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Fuller Theological Seminary

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THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES



The Church and the Media

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Be Dressed and Ready

Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.

—Luke 12:35

WHEN A CHURCH of Christ preacher in Tennessee was shot this year by his wife, shocked church members were forced to respond to a hoard of reporters while under the extreme emotional stress of losing their minister and someone dear to them. An associate on the church staff managed to say that they forgave the wife—a Sunday School teacher whom they also loved. No church ought to appear unscathed by such a tragedy, but every church—large and small—should be prepared to deal with the media that will attempt to interpret such an event.

The purpose of this issue of *Theology, News & Notes* is to consider how the Church should build relationships with the media that often define our world to the world. This includes understanding the importance of a media relations plan that assures being prepared when called upon by the media in any circumstance, with particular emphasis on strategies for potential crises.

Perhaps dismissive thoughts come to mind: “It’s unlikely that I will ever be in a crisis situation where I am put under pressure from the media!” or “I have no plans to write for a well-known publication!” Church leaders *must* function as excellent communicators in our media-saturated world or take the risk that someone else—indifferent, ill-informed, or even hostile to the church—will do it for them.

The level of preparedness necessary to function successfully starts with knowledge about the media and the way it works. A certain amount of coaching is needed as well. This issue gathers the experiences of communication experts, among them years of experience as daily news reporters, media critics, and journalists for Christian publications. Universally, they extend this warning: *do not be caught off-guard*.

We start with a thoughtful article by Dean Nelson who introduces a basic understanding of not only *how* the media works but *who* the media is: part of the local church’s field of ministry, among other things. Never forget, says Nelson, that the media is made up of people who are often searching for more than a story. He begins with an inspiring story to

readjust some of the tendency to think of church and the media as natural enemies with irreconcilable differences. A lengthy sidebar, excerpted from Dan Fuller’s book on his father Charles, gives a glimpse into the radio ministry partly responsible for launching the vision of Fuller Theological Seminary and is a reminiscent glimpse into a different era of church and media relations.

Next, Denise Ferguson emphasizes positive media dealings in the larger context of community relations. She urges thoughtful consideration of the impact on a community of everything from bake sales to building plans, and using the media to successfully *inform* the local community as well as *win support*. Ferguson draws on her experience as a professional consultant to give a four-step community relations plan adaptable to a local church, no matter what size.

Diane Winston, from the University of Southern California, brings a wealth of experience as a reporter for major daily newspapers. She describes from the inside the way a reporter thinks and looks for a story, urging readers to realize that though goals may be different, they are not necessarily antagonistic. In the process, Winston reveals strategies for getting quoted and having a real impact on the society at large by emphasizing the importance of building personal relationships.

Deborah Morel reviews basic principles for healthy public relations by helping to define what constitutes a news story and how to bring it to the attention of the media. Morel advocates media relations plans suitable to size and goals, believing that no institution is too small to have a communication liaison. She offers hands-on knowledge of how to draft a news release or how to frame an event for maximum positive publicity.

Part of being prepared is having a plan for the unfortunate occasion of negative publicity. My article about image restoration strategies offers insights from organizations that have had to rebuild once-solid images from the fallout of questionable activities, hoping to restore public trust. While this is a humbling situation any institution hopes never to face, the article outlines strategic decision-making in potential crises. Again, advance preparation is key: the staff of every organization needs to identify potential issues and

form strategies for the future, since public opinion is often interpreted not by *actual* beliefs but by *perceptions* of those beliefs.

Fred Messick, veteran of media interviews on both sides of the microphone, advises how to field interviews with confidence. Most ministers were not trained as journalists, but that doesn’t diminish the need to tell a story and tell it well. Messick addresses those who avoid the media because they are intimidated or feel unskilled, and provides step by step ways to be prepared for any eventuality.

Not all engagement with the media should be reactionary. Ken Waters writes on how to use print media in a positive way to get a message into the marketplace, with particular emphasis on Christian media. Waters argues that publicity can be improved by such simple things as analyzing the gifts of various staff members and understanding the elements of introductory query letters.

Fuller master’s student and writer Drew Dyck reflects on what drives a writer to communicate and how the process serves the process of spiritual growth. He argues that the written word, especially in the form of more contemporary media, can foster a wider conversation within the Body of Christ.

Finally, a brief excerpt from the current book by Fuller

alumnus Shane Higgs acts as a thoughtful reflection on how the media shapes our thinking.

