

Church news outlets struggle to maintain editorial standards

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The closing of several Protestant denominational newspapers, magazines and other news services has played a part in eroding the standards of professional religious journalism, according to members of the [Associated Church Press](#).

As denominational news services contend with fiscal challenges that have beset secular media as well, church press officials worry these outlets have lost their editorial independence and increasingly are performing public relations roles for their denominations.

✖ *The United Methodist Reporter* has become a web-only publication with a part-time staff. “There has been a strong commitment on the part of many denominations to promote religious journalism that lives up to the standards of what professional journalism should be,” said Meinrad Scherer-Emunds, chair of the ACP Religious Journalism Task Force. “We feel that has been limited in more recent years.”

Jay Voorhees, executive editor of [The United Methodist Reporter](#), bought the digital assets of the publication after it ceased publication in May when UMR Communications closed after months of financial losses.

Voorhees now runs it as a much smaller, Web-only publication. He and a few others work on the publication part time, hoping to continue the newspaper’s legacy.

“We still think there is an important need for a voice in the Methodist church that is independently operated from the official Methodist structure,” Voorhees said. “The reality is that it’s very, very difficult to find

a funding model that will allow for independent journalism that is not simply regurgitating what is coming out in press releases from denominational agencies.”

Many church publications are based on print models, which no longer are financially viable, Voorhees said.

“I think it’s going to be difficult for these organizations to respond to these changes that are required by this new world that we live in,” Voorhees said.

Joe Thoma, executive director of ACP, said his organization has seen a “significant change” in its membership as news services contract. Many denominations have resorted to telling the “good news” only, Thoma said.

✖ *DisciplesWorld*, a publication of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has ceased publication. Verity Jones, executive director of the [Center for Pastoral Excellence](#) at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, said this shift toward public relations led the ACP, which has more than 100 member organizations, to write a statement affirming religious journalism.

“We were seeing the eroding of support for and trust in an independent voice within traditions and denominations reporting the news,” said Jones, a former editor of *DisciplesWorld*, which ceased publication in 2010. “It’s not optional, because the free exchange of ideas is central to the living out of Christian community. It’s important for accountability; it’s important for news sharing.”

Jones also serves on the board of [Religion News Service](#).

She added that sometimes news is not good for a denomination, pointing to scandals involving clergy sexual abuse of minors as an example.

Other publications that have shut their doors include *The Progressive*

Christian, Episcopal Life, United Church News and the Church Herald.

The Virginia-based [*Religious Herald*](#) recently merged with [Associated Baptist Press](#), a national news service.