

Chapter 6

RELIGIOUS JOURNALISM: A LEGACY FROM THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

J. Martin Bailey

J. Martin Bailey served from 1963 to 1982 as the editor of *United Church Herald* and *A.D.*. He is the Associate General Secretary for Media and Member Services of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPERS AND magazines have played a formative role in the development of many American denominations. This was especially true among the Christian churches that eventually joined together to form the Christian denomination. The United Church of Christ draws a deep appreciation for the importance of communications in our contemporary world from this source. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film, and other audiovisual productions supported by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (e.g., United Church Press), and the news and public relations efforts of the Office of Communications are building a legacy deeply rooted in the history of the Christian denomination.

Although the publications of the Congregationalists, the Evangelical Synod of North America, and the Reformed Church in the United States were significant to denominational identity, especially certain German and Hungarian periodicals, the power of religious journalism to shape and strengthen discipleship and community is exhibited most clearly among the Christians. As that denomination matured, the expectations of its publications changed, but the centrality of its journalistic witness remained extremely important.

THE FIRST RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPER

The earliest publication in the Christian tradition was *The Christian's Magazine*. It was first issued in 1805 from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, by Elder Elias Smith, soon after he decided to forsake his Baptist origins for Christian principles. Smith organized a Church of Christ in Portsmouth in 1803, "owning Him as their only Master, Lord and Lawgiver, and agreeing to consider themselves Christian without the addition of any unscriptural name." The same year Elder Abner Jones, another important Christian leader, visited Portsmouth. Smith later said that Jones was "the first free man he had. ever met."

The Christian's Magazine, published quarterly, cost twelve and a half cents a copy, payable on delivery. As its editor, Smith held his pen in one hand and a battle-ax in the other. He used the journal to attack the established ministry of the church, criticizing powdered wigs and useless church paraphernalia.⁽¹⁾ He wrote on many subjects, "historical, doctrinal, experimental, practical and poetical." With the encouragement of friends, including a member of the U.S. Congress, he decided to publish a more frequent periodical in which to report religious events. On September 1, 1808, Elias Smith began publishing the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, claiming that it was the

first religious newspaper in the world.(2)

Smith published the paper from his house near Jeffrey Street in Portsmouth every other Thursday evening. He charged one dollar a year, exclusive of postage, fifty cents to be advanced when the first number was delivered and the other fifty cents when twenty-six numbers were delivered. He arranged for the four-page Herald to be “punctually forwarded to any part of the United States where conveyance is practicable.”(3)

From the beginning, readers of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* were primarily pastors and members of the Free Christian Churches in the New England states. They were pleased with the pioneering journal. Soon the model that Smith created was copied by others. His work was noted with pride throughout the Christian Church, when a century later an impressive leather-bound volume was published to mark The Centennial of Religious Journalism.(4) During the negotiations that led to the union with the Congregational Churches in 1931, Christian Church leader Warren H. Denison identified the publication of the “first religious newspaper in the world” as a major contribution of his church.(5) Today members of the United Church of Christ who know the heritage of the Christian Church speak of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* with family pride.

The claim to be the first religious newspaper in the world is disputed. American Baptists, who trace their journalistic history back through *Missions* to the *Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, which was launched in 1803, also make that claim. William B. Lippard, editor of *Missions* for fifty years and executive secretary of the Associated Church Press, knew of “no other church publication on this continent or in Europe”- and therefore in the world-as old as *Missions*. Lippard believed that UCC claims to pioneering journalism dated back to 1820 and the *Missionary Herald*, published by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, now the United Church Board for World Ministries.(6) Because of this competition for the distinction of being first, the Christian Publishing House included Smith’s *Christian Magazine* among the historical facts mentioned in a booklet printed sometime before 1931.(7)