The Church cannot hope, without preparation, to be captured in the best light when it comes to media exposure. Knowledge of the media’s inner workings—of news releases, query letters, media relations plans, or successful television interviews—as well as relationships with those who make up the media is a vital part of good image stewardship as well as enlightened ministry.

For long enough the Church and her ministries have had suspicious, even adversarial relationships to the media. There are deeper purposes for understanding the media and using it articulately, however, as hinted at in a 1996 interview by the magazine *The Nation* with Susan Faludi:

The information the modern media provide leaves people feeling useless not because it’s so bleak but because it’s so trivial, it doesn’t inform at all; it only bombards with random data bits, faux trends and surveys that reinforce pre-conceptions.

It is our responsibility *and* our opportunity to be savvy about media use as a way of informing and inspiring—not toward uselessness, but toward purposeful lives. ■

THEOLOGY NEWS & NOTES

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THE MINISTRY OF FULLER

Fuller Theological Seminary, embracing the Schools of Theology, Psychology, and Intercultural Studies, is an evangelical, multid denominational, international, and multiethnic community dedicated to the preparation of men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church. Under the authority of Scripture it seeks to fulfill its commitment to ministry through graduate education, professional development, and spiritual formation. In all of its activities, including instruction, nurture, worship, service, research, and publication, Fuller Theological Seminary strives for excellence in the service of Jesus Christ, under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Father.



Media as Extension of Ministry

A WELL-KNOWN national news reporter was given an assignment by a magazine a few years ago to tell the story of the megachurch phenomenon. She did her backgrounding on several different churches and then did what any good reporter would do: she called from her office in Washington, DC, to ask if she could visit their worship services, sit in on some board meetings, interview the pastors.

This reporter did not have personal background into the world of evangelical Christianity. Even so, she told me she was stunned by the response to her calls. It was mostly hostility.

“Why would we talk to you?” most of the pastors and church leaders said. “You’ll only twist the stories to fit your agenda.” From there

the conversations deteriorated into diatribes against what the church leaders felt was a godless, left-leaning, pro-atheist news media.

Religious leaders have unique challenges when it comes to dealing with the news media, and the first is that they must confront their own biases. If the leaders assume the reporters are out to get them, then the leaders

will be defensive and closed-minded. There won’t be much honest information sharing. And, speaking as a reporter myself, I know that when sources appear closed-minded and defensive, I assume they are trying to hide something. I then begin to mistrust my sources, who already mistrust me. How accurate and helpful will my article be?

In the case of my Washington journalist friend, one pastor was open with her. More than open, in fact. He welcomed her. He not only told her she could come to

worship services and board meetings, he added that his family had an extra room in his home and invited her to stay with them. She declined to stay with the family, but she did share several meals at the family’s home and observed them in their daily behavior. The family and the board prayed for this reporter, prayed for the article she was writing, and loved her.

When it the time came for her to return to Washington, the pastor asked her if she had everything she wanted for her story. Then he asked her if she had everything she wanted for her life. Fearing what she said was certain professional suicide, she accepted the love of Christ for her that day. She still wrote her story. It was tough, fair, and accurate. As it should have been.

Fairness Is Not Always Popular

This brings up another challenge for religious leaders when it comes to dealing with the news media. Fairness is not always in the interests of religious leaders. One of the reasons Mike Wallace, the feared investigative reporter from television’s *60 Minutes*, was accused of being a “self-hating Jew” was that he did even-handed stories about Arab countries—even Palestine. Likewise, when Steve Rabey, a Christian, was religion editor at a Colorado Springs newspaper, the most vehement criticism he got was from other Christians when he treated stories with fairness. By fairness, I mean he included multiple sides of issues, supported his stories with facts instead of pastors’ unverifiable quotes, and employed his own skepticism.

When one church badgered him about wanting coverage of an evangelist in town for a revival—but he chose not to cover it as a news event—he received the following message on his voicemail at work: “Steve, this is Satan. You’re doing a real good job for me.”

Reporters Are Not Cheerleaders for Jesus

This thought brings up another challenge for religious

leaders regarding their relationship with the news media: There must be news *value* in order to attract attention from the news media. An evangelist coming to town is probably not news, unless the evangelist is Billy Graham or some other noteworthy person. My observation is that religious groups want news coverage for primarily two reasons. The first is for personal validation. If the news media covers an anti-abortion march, then organizers can feel better about what they have done. But if the media don’t cover it, it may feel like it wasn’t worth the effort. So, the bias of the media gets complained about some more. That proposition is fundamentally flawed, in my opinion.

