

The Anglican Journal and editorial independence

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When Council of General Synod (CoGS) met this November, it heard a presentation on a committee now reviewing, among other things, the policy of editorial independence that governs the *Anglican Journal*. Some members of CoGS expressed confusion about this policy. Some Canadian Anglicans, the council heard, are puzzled by the way the newspaper at times covers news, because they assume that it's the church's official voice. (See related story, p. 10.)

Indeed, the *Journal*—unlike some (but certainly not all) church publications—is not a separate entity from the church it reports on. Formally, its publisher is the Anglican Journal Co-ordinating Committee, a committee of General Synod, and its staff are employees of the church's national office, part of the communications and information resources department. On that department's website, the paper is described as a "ministry" of the church.

The *Journal* costs about \$2 million to publish annually and funds come from various sources: General Synod (30.4%), the Anglican Journal Appeal (25%), a grant from Heritage Canada's Canada Periodical Fund (20.9%), advertising revenue (11.2%), distribution income (11.4%) and others (0.59%).

Not an official voice of or for the church

Telling only "good news" stories about the church, however, is not how the church has defined the *Journal's* job. Its mandate is to be "a national newspaper of interest to the members of the Anglican Church of Canada, with an independent editorial policy and not being an official voice of or for the church." This means the *Journal's* editor and staff are tasked with serving the interest of readers, and the editor is free to decide what goes into the paper without direction from anyone outside it, even leaders of the church.

How did this combination—editorial independence with organizational dependence—come to be?

The *Journal's* predecessor, a 19th-century newspaper called the *Dominion Churchman*, was fully independent. In 1875, the *Dominion Churchman* (whose roots may go further back) was privately owned and made money by charging for subscriptions, at \$2 per year.

After the death of its proprietor in 1912, ownership of the paper—now known as the *Canadian Churchman*—changed hands a number of times. By 1946, its circulation was dropping and the paper was in debt. At General Synod that year, a resolution was adopted that would result, two years later, in the purchase of the *Canadian Churchman* by the Anglican Church of Canada's General Board of Religious Education.

The resolution's wording suggests synod wanted to keep the *Canadian Churchman* afloat because it saw value in it as a publication serving the church Canada-wide. It states that General Synod "feels strongly the need of such a Church paper as can serve as the organ of the whole church,"



▲ The newspaper's policy of editorial independence, among other matters, is being reviewed by a committee of General Synod.

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but also considered it "inadvisable" that synod itself take on the responsibility of publishing a national paper. Meanwhile, the resolution noted, "recognition must be given to the fact that for seventy-five years the *Canadian Churchman* has endeavored to give loyal service to the Church people of Canada."

Despite synod's stated need of a newspaper that would serve as an "organ" of the church, the resolution also specified that in the development of a policy for a church-owned *Canadian Churchman*, it would be "understood that editorial freedom shall be safeguarded."

'A doubter, an informed critic, a vigilant friend'

In the decades that followed, the precise role of the paper continued to occupy church decision-makers. In 1955, General Synod resolved to look into replacing the *Canadian Churchman* and other church periodicals with a single publication, and in 1958, a committee tasked with looking into the matter recommended a monthly newspaper (keeping the name *Canadian Churchman*) that would "serve the promotional interests of the Departments of General Synod." The paper's other stated aims do not mention editorial independence, though they specify that the new *Canadian Churchman* "should stimulate the interest and courage of our church people by a vital editorial presentation of our faith, and its relevance to man, his needs and his problems in the world today." The proposal was approved by General Synod in 1959.

By as early as 1961, editor Canon Gordon Baker began questioning the role of the paper as purely promotional. In a report to the National Executive Council (the

forerunner of Council of General Synod), Baker argued that reporting, sometimes controversially, on issues that are "uppermost in people's minds" was part of the paper's other mandate of "stimulating" its readers.

By the mid-1970s, the *Canadian Churchman's* treatment of subjects such as the ordination of women, homosexuality and communist China was attracting accusations of bias and of sowing division in the church. At the request of the House of Bishops and the diocese of Qu'Appelle, the paper's board and staff prepared an editorial policy and code of ethics. The editorial policy, endorsed by the Executive Council in 1977, spelled out that "*Canadian Churchman* is the national newspaper of the Anglican Church of Canada, but it is not the official voice of that church," and referred to it as "an independent newspaper." The code of ethics stated that the paper "should hold itself free of any obligation save that of fidelity to the public good."

An earlier draft of this policy, written in 1976 by Norman Smith, a member of the paper's board of trustees, provides an insight into why the board felt the *Canadian Churchman's* editorial independence was important. The paper should not be the church's official voice, Smith wrote, because "a live church must...embrace rather than stifle argument and righteous indignation, else its rules and ways will be imposed from the top." The *Canadian Churchman*, he wrote, should thus present the news "without fear or favour," and serve the church as "something of a Watchman on the Wall, a Town Crier, an Ombudsman, a bit of a doubter, an informed critic and a wise and vigilant friend."

A similar argument was voiced about the *Anglican Journal*—as it has been known since 1990—35 years later by Archbishop Colin Johnson, bishop of the diocese of Toronto and metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province of Ontario.

"Editorial independence is important, even if annoying; it provides vibrancy on the part of the church," Johnson said before CoGS in 2011, when it was debating a motion to return the paper to the fold of General Synod after a nine-year period of existence as a separately incorporated body.

No unanimous opinion

Opinion on the *Journal's* role has not always been unanimous, however. For example, speaking also at the 2011 debate at CoGS, Canon Gene Packwood, of the ecclesiastical province of Rupert's Land, said a *Journal* that was independent editorially but not organizationally would put church leadership in a difficult bind.

"[If] I'm being asked, as CoGS, to oversee [the *Journal's*] policies, I'm going to be responsible for something I can't direct," he said.

CoGS would approve the un-incorporation of the *Journal*, but it also approved terms of reference for the *Journal* that preserved its editorial independence, and these would be confirmed by General Synod in 2013. ■