THE THEME OF LIBERTY

The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* began out of a deep concern to nourish the new freedoms enjoyed by citizens of the young United States. The Constitution, with its Bill of Rights guaranteeing religious freedom, was fresh in the minds of thoughtful people. Yet, Smith noted, “it is not now a tyrannical government which deprives us of liberty; but the highly destructive principles of tyranny which remain in a good government.” He quoted Isaac Wilbur, a member of Congress: “The people in this country are in general free, as to political matters; but in the things of religion, multitudes of them are apparently ignorant of what liberty is.” The design of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* was to “shew the *liberty* which belongs to [all], respects their duty to God, and each other.” Smith had no doubt but that “many will be displeased at what may appear in this paper from time to time, unless they own that *right is equal among all.*”(8)

The idea for the newspaper had come originally from Smith’s congressional friend Isaac Wilbur. Wilbur offered Smith generous financial support for a publication dedicated to religious liberty. Although Smith’s first *Magazine* had struggled financially, and he knew that costs for a weekly newspaper were high, the thirty-nine-year-old preacher-editor declined the support. Smith feared that his own “liberty of utterance” would be abridged and that his friend might be unpleasantly involved.

In the first 146 issues of the *Herald* Smith wrote fifty-three articles on “Liberty.” He wrote forcefully about religious liberty- “what I long for all [people] to enjoy.” He affirmed that he was “bound as a lover of [humanity] to instruct them, and teach them the nature of it, according to my ability and the opportunity given to me to do it.” Within the first year of publication the three principles of the Christian Church were identified: “1st. No head over the church but Christ. 2d. No confession of faith, articles of religion, rubric, canons, creeds, etc., but the New Testament. 3d. No religious name but Christians.” Smith insisted, on January 19, 1810, that “every Christian hath an equal right to the peaceable and constant possession of what he believes to be the truth contained in the Scriptures. . . even though his principles may, in many things, be contrary to what the Revered D. D.’s call Orthodoxy.”(9)

Relentless in his opposition to religious despotism, Elias Smith hurled bitter invectives against church politics, clerical trappings, ministerial titles, ecclesiastical associations, hireling preachers, creeds, and all the “isms” that lead to religious tyranny. Although his editorial successor believed that the time had come “when arguments instead of censure, and entreaties instead of the scourge may do more for the cause of truth than a host of censures and volumes of invective,” Smith had firmly established that the editor of a religious journal was free to express his or her own opinion and select the articles and news for publication. This concept, frequently tested and continually reaffirmed, became the foundation for all periodicals issued by those denominations that later came together in the United Church of Christ.

For example, editors of the Congregational Christian journal *Advance* frequently wrote about church politics and often raised the hackles, as well as the eyebrows, of some subscribers. It was one thing to espouse a nonecclesiastical cause (such as the welfare of laboring persons, or the United Nations), but it was another to argue about an issue coming before the General Council (specifically, union negotiations with the Evangelical and Reformed Church).

After the United Church of Christ was formed and had begun publishing the *United Church Herald*, Douglas Horton wrote:

“The *Herald* is the organ of the denomination, though its editorial policy, expressing the individuality in fellowship that runs all through the United Church, is wholly in the hands of the editor.”(10) Obviously, each editor must test that principle, and only when the concept of freedom of the press has been affirmed in some practical way is the liberty of the gospel available to a responsible editor. As the United Church News comes of age its editorial freedom tests the principle once again.

SUPPORT FOR IDENTITY

In the early days, when a visit from an itinerant preacher was the event of the year and second-class mail was delayed because a postmaster wanted to read the magazines, church periodicals provided the bonding agent for most denominations. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* facilitated communication between conventions, conferences, and boards.

The proceedings of our general convention, local conferences and various boards would be known to a limited number only, were it not for this avenue of information. And the same is true for the fellowship of the church. The church paper brings the whole [community] into fellowship. . . . Then, too, it is the unifying force of the whole church, and as such directs the energy of the church toward one common denominational purpose.