“Why should we do this event (e.g., march, food program, protest, blanket distribution, etc.) if the news media don’t come?” they ask. Why, indeed? Perhaps it is enough that our Lord tells us to. If a church does the work of the Lord in order to make a name for their church, what do you think our Lord would say to that?

The second reason religious groups want news coverage is to get free publicity. My advice? Buy an ad.

Criteria for Coverage

The news media will try to cover anything that is *truly* newsworthy. With diminishing readership of newspapers, though, and continuing fragmentation of broadcast audiences, and the tribalizing of internet audiences, most news organizations have fewer and fewer reporters on the street and less space to tell their stories. Still, news is news, and something will be covered every day.

There are seven traditional criteria by which decisions are made on what is newsworthy. These criteria are not in a specific order, because their importance varies with other criteria, such as whether it is a slow news day, whether the competition might also be covering it, and whether similar kinds of stories have already been done recently. Here are the criteria:

1. Impact/Consequence – Will this event/idea affect a large number of people? The Pope’s arrival will affect a lot of people. Your church’s car wash won’t. The smaller the number affected, the less interesting it will be to a reporter.
2. Conflict – While this is the very kind of news you might want to avoid, it is, quite frankly, the most interesting. A conflict between a congregation and its parent denomination, a conflict with conventional wisdom, or a conflict with neighbors over a building expansion is interesting. It’s not usually news when everyone is getting along.
3. Novelty – How unusual is the event or trend you want

covered? Are churches starting to use hymnals again? Are students spending their spring breaks serving the poor instead of getting drunk at the beach? That’s unusual for a lot of modern Christianity. I think churches get into some trouble here because they might do something bizarre just to get news media attention. And when they do, they wonder why they are considered freaks by the rest of the community. Firsts, lasts, and onlys are significant to the media. One analogy, however cliché, makes the point well: no one is interested in how many planes took off and landed safely at the airport yesterday. But we *are* interested in the one that didn’t.

4. Proximity – Is it happening within the news media’s readership or viewership reach? Will it affect a significant number of the local audience? (see #1). This isn’t the biggest selling point, but it *is* mandatory.
5. Timeliness – If it happened a week or a month or maybe even a couple of days ago, it has probably lost its news appeal. But if your church is tying an activity with something that is on the national agenda, for instance, immigration, that kind of timeliness will make an enormous difference. Social justice issues get far more serious attention locally when there is already a national or international story attached.
6. Prominence – This is my least favorite of the criteria, because it only seems to add to the sick celebrity worship we already have. But the reality is, if there is a person of prominence involved, it is more newsworthy than if there isn’t.
7. Human Interest – Some stories are interesting simply because they’re interesting and readers/viewers can connect with them. There are some universal themes such as overcoming great odds, or doing unusual acts of service or kindness. If there is an individual who represents the human question or dilemma, chances are he or she is newsworthy.

Advice for Successful Relationships with the Media

My advice to people of faith who want a better relationship with their local news media is the following:

1. Get to know its members. Take them to breakfast or lunch or coffee if their local ethics codes allow it. Meet with them on their own turf. Invite them to yours. It’s harder to hate someone when you’ve met them and asked about their own lives.
2. Pitch them on legitimate story ideas (see above criteria). They know when you’re looking for free publicity and when you have a story that would interest their readers.

SYNOPSIS

The seeds that are sown when a person consents to be the subject of a feature article can not be calculated in advance. Nelson magnifies this truth with numerous examples that touch the heart with God’s power to use us in his work when we are open to speak.

Dean Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. He has written for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Sojourners*, *Science and Spirit*, *Christianity Today*, and the *Wittenberg Door*. His most recent book, his tenth, was released in 2006, called *The Power of Serving Others*. It is written with Gary Morsch of Heart to Heart International, and published by Berrett-Koehler of San Francisco. Nelson is a Senior Fellow in Journalism with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.



