

The rise and fall of Protestant magazines: The Christian Century and Sojourners remain strong

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

“It's never been easy to make ends meet while putting out a progressive Christian publication. But in an ironic twist, a re-energized religious left may be making a tough task even harder. . . . At least five progressive periodicals—including four with a 30-plus-year publishing history—have either disbanded or undergone a radical makeover in the past three years.”

That's how a December 2 *Washington Post* article began. But before it could be published, G. Jeffrey MacDonald, for Religion New Service (RNS), had to fix a few things. One oversight was *Sojourners* magazine, which jumped from 24,300 paid subscribers in December 2002 to 45,500 now. The other exception to the trend mentioned in the article is the *Christian Century*, which hit a low point in circulation in 2001, but has increased annually to 36,000 subscribers. The percentage jump in circulation in five years has been well over 35 percent.

Century executive editor David Heim traces the magazine's success to “targeted direct-mail campaigns, improvements in customer service and usage of the Internet to attract new readers,” according to MacDonald's feature article. Credit goes to Kevin Shanley of Chicago-based Shanley & Associates, a consulting firm that contracts with the *Century*, *Sojourners* and other journals.

The article attributed the growth of *Sojourners* subscriptions to an increase in subscriptions from evangelicals—17 percent now compared to less than 5 percent in 2002, says *Sojourners* editor Jim Rice. And all this time *Sojourners* has been thought of as serving primarily a self-described evangelical readership.

Shanley, in an interview with the *Century*, says that the database of names used to seek first-time and renewal subscribers is the basically the same for both magazines—mainline ecumenical Protestants. Both the *Christian Century* and

Sojourners have good name recognition among mainstream Protestants. The *Century* will celebrate 125 years of publishing in 2008, nearly all of them under the same name. What *Sojourners* lacks in longevity it may make up for with the high profile of its top editor, author-activist Jim Wallis.

Which are the progressive magazines that have bit the dust recently? MacDonald names:

—*The Other Side* magazine, launched in 1965 as *Freedom Now*, which put out its last issue in September 2004;

—*Christian Social Action*, a 32-year venture of the United Methodist Church;

—the independent *Christian Network Journal*;

—*The Witness*, a self-described "feisty, opinionated journal since 1917," which lost a three-year cost-cutting battle this fall; and

—*Zion's Herald*, published by the Boston Wesleyan Society since 1833, which put out its last edition in May; it will resurface as *The Progressive Christian* in December.

"Though none of these publications ever became a household name, they did serve as recognized channels for disseminating ideas that were at once Christian and left-leaning, in politics or theology or both," wrote MacDonald. "*The Witness*, for example, critiqued the evils of capitalism. Readers of *The Other Side* soaked up arguments on issues from feminism to international peace."

MacDonald, a regular freelance writer for RNS and other outlets, indicated that each failing publication suffered from a combination of factors, including increased costs. Meanwhile *Sojourners* and the *Century* continue to thrive. As Shanley sees it, that success is due, at least in part, to excellent writing and sound marketing practices.