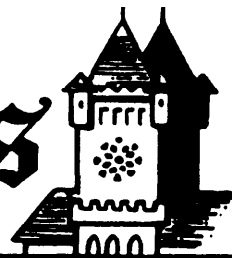


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LOCAL NEWSLETTERS: A KEY TO COMMUNITY INFLUENCE

by Michael R. Gilstrap

During the past decade and half, newsletters have been the single most significant addition to the mass communications industry. They have now far surpassed the advent of the cassette tape, which was extremely significant on its own merit. I dare say that 95% of you were first reached by the Christian Reconstruction viewpoint through a newsletter. Quite frankly, one of the planks upon which Christian Reconstruction has been built is newsletters.

It began with the launching of *The Chalcedon Report* in the early '60s. Rev. R.J. Rushdoony began publishing a monthly newsletter to reach outside his immediate area in Southern California. A decade later, in the early '70s, Dr. Gary North began the Institute for Christian Economics (ICE). With the simultaneous publication of North's *Introduction to Christian Economics*, Rushdoony's *Institutes of Biblical Law*, and the inauguration of the various newsletters originating at ICE, Christian Reconstruction became far more influential, although still in its infancy.

It was through the monthly newsletters that this perspective grew and developed. Without the monthly newsletters, Christian Reconstruction would never have gotten off the ground. Throughout the '70s and into the '80s, month after month, and year after year, the Institute for Christian Economics, Chalcedon Foundation, and later Geneva Ministries (formerly Geneva Divinity School) published, promoted, and delivered from seven to ten newsletters per month. Our combined mailing lists grew from little more than a thousand to well over ten thousand!

It was primarily through the newsletter ministry that these organizations went from obscure religious ministries with very small, but loyal followings, to being perceived as "thinktanks" by no less influential a source as *Newsweek*, which included Chalcedon/ICE in its exclusive list of conservative organizations that helped elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. *Newsweek* again mentioned them in a story on this year's election.

Newsletters are extreme/y powerful tools. Over the last twenty years we have seen just how powerful, effective, and influential they can be. But, for the most part, Christian Reconstruction has used them effectively only on a national level. There are very few good local newsletters – newsletters specifically designed and published for a local community. *That must change.*

We must move further up the ladder in this next decade with our message. We have spent the last ten years reaching you, the remnant. *Now it's your turn to reach others.* It is not enough for us to publish newsletters designed for a national audience. That's too much of a shotgun approach for maximum effectiveness. We want you to take what you have learned from us these last few years, and start your own local newsletter.

Why is it so important to start local newsletters? Why not simply put time and money into expanding our own national lists? We have to be honest: There are literally hundreds of thousands of individuals out there who will *never* read a newsletter from ICE or Geneva Ministries. But they would read a newsletter published by a local church, pastor, or businessman commenting on local events of interest (from our particular point of view, of course!). That's the key – that's our goal, getting that next tier of readers to hear what we have to say. Many of you have been reading our material, as well as developing your own for many years now. What we would like to see is for you to take that knowledge, that understanding, and apply Biblical principles to your local communities.

For instance, Dr. North may write an essay for *Biblical Economics Today* on the subject of the statist doctrine of "Eminent Domain" and what the Bible has to say about it. He will point out that the state is not God, and therefore, it does not own all property without restriction. That article will be read with great interest by the readers of *Biblical Economics Today*. But try to get Andy Accountant of Tyler, Texas, a member in good standing at First Baptist Church to read it. No way, Jose! He's not interested in the least.

But let's recast that same article. Let's assume that the city of Tyler is expanding one of its main boulevards to accommodate the increased traffic volume. The city is buying up all the property along this boulevard, which of necessity involves the moving or destruction of several hundred homes along the proposed expansion route. Some of the homeowners have lived in the same place for 10 years, others 15, and some as long as 25 years! They don't want to move. Their children were reared in these homes. Even though the city is offering them market value or better, the sentimental attachment to these homes is beyond value. A great hue and cry is being made, and a first-class *local* controversy is in the air. *Everyone is talking about the proposed expansion.*

As the publisher of the local religious newsletter, *The Tyler Christian Observer*, you recast Dr. North's article on "Eminent Domain," and run it under the headline, "Has the City Council Flown in the Face of Biblical Law? – What God Has to Say About the Proposed South Broadway Expansion." You won't have to beg to get Andy Accountant to read your newsletter now. In fact, you will probably have to go back to the printer and run additional copies of that edition because the demand is so high! Your article will probably even get you an interview with a local newspaper reporter, and then you'll be *really* cooking. A few well-placed plugs for your local newsletter in the newspaper article, and you increase your circulation by 509'0!

