

Christians and the Media: Why can't we be friends?

by Dave Crampton

Christian leaders and journalists seem to have a mutual disrespect for each other. Christians often think journalists are unfriendly, and are thus suspicious of the media. The media think the church is insignificant but newsworthy when they preach outdated morals, when a church leader strays from traditional Christian doctrine or some other misdemeanour.

As we are currently seeing with the Catholic Church, sex scandals among clergy make especially good copy as church leaders are seen to be people that should be beyond reproach, despite being as human as anyone else. It's exciting when they fall.

But Christians are of the opinion that the media sees the church as irrelevant. They couldn't be more incorrect, but they could be more relevant in communicating their good stories. The media will get hold of the not so favourable news easily enough.

Most church leaders don't understand the media, but are keen for good copy. Likewise most journalists don't understand the Church and ignore it as much as possible unless there is a scandal or they have to do a story on church life. Both groups don't really want to understand or get to know each other. Christians are suspicious of the media while the journalists are cynical or sceptical of the church.

Many journalists say that Christian leaders have unrealistic expectations of what the media should cover in religion. They say these same leaders do not understand news values – i.e.: what makes news newsworthy.

This is often reflected in budgets of church denominations and Christian organizations. The money spent on PR in most Christian organizations is less than spent on evangelism and less than spent on advertising. PR can be both, but some use advertising as their PR and refuse to employ media liaison people even on a part time basis due to the cost. But a well-written news story in a daily paper can attract more attention than an advertisement.

Most religion stories are not the hard news that sells newspapers. Hard news is "what is happening, what has happened or what will happen". Most religion stories are soft news or analysis.

A journalist who covers the religion round – if a paper has one – is seen to be interested in the church but not of it. Like his colleagues, he may not think religion is important as religion is not the money-spinner that sports or political reporting is. Imagine a sports reporter who took that attitude, and maintained that sports was a total waste of time and the sports people would be better spending their time in, say, helping the poor. This illustrates the bias that journalists have against reporting religious news.

If a paper's religion reporter is a Christian, church leaders unreasonably expect a greater understanding of the church than secular journalists, but they are not willing to understand how the media works. Furthermore, Church leaders sometimes unfairly ask Christian journalists for copy before publication. Some Christian spokespeople even expect Christian journalists to put less spin against the church in their stories and are happy to criticise them when they spin the other way or even provide balance. This ensures the journalist sides with his media colleagues when there is a conflict with journalistic ethics and church leader's wishes.

One of the biggest fears for church leaders is that their comments will be misinterpreted or taken out of context. One of the most annoying things for a journalist is for a suspicious church leader to grant an interview, but then say at the end "don't quote me on that." You can be sure that they will – and probably pick the most inconvenient comment. The worst thing a Christian leader can do is say nothing to the media to avoid possible misunderstanding or criticism, as the opposing view will be reported with a small "no comment" from the Christian viewpoint to ensure balance. Thus the Christian viewpoint could also be misunderstood. We

must be clear communicators. It is not good enough merely to mean what we say – we must clearly say what we mean.

Some Christian leaders- the Pope being a classic example – suggest that the media should report the truth, not distort it. Sure, reporting should be based on the truth, but journalists put the emphasis on the news, not the truth. The news is what journalists write, the truth is what they should be told. The whole truth and news are not always the same, as the person being interviewed tells their perspective on the truth and the journalist packages it as news. That is why journalists interview several people for a story as they all have a different perspective of how they see the truth, or the story. If an interviewee makes a statement, it is reported, then the journalist gets a call like “but I didn’t say that”, what they often mean is “I didn’t mean that, or that was only part of what I said.” Sometimes my response, after looking at my shorthand book to see what they actually said, might be “why didn’t you say what you meant?”

But many journalists in the Christian media put too much spin in the church’s favour, often at the expense of the ethical requirement of balance. This especially occurs within denominational papers for reasons that have more to do with politics than news sense. The religious media – especially denominational publications - tends to down play conflict, whereas the secular media thrive on conflict and controversy. If religious media report on conflict, it is usually in a light that elevates the church against the “them” of “ism’s”, be it feminism, communism, secularism etc.

Right-leaning Christian spokespeople tend to understand the media to a lesser extent than their liberal counterparts. Liberals, on the other hand are more prolific religious commentators. Bot groups, however offer a skewed perspective of mainstream Christianity. But mainstream Christian leaders don’t often comment to the media. This results in the warping of the public’s perception of mainstream Christianity, as only the right and left elements of the faith are aired in the media.

The fact of the matter is that the Church needs the media more than the media needs the Church. Therefore church spokespeople must be less suspicious of reporters and more proactive in restoring and initiating relationships with journalists and media outlets - and story ideas - if they want to get any copy – let alone copy with a favourable spin. The press in this country do respect the freedom of speech. To an extent the press represents free speech, but we must remember it is the new editors, and chief reporters that determine what is news and it is up to church representatives to persuade them that their news is news they should print.

But many who have sincerely held beliefs that they feel they should alert media to are usually conservative, and often they are on the other end of the religious, social and political spectrum to the majority of journalists. And these journalists couldn’t care less what Christians thought unless it made for a spicy story.

But to get good copy, Christians need to cultivate positive working relationships with news editors and learn to write media releases. Christian organizations should not have to wait for the media to contact them for a story. They could be contacting the media directly via media releases. Larger organizations should consider employing a media liaison officer – and one who has good news sense, understands how the secular media works and knows what reporters want in stories and what they are likely to cover. They also need to know how to develop contacts and write media releases and must have the trust of church hierarchy who do not have a clue as to how the media works.

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