Elias Smith, more than any other person, held the conservation and preservation of the church's prosperity.(11)

In 1834 the *Christian Herald* (as the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* came to be known) had trouble paying its bills. Christians in New England, however, were determined to preserve their journal. On the first day of the new year an assembly of preachers and others met in Hampton, New Hampshire, to organize the Eastern Christian Publishing Association. Under a new name, the *Christian Journal*, the old *Herald* still served the church. By 1851 the name was changed back and the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* took a motto welcomed throughout the church: "In necessary things, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."(12)

Elsewhere in the Christian Church journalism thrived. In 1843 Christians in North Carolina selected D. W. Kerr as itinerant preacher (superintendent) and as editor of a paper known as the *Christian Sun*, begun in 1844. By 1850 the Christian General Book Association published a weekly *Christian Messenger* and a semimonthly *Christian Palladium*. When North Carolinians considered union with some of the northern churches, they spoke of the Christian churches connected with the *Palladium* and wrote to its editor. So important did the *Sun* become to churches throughout the Southern Conference that biographies of clergy published in P J. Kernodle's *Lives of Christian Ministers* frequently included references to articles published in the paper. In the discursive style common at the turn of the century it was recorded that such and such a pastor was "a regular contributor to the church paper, which owing to the death of the editor, Elder D. W. Kerr, had been moved to Raleigh, North Carolina."(13)

Loyalty to the *Christian Sun* did not die with church mergers. Christians from the Southern Conference continued to subscribe to the *Sun* long after their church had united with the Congregationalists and even with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Its weekly editions, edited by E C. Lester, were replaced by the monthly newsletter of the Southern Conference of the UCC in 1965.

The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* gradually absorbed more than a dozen papers, including the *Gospel Herald*, founded in 1843 by the Ohio Christian Book Association. In January 1868 the offices of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* moved to Dayton, Ohio, and the paper became the general denominational organ. Its most distinguished and energetic editor was Alva Martin Kerr, a man who suffered for forty years from an incurable bone disease. Kerr encouraged the Christian Church to look beyond its small size and struggle with important issues in the decade that followed World War I. His editorials and the articles he selected convinced people that the newspaper was the "greatest factor binding the people of the Christian Church as a fellowship."(14)

That conviction about the importance of a church journal led those who shaped the United Church of Christ to agree that the first agency of the new church should be its periodical, *United Church Herald*. In an introductory editorial Theodore C. Braun and Andrew Vance McCracken expressed their agreement that the "united journal must provide concrete, visible evidence that the United Church of Christ is in the process of becoming a reality." Historian Louis H. Gunne- mann noted that "the birth of the *United Church Herald* was not only of symbolic importance but also proved to have immeasurable influence in giving the United Church a sense of unity and identity."(15)

In the early years editors were intentional about the selection of authors and news, believing that the pages of the magazine must introduce members of the new and larger church family to one another.

As the United Church of Christ discovered its identity in a courageous struggle for justice and peace, the *Herald* reflected and led churches in their response to the turbulence of the 1960s. The concern for identity was not lost in 1972, when the *Herald* and *Presbyterian Life* merged to form a unique ecumenical journal called *A.D.*. A widely reprinted article by Oliver Powell described the United Church as a “Beautiful, Heady, Exasperating Mix.”(16) One issue attempted to answer the question, “What does it mean to belong to the UCC?”(17) Another celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Church of Christ.(18)

COMMITMENT TO UNITY

The identity of the Christian Church was closely tied to the goal of Christian unity. From its earliest editions the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* argued that the division of Christians was both weakness and sinful. In July 1840 the Rev. Ira Allen wrote in the *Christian Palladium*: “The principles upon which union is based are a matter of revelation, and not of human policy. It is not for Christians to say how, and for what purpose they will unite, for these things are fixed by a higher power. . . . Union is the sine qua non of the religion of Christ.”(19)

When a hymn was written, to the tune of America, for the centennial of the founding of the *Herald*, its verses linked the paper and the cause of Christian unity:

Our fathers' God, we raise
To thee our hymn of praise
For gospel light.
It shines from sea to sea,
Before it shadows flee,
It sets the bondmen free
From error's night.

