

TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

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CHURCH NEWSLETTERS

by Gary North

As you might imagine, I'm a firm supporter of newsletters. I support myself by means of *Remnant Review*, my economic report. I keep people interested in the Institute for Christian Economics by means of the various letters put out by ICE. I have found that my newsletter essays are quoted more widely than my books. So in terms of short-run impact, the newsletter is a better medium than books.

Why newsletters? There are a lot of reasons. Let me list the readers' reasons: 1) time constraints; 2) attention span; 3) rarity of active, analytical readers; 4) timeliness; 5) specificity; 6) ease of lending; 7) personalism of communication; 8) ease of filing; 9) ease of reviewing; 10) action-orientation.

Now let me list the advantages for the publisher: 1) time constraints; 2) research limitations; 3) timeliness; 4) specificity; 5) training programs; 6) name identification (personal and institutional); 7) variability of the number to be printed; 8) local production; 9) costs of mailing; 10) reinforcement for sermons; 11) reminder of institution's existence; 12) personalism of communication; 13) speed of publication; 14) action-oriented; 15) division of labor factor; 16) ministry possible.

Almost all of these benefits can be achieved by means of a tape ministry, but tapes have distinct limitations, most notably their cost of production and distribution. The newsletter is much less expensive per person reached.

Christian Readers

Christian readers don't read very much. Anyone who has read Mortimer Adler's book, *How to Read a Book* (1939) — and anyone who expects to be a writer had better read it — knows how difficult it is to read analytically. Few people ever learn how, including college graduates. He draws on his experiences from the college classroom — the pre-World War II college classroom, when things were far better — to prove his point. Readers are used to simple, passive reading. They read the sports pages of the newspaper, or possibly brief articles in magazines, but seldom do most Americans, including Christians, read a 400-page book, other than novels. The newsletter, even when dealing with difficult material, is less foreboding to the reader, since newsletters are short. A 4-page report, even if a bit technical, is not the threat to the reader that a book is. He may tackle the newsletter; he probably won't tackle a book on the same topic.

The reader has no time. Women are too busy with children, and men are too busy with business. Everyone is too busy watching television. The writer has to compete with the brain-mushing effects of modern television. The newsletter is a better competitor.

Christians need to be educated, yet you cannot start their educations with 400-page books. You have to begin with their present level of achievement and their present level of motivation. Newsletters are motivational in a way that books are not, since they are issue-oriented and immediate.

You can educate readers step by step. Newsletters can be used in a systematic educational program, such as a doctrinal training program. Or they can be used to alert people to important current events in the church or the world. There are many applications, but the key fact to remember is this: **they are effective because they are read.** It does little good to write if no one reads, except as a self-improvement exercise. The chief goal of writing is to be read.

If many people in the church are reading a newsletter on a regular basis, they will tend to draw others into the circle of readers. Peer pressure is far better as a motivating force than endless reminders from the pulpit that people ought to read more. They also ought to exercise more, spend more time with the kids, fix up the church, and evangelize their neighbors. There are lots of things they ought to be doing. What they will wind up doing is whatever is traditional, easy, and acceptable to their peers. By getting many people reading, the writer encourages others to begin doing something most people in history haven't had the ability, opportunity, or leisure time to do: read.

Pastoral Goals

All right, let's not shilly-shally around. You want more money, more influence, more people to take over the cruddy jobs around the church, a larger building, less debt, a steadier source of income for the church, a new evangelism program, more informed members, less bickering among the elders, a good reputation outside the local church, and potential employment opportunities if you can't get your present church on its feet. Newsletters can give you all of these. I stress the plural. You need more than one newsletter.

People outside the church are unlikely to give to your church unless your church is supplying them with something they appreciate. An informative newsletter is something people appreciate. It reminds them, month by month, that your church is alive and well. They become personally linked to your church. Finally, this sense of familiarity can increase the church's income. A newsletter can be a kind of outreach to the uninformed, whose name is legion in American Christianity today.

What is your personal interest? Marital counselling? Evangelism? Church fund-raising? Book reviewing? World affairs? Literature? There must be something. If there isn't anything special about your ministry, you should either develop something or get into a line of work to which you can contribute something unique. Find that niche, and then start reading widely in it. Keep your readers informed. Send copies of your letter for six months or a year to those who have expressed some interest in it. Rent mailing lists, if necessary, to identify these people. Take names and addresses when you speak at other churches or at seminars. Take along copies and sign people up. Don't let a speaking opportunity fail to become a source of names and new subscribers.

What kind of newsletters should you consider? There are many possibilities: 1) local church news; 2) world or national events relating to Christianity; 3) specialized letters on common problems, especially family or financial problems; 4) training letters that can be used repeatedly; 5) reprints of classic sermons or other out-of-print materials; 6) letters aimed at informing pastors in a denomination or association; 7) Christian school events; 8) book reviews or other cultural information; 9) motivational letters (evangelism, etc.); 10) devotionals. You can make inserts available to other churches for their bulletins. But **specialization** is important; it is generally a mistake to mix up the categories. You want a **clearly identifiable** newsletter, one which is opened, read, and saved by the readers.