The locally published newsletter will do what we, the publishers of nationally targeted newsletters, can never

hope to do. As the above example illustrates, we can never hope to reach local communities as effectively as locally based operations can. The potential of a local newsletter movement is mind-boggling.

Before I begin to tell you how you can begin to publish a newsletter, let me give you taste of the vision—a taste of the potential of this enterprise—a glimpse of what we can *realistically* do in a few short years.

I Have a Dream . . .

I have a dream of reaching one and a half million people every month with hard hitting, Biblically based, local newsletters, and *reaching our goal in less than ten years*, and making the entire operation pay for itself. Here's how we can do it.

This newsletter is going out to approximately 6,000 people, the combined Geneva Ministries and ICE list. Let's assume that after reading this newsletter, 50 of you decide that you want to publish a local newsletter. That means that only 8/10ths of one percent decide to go for the gusto. Local churches may sponsor some of these newsletters. Dedicated individuals will sponsor the rest. It doesn't really matter how it is done, but in 1984-85, we are able to convince 50 of you to start a newsletter. Let us further assume that during the next 12 months, each of you will be able to build your list to about 1000 names (using the techniques I'll tell you about later in this article). So in 1984-85, 50 different local newsletters will be mailed monthly to a total of 50,000 people. Therefore, including the circulation of this newsletter, we will reach, on a monthly basis, 56,000 people. That's an increase from our original 6,000 of 933% in just twelve months! Quite an accomplishment.

Let us further assume that in 1986, we are able to convince 50 more individuals to start local newsletters with a combined monthly circulation of 50,000. The original 50 newsletters, however, continue to grow, and the average circulation for each of the original 50 reaches 2,500 per newsletter. Which means we are now reaching, in this second stage of development, a total of 6,000 (Geneva/ICE list) plus 50,000 (50 new newsletters x 1000) plus 125,000 (50 original newsletters x 2,500) which equals 181,000 individuals on a monthly basis!

Let's go one more step. In 1987, we are able to convince 50 more individuals to start local newsletters with a combined monthly circulation of 50,000. The two preceding stages (1985 and 1986) also continue to grow. The 1986 newsletters grow to individual circulations of 2,500 each, and the 1985 newsletters reach 5,000 each. Therefore, we are now reaching, *on a monthly basis*, 6,000 (ICE list) plus 50,000 (fifty new 1987 letters x 1000) plus 125,000 (fifty 1986 letters x 2,500) plus 250,000 (fifty 1985 letters x 5,000) for a grand total of 431,000 individuals on a monthly basis.

In three short years, we have grown from reaching only 6,000 per month *to almost half a million per month!* And each and every newsletter operation is paying for itself to boot! In the chart below, I've extended the projections through the year 1991:

Newsletter Circulation Projections

Year	Circulation Breakdown	Monthly Total
1985	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	56,000
	50 Local Newsletters (1,000 each)	
1986	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	181,000
	50-1984 newsletters (2,500 each)	
	50-1985 newsletters (1,000 each)	
1987	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	431,000
	50-1984 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1985 newsletters (2,500 each)	
	50-1988 newsletters (1,000 each)	

1988	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	681,000
	50-1984 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1965 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1966 newsletters (2,500 each)	
	50-1987 newsletters (1,000 each)	
1969	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	931,000
	50-1984 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1985 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1966 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1987 newsletters (2,500 each)	
1990	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	1,181,000
	50-1964 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1985 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1986 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1987 newsletters (5,000 each)	
1991	ICE/Geneva Ministries -6,000	1,425,000
	50-1984 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1985 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1986 newsletters (5,000 each)	
	50-1987 newsletters (5,000 each)	

As you can see, I've leveled off circulation figures for each of the newsletters at 5,000 in their third and following years. I've also assumed that Geneva/ICE's list remains constant, which it won't; it will grow. Be that as it may, if we follow this plan (and I believe this plan to be realistic and attainable) we will be reaching, by the end of 1990, almost 1.5 million different individuals each month, and we'll be doing it through only 350 different local newsletters.