3. Compliment them and their editors/news directors when the organization does a story you like. They have a mathematical formula for calculating how many readers/viewers each call or letter or e-mail represents. It's in the thousands for each contact. Complain if you must, but it's far more effective and encouraging if you praise a story that is well done. Others will follow.
4. If you are interviewed for a story, feel free to ask to see your quotes before they are used. It's a reasonable request and most reporters will give you that courtesy. Most will not, however, let you see their stories before they appear in print or on the air. My observation is that usually, when sources say they were misquoted, they really mean one of two things: either they wish they hadn't said it, or they felt their quotes were taken out of context. Rarely are they flat-out misquoted. More often, they are trying to cover for their embarrassment.
5. Pray for the reporters/editors by name. Ask God to bless them in their vocation of bearing witness.

In Conclusion

A final anecdote to bookend with the one at the beginning: During the Iranian hostage crisis of the 1970s, a Los

Angeles television reporter, Janine Tartaglia, was assigned to a family from Pasadena whose son was among the hostages. The parents were pastors at Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene. Rather than view Janine as an intrusion, the Lee family opened their lives and home to her. Janine was raised Catholic, but had stopped being a participant years ago. The language of love and mercy and forgiveness was foreign to Janine, but this is what she witnessed consistently as she followed the Lee family for more than a year. She saw them in very dark moments, when it appeared that all hope was lost. She attended the worship service at the church when the announcement came that the hostages had been set free. In that moment, with the camera rolling next to her, Janine knew she wanted what she had seen in the Lee family.

Janine remained a prominent television journalist for a few more years, then attended seminary and became a theology professor at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. She is now married, goes by Janine Metcalf, and is pastor of the El Cajon Church of the Nazarene outside of San Diego.

Not all reporters will find Christ as a result of dealing with you. That's not the question. The question is, will they even see him? ■

The Media Impact of Charles E. Fuller

This excerpt came from "Washington Day by Day," a column that ran in three hundred newspapers in the mid-1940s. Daniel Fuller shared this newspaper clipping from his research with his readers to show the impact of his dad's radio program:

IN A WORLD with war and crime writing the annals of greed and violence in the blood of countless victims, it is restful to hear an old-fashioned preacher preach old-time religion in the good old-fashioned way. Coming out of California every Sunday evening, this Gospel hour of the radio breaks through the din and clamor of swing-whoopee, crooning, and news broadcasts to almost startle a weary world with its unretouched truths.

This earnest, pleading Baptist preacher who exhorts a bizarre world in a manner simple and devoid of sophism is the Rev. Charles E. Fuller. . . . The radio sets of blasé Washingtonians pick Evangelist Fuller's soul-searching messages from the gentle autumn breezes that blow out

of the night across the Potomac lush-lands and over the low-hung islands which dot historic Chesapeake Bay. The congregation's singing of such time-tried hymns as "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," and "Sweet Hour of Prayer," comes like a ground swell from a new and better world, and by the air waves reaches comforting hands across all the North American continent and to the islands of the sea, bringing the new-old story of religion to the weary heart not only here in sophisticated Washington but to mansions and hovels, homes and brothels, prisons and cocktail lounges the country over. It steals into rooms made restless by the unquiet slumber of sick life, hovers over the cabins in the cotton, and filters into the lumbermen's camps in the great North words."

—As quoted in Daniel P. Fuller's *The Story of Charles E. Fuller: Give the Winds a Mighty Voice* (Waco: Word Books, 1972), 141.

Building Positive Community Relations

A POLICE-ESCORTED parade wound its way to Traders Point Christian Church's new \$16 million home, located on the far northwest side of Indianapolis. After two failed attempts to obtain zoning approval over more than ten years, the church finally moved to a 160,000 sq. ft. facility that now houses its 2,000 weekly attendees. The obstacles: Community members' concerns about how a big church might affect neighboring residential areas.

"It's been quite a journey," said Senior Minister Howard Brammer. "After a decade of prayerful search for available land upon which to relocate, God has led us to this site. God had a plan all along. We're just getting to it."¹

The Importance of Community Relations Planning

The purchase, zoning, and building process is just one context in which a church's positive community relations are essential. The goal of community relations is simple: to operate an organization in ways that please the local community and earn its approval and support.² At the heart of the process is effective two-way communication, in which the community speaks to your church about what it wants and needs, and your church listens carefully and responds in ways the community can understand and appreciate.

The impressions and opinions formed about your church by members of the community affect your ability to operate effectively, as the above example demonstrates. Impressions about your church will largely determine whether local residents will visit a worship service or program, or will openly resist church programs or building plans.