One of the most successful letters is published by the Calvary Temple in East Point, Georgia: *Temple Times*. It reprints sermons, other newsletter articles, and news about the Federal bureaucracy's invasion of Christian liberty. It is sent all over the country. It was the first newsletter to report on the attempt of the IRS to establish racial quotas for Christian schools (August, 1978), and as a result of the newsletter network, over 150,000 letters of protest were generated, and the IRS had to postpone the action (although it is still pending). This indicates how the newsletter industry is becoming a kind of underground information network. The newsletters are the modern equivalent of the Committees of Correspondence during the American Revolution. (Address: Temple Times, 2560 Sylvan Rd., East Point, GA 30344).

There is no reason why a church can't publish several letters, each aimed at specific groups. There is no reason for the pastor to publish a church news report; that task should be delegated. The pastor should specialize. His teaching ministry should increasingly become a written and tape recorded ministry, with graduates of the training sessions leading the new ones. A newsletter program allows a continual upgrading of any teaching ministry. The newsletters become inserts for instructional packages later on.

The Clearing House

The church which adopts my issues-oriented program of local evangelism can use newsletters as an integral program of follow-up. This program is outlined in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* (Winter, 1980-81): "Evangelism." Send \$5 to:

Journal of Christian Reconstruction
P. O. Box 158
Vallecito, CA 95251

In this program, local canvassers contact residents, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, with a questionnaire geared to specific topics of interest to activist Christians: abortion, national defense, inflation, etc. They find out what the "hot buttons" are in the community. Then the local church begins to mail a specialized newsletter three times a year or so that deals with **each** of the most popular topics. The church uses its timely newsletters to follow up with those identified as concerned citizens. This is single-issue targeting, but it works. You use the issue which most concerns a citizen to interest him in a total world and life view.

Your newsletter program can be geared to attracting outsiders to the church's ministry. It can also be geared to strengthening

those within the camp. What we need is for several pastors to specialize in special-interest areas, so that they can exchange letters with others of a similar vision. Each can pull items from other letters, or use the other man's letter in his own publication schedule. If we had 20 writers who could produce a single-interest report three times a year, those pastors co-operating in the exchange could put their own masthead on a report produced by another pastor and mail it out under the local church's banner. No restriction on using the information in any letter would apply to others in the network who were also contributing letters to the group. Special-interest letters could be produced by 20 men, and 20 churches would then be in a position to produce reams of material for the various age and interest groups within the community at large, and also within the local congregation.

This is the kind of program that we need. We probably won't get it, but if your church has a letter available, or wants to get one started, just contact the ICE and let us know. We are about to set up a computer file on letters, and we can operate as a **clearing house for the church newsletter distribution system**. We will make lists of letters available on request.

Production

You need an electric typewriter, preferably an IBM Selectric III or its equivalent. I recommend the "Letter Gothic" typewriter element. Mimeograph your letter, or offset print it (preferred). Typeset it if you can find someone locally who will do it for a reasonable fee (anything under \$20 per page in mid-1981 is reasonable). Print extra copies for future distribution. The standard format of 8½ by 11 inches is good, although 11 by 17, folded (like *Biblical Economics Today*) looks better. It's usually more expensive to print, however.

If a church finances a church news bulletin and a current affairs report, it's doing well. Better the current affairs report (along the lines of *Temple Times*) than a local church news letter, if you can afford only one.

We need as many churches in the program of publication as possible. As the tightening grip of the State sets in, the independent newsletter network will take on ever-growing importance. The existence of Xerox machines and mimeograph machines poses a major threat to any government that would attempt to centralize authority in this country. Communications are far more decentralized in free societies than in tyrannies.

One way of staying out of the limelight of the Federal bureaucracy, if you are a small or new church, is to **avoid applying for IRS-approved church status**. The Post Office requires such approval for its 3¢ rate. It might be wiser to **use the 10¢ second-class mailing permit which is available to anyone who mails out 200 at a time**. That way, the IRS isn't alerted to the formation of a new church. The IRS does not have to approve your church yet for it to be tax exempt. By applying for exemption, you identify yourself. Better to pay the higher mailing costs and preserve a greater degree of invisibility.

Another advantage of newsletters is that you can stick in a reply envelope for contributions. You can also offer books or other materials in flyers that accompany the newsletter. Warning: if you mail using the non-profit, 3¢ rate, any enclosure must be limited to some organization that also has the legal right to mail at 3¢. Piggybacking is illegal.

Tentmakers is published six times a year by the Institute for Christian Economics, a tax-exempt religious and educational organization. It is available free of charge to pastors, elders, deacons, and other church officers, as well as to members of Christian religious orders. Subscription requests must be made on church letterhead stationery. Address: P.O. Box 6116, Tyler, TX 75711. A tithe or offering on any money saved by these reports would be appropriate.