One hundred years have gone,
The day begins to dawn
When souls are free;
The vision of the years,
Delayed by doubts and fears,
Within Thy church appears,
Blest unity.

Thou Herald of the right
Long may the gospel light
Illumine thy page!
For truth and unity,
For love and liberty,
May all thy witness be—
From age to age.(20)

Alva Martin Kerr, longtime editor of the *Herald*, was a staunch Advocate of Christian unity. In an editorial he wrote: “The door of the church has been made narrower than the gate of Heaven, and the church has cast out those whom Jesus received.” After he addressed the Ohio Pastors As-

sociation in 1924, a Columbus newspaper reported: “Ministers from all over Ohio, many of them men of eloquence, listened enthralled for more than an hour last night while a little chap with the inspired logic of a prophet, condemned isolated denominationalism. . . . Crippled in body, he revealed to his listeners a flaming soul afire with the conviction that in union lies the true strength of the church.”(21) It was no accident that the tradition of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, so committed to church union, merged with *The Congregationalist* in 1934 to form *Advance*. It was a step forward.

As the Congregational Christian Churches considered union with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, *Advance* editor John Scotford became a target of antimerger forces for his outspoken editorials and support for union. Malcolm K. Burton, a vigorous opponent of the merger, was named as part of a three-person “Forum on the Merger” in a 1947 issue of *Advance*. Burton stated that “the committee was appointed by the Executive Committee of the General Council in an effort to offset the one-sided treatment of the merger by the editor, Dr. John Scotford.”(22)

Scotford’s editorials built on the assumption that church union was part of the identity of the Congregational Christian Churches. In June 1948 he wrote:

We have prided ourselves upon being the most broad-minded, liberal, and progressive of American denominations. A proposition has been put before us which has been accepted by the other party and a majority of our churches and people. If we cannot unite with a church as reasonable, as gracious, and as Christian as the Evangelical and Reformed, what chances are there of reducing the divisions which plague Protestantism? The eyes of the world will be upon us at Oberlin; the hope of future unions depends on our decisions.(23)

This commitment to unity continued to shape UCC identity as defined in an August 1981 A.D.. editorial. The editor wrote:

I hope that we will reclaim our ecumenical heritage and invest heavily in cooperative mission efforts. . . . We have turned inward during the last decade, feeling the need to build a United Church identity. . . . It is time to build on our new self-consciousness and to work selflessly for larger goals. I hope that we will use these years of conversation with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to understand what it means to be a uniting church in the 80s.... We need to test with our Disciples friends how the Spirit is leading us to serve together. Perhaps our careful work in the Consultation on Church Union will lead us to an altogether new approach to unity.(24)

The ‘70s and ‘80s gave rise to a broader, if not altogether new, approach to unity. It is not unity for the sake of unity, but unity for the sake of mission and service. Describing “A Continuing Search for Unity,” on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the UCC, Dorothy G. Berry quoted President Avery Post: “United Churches have been created by God to birth the world’s new global people.”(25)

ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE

The quest for social justice and peace found expression in many of the journals that are part of the history of the United Church of Christ. When Elijah Shaw became editor of the *Christian Journal* in April 1835, he announced that “doctrinal subjects will find a place in our columns.