Good relations with the community are just as important to your church as effective leadership, organization, and member-driven programs. A good community relations program can supplement these elements and increase effectiveness as you attempt to serve the community, and as you attempt to work with the local media to communicate your church's messages accurately and positively.

A community relations program is worth the investment, and it requires the sustained effort of church staff

and leadership to be effective. Sometimes expenses are minimal, such as working with staff to be attentive and friendly in dealing with community members or being a good neighbor by beautifying church property with attractive landscaping. However, when purchasing land, seeking zoning approval, and building, the stakes are high, and substantial financial investment may be required for technical and legal experts. Yarrington recommends a five-part community relations program of fact-finding, developing messages, strategic planning, communicating, evaluating, and interpreting results.³

Five key questions must be employed in your community relations program:

1. How does the community perceive your church?
2. What information do you need to communicate to them?
3. What is the best way to communicate your messages?
4. How should you evaluate the results?
5. How do you use what you've learned?

STEP 1: How does the community perceive your church?

Within the local community, there are specific groups of people, or publics, with whom your church seeks to have good relationships, such as neighbors, nearby resident-visitors, elected and appointed government officials, schools, hospitals, and community groups, such as environmental activist groups and neighborhood associations. It would be beneficial to ask church staff and leadership members to brainstorm a list of relevant publics in your area and prioritize them to best utilize your resources.

After you're armed with a list of priority community publics, or groups that are most important to your church, you're ready for step one in the community relations plan:

SYNOPSIS

Community relations can be a struggle even when things seem to be going our way. Ferguson illuminates just what is necessary for coming out on top of this tension in the community marketplace.

Denise Ferguson is professor of Journalism and Public Relations and chair of the Communication Arts Department at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana. In addition to teaching newswriting, magazine writing, public relations writing, and public relations introductory and advanced courses, she serves as advisor to the campus newspaper, *The Sojourn*. She has several years of experience in professional public relations in higher education, corporate, and nonprofit organizations.

fact-finding to learn what the community thinks about your organization and what information needs to be communicated to it. Research accurate information about them. Go to the library, look in community directories, read the local newspaper, contact community agencies, and attend local school board, town hall, and city council meetings to learn who the power players are and the prevailing attitudes and future issues facing the community. Build a file for each public, and collect news clips about local organizations and leaders. If your community has a planning agency, obtain the latest plans and reports. As you gather and study this information, you may be able to get a feel for how these publics might feel about your church or their openness or opposition to a Christian worldview. These informal impressions will be supplemented by more formal survey techniques and your more direct, involved experiences with these groups.

Few churches have the resources or the need to know what everyone in the community knows or thinks about them. Survey techniques can help you find out what specific, priority publics know about your church and their attitudes toward it. You can either tie in your study with a survey that is conducted regularly with an existing sample of people from the community, or draw your own sample and do your own survey in the form of a questionnaire or series of interviews.⁴ Your questions must be clear and concise, with responses that are easy to tabulate (e.g. yes/no or multiple choice), with a few “write-in” questions for more detailed information. Once you have the questions drafted, test them on a few people to make sure they are easily understood and ask what you’re wanting to know. Also include basic information such as age, marital status, and sex. Make sure that your questions can allow you to break out the publics that are most important to you. If your survey is done well, the results will indicate what your community thinks and what information you need to communicate and to whom.⁵

STEP 2: What information do you need to communicate to the community?

Now that you have a good idea of relationships that you want to develop and maintain, and have collected adequate, accurate information about them and what they know about your church, look at your church from their perspectives. Developing clear, consistent explanations for why your church is located in this community, its purpose (including a general mission statement and more specific objectives and programs), what it contributes to the community, and who benefits from these contributions and may be interested in your church services and programs, will benefit your church’s overall public relations efforts.

You may need to convey one overriding message to your community publics, or a number of different things either to the community as a whole or to specific community groups. Due to limited staffing and resources, you’ll need to ask yourself: What communications are most important? Which ones have the highest priority and should be done first? Begin drafting representative messages, perhaps using a common theme or basic themes that tie them together and present consistency and unity. Use language that is easily understood and has meaning for your audience. As you rework your messages, ask people who are representative of the public you’re trying to reach if they understand the message and the meaning you intend. As these messages take shape, begin thinking about how they can be best communicated. If the information is complex or requires a significant amount of text, you may choose to convey it through articles, pamphlets, or audiovisual presentations of some length. If the messages are simple and concise, they may lend themselves to radio or TV spots or billboards. If the public you need to reach is specific and you need to develop a more personal relationship, personal visits, a meeting or luncheon, or cooperative project may be more effective. Ask yourself: What is the best way we can convey the information we need to communicate to the people we desire to reach?

