expectations. As for the members, it is perhaps true that most expect what they have been conditioned to expect, as one editor mentioned. But some are beginning to demand more from their conference officials.

Recently, an editorial in *The Criterion*, the student newspaper of the La Sierra campus of Loma-Linda University, took the church to task for poor press coverage of significant church news such as the current lawsuits in California over hiring policies.

“While the church is certainly not trying to censor news of the lawsuits, neither is it encouraging any widespread coverage,” the editorial said.

“Staid Adventist publications such as the *Pacific Union Recorder* and the *Review* write articles on Five-Day Plans held in Glendale, new church buildings in Nebraska and river baptism in the jungles of New Guinea, but have very little to say about the lawsuits, and even less about the changes they’re causing within the church. And some of the changes could be momentous.”<sup>3</sup>

When the objectives of the editors are examined, it is easy to understand why members are reading only about church buildings and baptisms. The editors see their function as stimulating loyalty and strengthening the work, not examining issues. Perhaps as more daily city papers print stories about controversies within churches, including the Adventist church, and as magazines such as *Spectrum* and *Adventist Heritage* promote examination of church programs, union papers will be looked upon as a possible vehicle for regional discussion within the church, thus meeting the need of the constituency to be informed.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Figure based on budget estimates provided by paper editors.

2. As a class project, three consecutive issues of each magazine were examined for the overview. Stories were logged according to categories, notations were made as to who had written articles, and graphics were commented on. Summer issues were examined

in order to see how each union handled the news from the General Conference session in Vienna. To follow up the overview, a questionnaire was sent to each of the editors with seven general questions about union conference papers; all nine editors responded.

3. “The Church Goes to Court” (editorial) *The Criterion*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Loma Linda University, Riverside, California, 1976, p. 2.