Doctrine is the foundation of practice.” During his editorship the paper was a progressive advocate of measures “that promised success in building the Redeemer’s kingdom.” The *Journal* was owned by the Eastern Christian Publishing Association. It went to considerable lengths to prove that it was the successor to the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* and, therefore, the oldest religious paper in the nation. (The Association seemed especially eager to establish seniority over the Congregational *Boston Recorder*!) In 1838 the Association duly resolved ‘that the columns of the *Christian Journal* be open for articles on the evils and sin of slavery, so far as the same may involve the fundamental principles of morality and religion.’(26) Shaw, however, had not waited for the authorization of the Association. Soon after he became editor he published an article that began: “We believe slavery to be a sin, always, everywhere and only a sin.”(27)

This subject was more difficult in the Southern Christian Convention. In 1854, the year before he became editor of the *Christian Sun*, William Brock Wellons withdrew from the American Christian Convention over the issue of slavery. By 1862, with the Civil War pressing on Suffolk, North Carolina, he had moved the editorial offices of the *Christian Sun* to Petersburg, Virginia. Shortly thereafter publication of the *Sun* was suspended, and Wellons became editor of the *Army and Navy Messenger* and served as a chaplain.(28)

The most influential editor of Christian Church periodicals was Alva Martin Kerr, who edited the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* from 1919 to 1928. His editorials sparkled with his zeal for racial justice. He sought to substitute “human relations” for “industrial relations” and called for better immigration laws. Kerr was at his most eloquent, however, when he was writing about the search for peace and the need for a new international order. He appealed to his readers to support President Wilson’s plan for a League of Nations. Opposition to the League was based on a theory that “God wants America to be superior, safer, and stronger than any other nation, instead of a little kinder so that others may love her and not fear her. If you start with the God of Christ,” he wrote in an editorial, “you can predict nothing less than some kind of League of Nations.” In one Christmas editorial he reminded his readers that Christ could never be the prince of peace to the nations until the spirit of national self-righteousness and self-seeking was destroyed. He believed that Christ could save society, and would enable the nations to practice a Christian internationalism.(29)

After 1934 the pages of *Advance*, building on Christian and Congregational traditions, frequently discussed race relations and an emerging concern for the institutionalization of social action. Under the editorship of Andrew Vance McCracken, *Advance*, and later *United Church Herald*, published articles by Herman Reissig, the international affairs specialist of the Council for Social Action. Many of the articles dealt with the role of the United Nations. During the years of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war the pages of the *Herald*, and later *A.D.*, carried articles and editorials, along with letters to the editor, showing the commitment of the UCC to the “struggle for justice and peace.” *A.D.* kept its UCC readers informed about the incarceration and ultimate release of Benjamin Chavis, a staff member of the Commission for Racial Justice who was falsely convicted on charges related to racial violence in Wilmington, North Carolina. *A.D.* highlighted the needs of women in society and helped the United Church see itself as more than the continuation of four Anglo-Saxon denominational traditions. Through its pages the UCC emerges as an inclusive church in which the heirs of African slaves and Native Americans, Hispanics and Asians, can take their place alongside the descendants of Europeans.

Social commitment continues to shine through the columns of the *United Church News*. UCC readers are pushed to understand “What might it mean to be a ‘Just Peace Church’?”(30) or how

church efforts to end apartheid in South Africa relate to investments.

THE LEGACY

In his booklet describing the founder of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, J. E. Burnett put a high value on the journals of the church.

The religious newspaper ranks with churches, colleges, and philanthropies as an indispensable institution to Christian progress. None of these could live without the church paper. . . . The church paper brings the entire brotherhood into fellowship; and without it, such fellowship could not exist. . . . It is the unifying force of the whole church, and as such directs the energy of the church toward one common purpose.(31)

Although patterns of denominational life have changed in recent decades, there can be little doubt that church journals have contributed greatly to the style and identity of what is now the United Church of Christ. From our Christian beginnings we have a rich legacy.

Notes

1. J. F. Burnett, "Elias Smith, Reformer, Preacher, Journalist, Doctor," one of a series of undated booklets issued sometime before 1931 by the Department of Publishing of the American Christian Convention, "that members of our churches and Sunday-schools may be well informed as to the history and distinctive principles of The Christian Church," pp. 18ff.
2. Ibid., pp. 20-24. Dates for periodicals mentioned or related to those mentioned in this essay are:

The Christian Magazine, June 1805-August (?) 1808 succeeded by *Herald of Gospel Liberty* in September 1808.