STEP 3: What is the best way to communicate your message?

After you have identified what information you need to communicate and have begun outlining the basic message or messages, you’re ready for step three in the community relations plan: planning how best to reach each public with the message it needs and selecting the media that will be most effective in conveying the message and reaching the desired public.⁶ The mass media are effective for reaching large numbers of people in your community. Your job is to familiarize yourself with them—the type of information they carry and the format in which it is conveyed. Knowing the types of information the media need and helping them obtain it will result in getting your church’s messages out to your community and developing positive relationships with your local media—a public that is vital to your church.

First, if you’re not a regular consumer of your local news media, familiarize yourself with local newspapers, radio, and TV stations people in your community have access to. Study the newspaper(s) that focus on the community where your church is located and which you want to reach: the daily newspaper(s), weekly newspaper(s), community newspaper(s), and shopper(s). Ask the newspaper to send its advertising rate card, and find out the circulation and any other information about its readership and their demo-

graphics, as well as procedures for submitting news releases and feature articles. News releases, brief calendar listings of upcoming church programs and events, and letters to the editor written by church leaders are some of the more common and effective tools for conveying a church’s messages via the newspaper to the community as a whole. Just as you studied local newspapers, study local radio and TV stations. Read their schedules, and listen and view them to identify the amount of news broadcast and special programs carried for community events and involvement.⁶ As you did with the newspapers, ask for advertising rates, how to submit news items, and the station’s policies on and needs for public service announcements (PSAs).

Each type of media has strengths and weaknesses. In selecting which media to use to convey your church’s messages, consider the following questions:

1. Which media reach the most people?
2. Which media reach those we need to reach most?
3. Which media do people actually utilize most?
4. Which media fit the message we wish to send—in terms of the images we wish to be conveyed?
5. Which media will the message best fit in terms of desired length, use of visuals, etc.?
6. Which media will provide the most likely access—where will it most likely be printed or broadcast?

This step in the community relations plan involves developing communications that will carry the message, interest the audiences at which they are aimed, and fit the media that will carry them.⁷ If your message is targeted for local newspaper readers, you might write news releases announcing upcoming events or programs, for example, a well-known out-of-town speaker coming to your church. It’s important to follow the conventional Associated Press format and writing style for newspapers, known as the inverted pyramid, with the information that is most important at the top and least important information toward the bottom. Or, one of your ministers may wish to write a letter to the editor or column for the opinion section. Because churches are involved in the life of the community by employing people and serving residents, there will be opportunities for interesting feature articles for local newspapers, magazines, radio, or TV. Look for interesting personal or “human interest” stories, situations, and happenings that speak to current issues and trends in the community. You may determine that it is important to control the wording, placement, timing, and frequency of your message and pay for advertising space in local print media or broadcast time in radio or TV, for example, to

promote an upcoming Christmas or Easter musical concert. The church’s website is an ideal outlet for providing unlimited information. Other non-mass media ways to communicate with your publics and to encourage community residents’ participation include special events, such as Vacation Bible School, and community projects, such as neighborhood beautification days. In addition, church publications such as newsletters and postcards can be sent to community members.

STEP 4: How should you evaluate the results?

After your messages have been conveyed to the relevant publics via the appropriate communication vehicles, you need to evaluate how well the messages are being received and how effective they are in meeting your objectives—step four.⁸ How do you evaluate what you’ve done? How will you judge what worked well and what could be better? Revisit the questions you asked yourself in your initial fact-finding and message formation: Did your messages reach the publics you wanted to reach? Were they the right messages? Did the publics understand the messages? Did the messages increase public understanding, acceptance, and support? Measure the messages’ effectiveness by whether your initial objectives were met, for example, if you were promoting a marriage seminar, what was the community participation? Conducting a post-messages survey will help determine the effectiveness of your messages and the extent to which your community publics understood your messages and their attitudes toward your church. A more comprehensive and formal method of evaluation is the external audit, conducted by public relations firms and individual counselors.

STEP 5: How do you use what you have learned?