This would mean that if a major news item hit which we all needed to know about immediately, we could reach 1.5 million conservative, socially-conscious Christians by sending 350 letters to the publishers of the local newsletters. Every time an important new book is released, such as each succeeding volume of Dr. North's *Economic Commentary on the Bible*, we could quickly and easily contact 1.5 million different individuals with an offer for the book. Geneva Ministries or ICE, whichever published the book, would make money by wholesaling the books to the individual newsletters, and each newsletter would make money by retailing the book to its list.

1.5 million a month, that is my dream. The potential is mind-boggling. *But we can't get it off the ground without your help.* Before I tell you how to begin to make this dream a reality, however, let's look at some of the unique advantages of the newsletter medium.

Why A Newsletter?

A newsletter is a lot like an iceberg. The part that is visible above the water is only a small percentage of the whole iceberg. Likewise with a newsletter. The "finished product" reflects only a tiny percentage of what it takes to make a successful newsletter. I'm not going to kid you: Publishing a monthly newsletter is work, but it is worth every ounce of sweat that is poured into it if the letter is done right, and if you are able to minister to the people of your community.

Newsletters are one of the last vestiges of a free press in the United States. When was the last time you were on the "inside" of a major news story? Recently I was privy to a major news item here in Tyler. One of our Church members was mauled by a bear which was supposedly "domesticated." The owners kept the bear in their backyard. The young man survived and is doing fine at this writing, but the news

coverage of the event was deplorable. Matters of fact were erroneous, and areas of interpretation were so far off base they were ridiculous. It made me wonder at the quality of reporting at local newspapers, to say nothing of the national media. Local newsletters, however, can help remedy this situation for Christians, particularly in Church/state matters, which have been characteristically misinterpreted in the secular media.

Furthermore, newsletters are tremendously powerful tools. Why is this? There are a lot of reasons, but from the reader's point of view, probably the most important one is *time*. A newsletter only takes a short amount of time to read. When I look at a book, the question I ask myself is, "Am I willing to invest the 3-4 hours to read this book? Is it worth it?" A newsletter, however, only takes 20-30 minutes to read. A large number of people are willing to spend 20 minutes reading what we've written, but they are unwilling to commit 3 or 4 hours to us, or to anyone else for that matter.

The second major reason, from a reader's point of view, is that a newsletter is much more *personal* than a book. It can be much more specific and dated than a book. People like that. In a newsletter, we can talk to them directly about issues and problems that affect their lives.

One of the greatest advantages of a local newsletter is that the letter can be focused directly on local problems. A local newsletter can create the perception that local needs, individual needs, are being met and ministered to. Your readers live in real time and they have real needs. They want to know how to solve their problems: rising crime rates, how to make their sons and daughters safe, what to do about pollution, taxes, nuclear power, and a host of other issues. They want to feel that you are talking to them about *their* problems. That's what a local newsletter can give.

Third, a newsletter is *action-oriented*. People are not as passive when reading a newsletter as when reading a novel or watching television. The Christians in your community will come to rely on you to let them know what's happening out there, and what they can do about it. A local newsletter can also develop into a "bulletin" board for upcoming important events that the Christian community should know about.

How about from a publisher's point of view? Why should we spend our time writing newsletters, instead of concentrating solely on books? It is very simple. *Newsletters are effective because they are read.* I don't write just to put words on paper. I want people to read what I write, and more importantly, I want people to take what I have to say seriously. Newsletters, in the short run, do that more effectively than anything else. After they've been reading our newsletters for a while, we'll sell them books.

So, combined with what I said earlier, I hope you have a glimpse of what is possible with a local newsletter. Quite honestly, I've only uncovered the tip of the iceberg. As you begin to minister to your community through a local newsletter, an entire horizon of possibilities will open up to you. Joined with the ministry of the local church, the newsletter could very well be the most important tool in our arsenal to influence our local communities.

Commitment

We've now come to the "bottom line." You've read the newsletter to this point, and if I've done my job, I've got you to thinking, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea, but how?"