Herald of Gospel Liberty, September 1, 1808-1934 absorbed *Christian Messenger and Palladium*, in December 1862; absorbed *Gospel Herald*, on January 4, 1868; absorbed *Christian Messenger* of New Bedford, MA, in January 1907; was merged with *The Congregationalist* to form *Advance* in 1934. *Christian Herald*, May 1818-April 2, 1835 (absorbed *Watchman*, in May 1829)

Christian Journal (formerly *Christian Herald*), April 2, 1835-April 1841 absorbed *The Christian* on June 28, 1838; name changed back to *Christian Herald*. *Christian Sun*, February 17, 1844-December 31, 1965 *Christian Messenger*, c. 1848-January 1861; absorbed *Christian Herald* on March 27, 1850; was merged with *Christian Palladium* in January 1861 to form *Christian Messenger and Palladium*.

Christian Palladium, c. 1831-January 1861

Christian Messenger and Palladium, January 1861-December 1862

Christian Banner,?-1861 (consolidated with *Gospel Herald*)

Gospel Herald, October 2, 1843-January 4, 1868 (consolidated with *Herald of Gospel*

Liberty).

Christian Messenger (of New Bedford, MA), February 1900-January 1907

Advance, April 1934-September 1958

United Church Herald, October 9, 1958-July/August 1972

A.D., September 1972-June/July 1983

United Church News, May 1985-

3. Daniel Benoni Atkinson, "The Herald of Gospel Liberty: The Pioneer Religious Journal-A History," in *The Centennial of Religious Journalism*, ed. J. Pressley Barrett (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association, 1908), pp. 37-75.
4. Ibid.
5. In an unpublished manuscript by Dr. Denison in the files of Mary Denison Fiebiger.
6. William B. Lippard, *Fifty Years an Editor* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), pp. 16, 218-19.
7. J. E. Burnett, "The Origin and Principles of the Christians," the first booklet in an undated series, p. 56.
8. Elias Smith, in an "Address to the Public," published September 1, 1808, in the first issue of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* and reprinted in *The Centennial of Religious Journalism*, pp. 29-34.
9. Quoted by Atkinson, op. cit., p. 49.
10. Douglas Horton, *The United Church of Christ* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), p. 180.
11. Burnett, "Elias Smith," pp. 21-23.
12. Atkinson, op. cit., pp. 55-58.
13. P. J. Kernodle, *Lives of Christian Ministers* (Richmond, VA: Central Publishing Company, 1909), pp. 114, 127, 205, 219, 256.
14. Alfred Wesley Hurst, in an unpublished monograph on the life and work of Alva Martin Kerr called "The Fun of Being an Editor" (1976), p. 19. Copies are on file in the archives of the Congregational Christian Historical Society.
15. Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1977), pp. 59-60.
16. *A.D.*, September 1975, pp. 39-48.
17. *A.D.*, August 1981.
18. *A.D.*, June 1982.
19. Quoted in *The Centennial of Religious Journalism*, pp. 105-106.
20. Ibid., pp. 76-77. The hymn was written by the Rev. Thomas S. Weeks of Troy, Ohio.
21. Hurst, op. cit., p. 39.

22. Malcolm K. Burton, *Disorders in the Kingdom* (Rev. ed.; New York: Vantage Press, 1982), p. xii.
23. John Scotford, "The Council Faces Church Union," an editorial in the June 1948 *Advance*.
24. J. Martin Bailey, "My Hope for Our Church" in *A.D.*, August 1981, p. 6.
25. Dorothy G. Berry, "A Continuing Search for Unity" in *A.D.*, June 1982, p. 25.
26. Atkinson, op. cit., pp. 56-58.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
28. Kernodle, op. cit., pp. 257-58.
29. Hurst, op. cit., pp. 51-52.
30. *United Church News*, July 1985, p. 3.
31. Burnett, "Elias Smith," pp. 21-22.