After you have evaluated your community relations plan, report your findings to church leadership. Provide an overview of your community relations plans, what has been accomplished, and how that is going to help further the church’s goals and, most important, God’s kingdom. ■

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Redeeming Media Relations

It seems that some delusions will never die. One such delusion is the notion that messages can be put into any available medium of transmission at one end and come out the other end as the same message—unscathed, untainted, untouched.

—David J. Hesselgrave in *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*

What is the most important advice you have for the Church on establishing a good rapport with the media?

My best kernel of advice is to understand how the media works and to accept that its goals are different than yours. Then decide how to make that work for you.

When I was a reporter, I usually developed collegial relationships with a few clergy. That made it easier to go to them when I had to write a controversial story. They trusted me not to misquote or take their opinions out of context. I had a deeper appreciation for their views than I would have if I called a stranger for a quick quote. Having a relationship built on understanding and trust makes a difference.

Many religious people see the media in black or white. Either it's a means to "get the message out," which is not the media's job, or it's "out to get them" which is not the media's purpose.

Journalists are on the lookout for stories. If you know how to translate what you do into a story you are much more apt to use the media effectively.

On the other hand, if the media is coming to you because it already has a story, then you must decide how you want to be portrayed. Not surprisingly, many narratives have a

religious theme which include typical storylines about sin, sacrifice, love, and redemption. But even though the narratives have a religious dimension, they may not be framed exactly as you might like.

What does a reporter want when gathering information from an interviewee?

The nature of the interaction between a reporter and an interviewee usually depends on the context of the call. If a reporter is calling because the word is out that you cheated on your wife, you are going to feel differently than if she wants an opinion on a theological question or is profiling your Vacation Bible School.

If you have done something wrong, it is best to respond nondefensively. If you are defensive, a reporter will sense it and assume you are hiding something. It's best to be straightforward and to control your side of the story. Most times, a reporter that wants to get a story will find a way to do it with or without your help. As an alternative, think about the message you want give and how you can control it.

Bottom line: a reporter wants clear and accurate information—whether the story is about the biblical position on the death penalty, trends in liturgical music, or how the church treasurer stole the building fund.

Are there disadvantages in giving complete cooperation?

That depends on your perspective. When a person has done something wrong such as steal money, commit adultery, or molest a child, they should not be allowed to hide behind a ministerial collar—I think that reporters should write about it. However, if you are unfairly charged, perhaps you should seek a lawyer's advice about talking to the media. Either way, a diligent reporter will get the story sooner or later and if you want your side told, *you* have to tell it.

It's different if the story isn't about a misdeed: if a reporter wants your opinion on gay marriage or the environment, and you have something to say, then call back in a timely manner—*after* you've decided what points you want

to make. (If you would rather not comment, it's polite to call and say so.) A reporter is looking for a sound bite, for a pithy and interesting statement. If you ramble, you are a lot less likely to be quoted. Before you talk, jot down the points you want to make, but be aware that nine-tenths of what you say is not going to make it into the story because there is not enough space (or time if it is for television or radio). You may give a brilliant analysis of the Bible's stand on homosexual behavior, but that probably won't be in the story because the reporter does not have the room. That is why it's crucial to speak clearly and concisely.

What about the fear that an interviewer will back you into a corner or take one comment and magnify it?

Some of those fears are justified; however, you always can say, "I don't want to answer that," or, "I don't agree with that question," or, "I think I would phrase it this way," or, "I think that you are missing something." You also can go off the record, which means you don't want to be quoted directly, or you can speak on background, which is giving information that you do not want the reporter to use but is important to know. Always remember that you have as much power in the interaction as the reporter. The reporter is coming to you for help (but don't let the reporter "seduce" you into giving more help than you should!).

Treating an interview as a conversation, an exchange of information, is helpful because the reporter can help you get your message out. When I wrote a book about The Salvation Army, I was struck by its founder William Booth's approach to publicity. Booth's credo was "Attract attention!" He welcomed any kind of publicity, good or bad, because it put the Army's name before the public. There's truth to that; if people read about you, they may want to know more about you.

Sometimes it seems to the interviewee that a comment has been magnified out of proportion. Reporters don't have sufficient time or space to tell what *you* think is the whole story. Instead, they try to capture the most salient point (or points). It's two different perspectives. Your best defense is to express your main points succinctly and powerfully.

Is there a particular religious figure that you think has gotten a bad rap or even is presented in an accurate description but is not the example to follow?