As I said earlier, we can't pull this off by ourselves. We need your help. It doesn't matter where you live . . . it doesn't matter how large or how small your community is . . . it doesn't matter whether you think you have what it takes to do a local newsletter . . . the only thing that is important is that you see that there is a need in your community for a local newsletter, and you are willing to do everything you can to fill that need.

in other words, what we need from you is a **commitment**. I can give you the nuts and bolts on how to do it, but the one thing I can't supply is commitment. You've got to get that on your own. Perhaps a Church wants to start a local letter- then that Church must find one or more individuals with that commitment. So before you begin to ask how, you must ask the question, "Do I want to?" After you have answered that question, you are prepared to discover *how* to publish a newsletter.

Christian Newsletter Association

In order to see this project through, we have organized the Christian Newsletter Association. This association is sponsored by Geneva Ministries, and is organized for two purposes.

One, the Christian Newsletter Association will function as an educational association to help newcomers as well as veterans improve their skill in reaching their communities through local newsletters. It is our desire to see like-minded individuals or Churches start these newsletters, yet we realize that most won't have the foggiest idea of how to begin. The CNA is designed not only to give you the knowledge necessary to begin the project, but also to help you along the way through continuing education and counseling.

Two, the Christian Newsletter Association will actively promote the Association, and seek to recruit new members in order to realize the Association's goal of 1.5 million combined subscriptions in ten years. I really believe this project will work. If the Lord is pleased with it, we could very well be on the ground floor of an association that will accomplish great things for His Kingdom. 1.5 million may only be the beginning.

The bottom line is that the Christian Newsletter Association is designed to serve its member publishers by helping them do the very best job they are capable of doing. Below I've listed the member benefits as we have organized them at this point. But, if in the future, CNA members decide that they would like another benefit, then we will endeavor to supply it. To reach our goal, we *must* work together. That is what CNA is all about.

CNA Member Benefits

The Christian Newsletter Association provides the following five benefits for its members.

The Christian Newsletter Association Training Manual. This particular benefit is worth the price of admission. I am in the middle of preparing a training manual that will cover all aspects of publishing a newsletter. The projected length of the manual is over 200 pages, and it will be bound in loose leaf format in a deluxe custom binder with tab dividers.

As I said, the CNA Training Manual covers every conceivable aspect of publishing a newsletter. One section deals with copy, writing techniques, research techniques, creative idea generation, and other important aspects dealing with the content of the newsletter. Another section deals with typesetting, graphic design, and printing: how to get the best price, what to look for in a good job, etc.

A third area will cover computers. Some of you may already have computers, but my guess is the majority of you don't. At least you don't have a computer that is capable of adequately manipulating a list of 5,000 individual names, addresses, and activity data. That being the case, I've included an introduction to computers as well as a buying guide.

In addition to knowing *what* computer to buy, you'll need to know how to use it. For that reason, I've also included a section on computer applications as it relates to publishing a newsletter: word processing, computerized typesetting, data base management, accounting, recording keeping, etc.

Perhaps one of the most important sections has to do with mailing lists. One of the hearts (being good VanTillians we can't very well say *the* heart) of any newsletter operation is the mailing list. Without a good list, all the great copy, sophisticated design, and brilliant art work, is so much drivell. If your newsletter is not read, then you have failed. The key to getting your newsletter read is mailing to the right people. How do you know whom to mail to? Where do you get the names? Once you have the names, in what form should they be kept? When your list is big enough, how should you enter them into the computer-what information is important? I answer all of these questions plus many more in the "Lists" section of the manual.

Another "heart" of newsletter publishing is finances. If you don't have the money, it is impossible to get the newsletter to your readers. What are some of the ways to finance a newsletter operation? We cover these in the CNA manual.

Although that's not all, that's all the space we have. I hope you get the general conception. The objective of this manual is to give to CNA members *everything* necessary to know how to publish a newsletter.

Counseling Service. The second benefit is a special counseling service to help members as they actually publish a newsletter. Say, for example, a local Church pastor has decided to publish a newsletter. He has read and studied the manual cover to cover. The first month he's racing against his mailing deadline. He's got two days to get his newsletter in the mail. At the same time he must prepare a Sunday School lesson, two sermons, plan an evangelistic outreach program in the community (his newsletter is playing a prominent role in his program!), and make sure he doesn't neglect his wife and children. He feels like he has just enough time to complete all his jobs, but then he hits a snag in his newsletter. His typesetter has given him a roll of "galleys," and his printer tells him that he must "paste up" the galleys and give him "camera ready" copy to shoot or it will take an extra two weeks to print the newsletter. Otherwise, the printer tells him, he can get the job done in 24 hours. What is the pastor to do? He doesn't have the foggiest idea how to paste up galleys and do a mechanical.

Here's what the pastor does. He tails the CNA offices and takes advantage of CNA's personal telephone counseling service. We guide him through his problem, and he is able to get his newsletter out on time. For the cost of a phone call, his problem is immediately solved. In addition to the telephone counseling service, we also offer a counseling service for those less immediate problems that can be handled more economically through the mail.

CNAS Exclusive Newsletter Clearinghouse. One of the most difficult jobs of the newsletter publisher is coming up with copy month in and month out. Each publisher goes through a honeymoon period in which copy is running out of his ears. But then, *the honeymoon is over*. One month he sits down to plan out the next issue, and he finds a dry well. What can he do?

CNA has anticipated that problem and offers as part of its membership package a special Newsletter Clearinghouse. CNA will keep on file all newsletters generated from here (ICE and Geneva Ministries), as well as many other newsletters that we feel are important. CNA will then publish a quarterly index to our newsletter files by subject and author.

Then, for instance, one publisher has an article he would

like to write on capital punishment, he can consult his quarterly index under "capital punishment: tail or write our office, and request photocopies of any article he wishes to use. He can then either print an article as it is, or use several articles as source material, adding local flavor along the way, producing a first rate, original article for his community.

Or, to take another example, let's say another publisher wishes to print an article by Gary North. He knows that Dr. North has a book coming out in five months, and he wants to prime the pump so that he can sell more of Dr. North's new book (in order to help finance his newsletter operation). He checks his quarterly index, runs down the articles Dr. North has written, chooses one, and then gives our office a call. We ship him the article the next day. Quite frankly, this clearinghouse may prove to be one of the most popular benefits of membership in the CNA.

Association Newsletter. As part of its continuing education program, CNA will publish a quarterly newsletter, *The CNA Report*. In it we will offer articles of continuing interest, manual updates, as well as news and views from the CNA membership. Along with the newsletter, we'll send the quarterly index of the CNA Newsletter Clearinghouse.

Publishers Seminars. The last member benefit is the publisher's seminars. CNA will sponsor these as often as there is need. The first one is scheduled for January 25-26, 1985, immediately following the Third Annual Geneva Reconstruction Conference: Eschatology and Dominion. The second, which will be a repeat of the first, is scheduled for June 28-29, 1985, following the second edition of the Third Annual Geneva Reconstruction Conference: Eschatology and Dominion. We're repeating this first Publisher's Seminar in an effort to give as many people as possible an opportunity to come. The seminar will cover a broad range of topics, and will consist primarily of workshops to give attendees "hands on" experience in overcoming publishing problems. Unlike the other member benefits, we will be charging a small fee for these seminars to cover the cost of the room, etc.

Membership in the Christian Newsletter Association is open to anyone who is interested in starting a local newsletter. Dues are \$100.00 annually, which entitles you to all of the member benefits listed above, and any future benefits we may add. For more information, or to join, please contact Michael Gilstrap, Christian Newsletter Association, P.O. Box 8376, Tyler, Texas, 75711.

Conclusion

Several weeks ago I was invited to a ranch in Central Texas. I had been there before, but I was still amazed at the sheer magnitude of the ranch. East Texas is much like the Deep South. We have a lot of trees, and the only horizon we see is by looking above the tree line. On this ranch, however, it was as if one could see forever. The horizon stretched, seemingly unlimited, in every direction. The view was magnificent.

As I think of the Christian Newsletter Association, I get the same feeling—the horizon, the possibilities are seemingly unlimited. We have the potential of reaching literally millions of people in the next twenty-five years. We have the opportunity to begin an organization that could help change this nation for the better.

I hope you will give serious consideration to becoming a local newsletter publisher. As I've already said twice before, this project will not succeed without your help.

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