I am always surprised by Pat Robertson's comments. I am not sure if he has an underlying strategy or if he is following William Booth's dictum: "Attract attention!" There is a problem, however, because now reporters go to him to get something that is off the wall. He is extremely quotable and

if his goal is to get his name out, he has succeeded. However, if I were a Christian minister, I would be irritated that the press allows him to speak for me because I don't think most of his ideas are widely shared.

When I was reporting in Dallas, several pastors were rumored to have committed misdeeds. I was very impressed when one minister, who was accused of adultery, held a news conference to apologize to his wife and his church. He accepted responsibility and that was it! What struck me was that it was clean and it was over fast. This was unlike stories that went on for days and days because someone who was accused of something stonewalled or denied it. If there is truth to a rumor, you usually can't hide it forever. You can control the situation by confronting it. That's a bitter pill for some—though it *can* be a good redemption story.

Do you think that the idea of "getting attention" is outdated?

I don't think the idea of attracting attention is outdated. In different ways, it has worked for Pastor Bill Hybels at megachurch Willow Creek Community Church (in South Barrington, IL) and Pastor Rick Warren at Saddleback Church (in Lake Forest, CA). They both did something different that attracted folks. Christian music, Christian films, and Christian books do the same thing. Look at the global impact of Mel Gibson's 2004 movie *The Passion of the Christ*. *There's* a film that attracted attention.

Sometimes new outreaches seem questionable. My students found a website, started by former sex industry workers, that used sexual come-ons to attract viewers. Interestingly, The Salvation Army used sex, or gender, a lot in its early days to attract folks, too. (The movement drew attention—and was criticized widely—for allowing women to preach.) Here in Los Angeles, many churches integrate their worship with contemporary music and film and have websites that are very interactive. But that's preaching to the choir. Those ministries who want to reach the unconverted have to be bold.

What forms do you think that boldness should take?

Religious nonprofit organizations seem to do a lot of direct mail. While that is not a bad thing, the possibilities provided by new technology are exciting. Podcasting seems really smart. Websites, too, are a great way to present information and attract new people. As a whole, religious groups—whether that's schools, churches, nonprofits—need to break out of the box and take advantage of the technology in the culture. The same "kernel of advice" applies, however, to any media: know how it works and how to make it work for you. ■

SYNOPSIS

Diane Winston fields questions about her time as a reporter and what it means to research not just an article but the truth. Her answers provide in-depth insights into the expectations of a writer when he or she is in the process of crafting a story.

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What Makes the News: Identifying and Promoting Your News Story

YOUR CHURCH has an arts festival on Saturday and you'd like to see it covered by the local papers. What is unique and special about your event above others that are similar? Put another way: A reporter wants to have the pulse of the community and *you* have things to publicize in the media—can this be a match made in heaven?

All organizations, religious or not, who want positive coverage in the media need to look at publicity as a process to be understood realistically from beginning to end—from press release to final interview. The communication liaison must know how much control is possible over the delivery of the message when considering the media, and specifically how each medium might function for good for your organization. Many factors impact this assessment. It

is important to be aware of the receptivity within the culture for messages from churches and religious organizations. For example, the Christian Coalition got very little press coverage when they first began. It was not until it was clear that they had political clout to change the outcome of an election that they started to get massive media coverage. If your desires for media coverage are not being met, it may not

be bias against your organization but rather a limited space designated for religious news.

Uncontrolled or Controlled Media

Some publications maintain integrity by placing content under the strict control of their editors. You must recognize that your news is not the right fit for all publications, but even if you do submit an article for publication, it's likely that your submissions will be subject to editorial discrimination and revision. These specialized media, when

you are not the editor of content, would fall into the category of "uncontrolled media"; you do not have the final say about what goes into the publication. It is sometimes difficult when another person gets to decide *whether* or not to use your written material, and you don't even get veto power on *how* they decide to use it. On the other hand, magazines, brochures, newsletters, and videos that you produce and distribute are "controlled," because you decide when, where, and how to deliver the message.

Interviews

Two rules to live by when giving an interview: be yourself and be prepared. It's important to be aware of your own natural style and be comfortable with it, especially if the interview is being recorded or videotaped. Be aware of body language, facial expressions, general rapport with the interviewer, and focusing on the part of the story that you want to tell. Be natural—do not put on an act.

Understand the importance of being prepared. Anticipate the questions you might be asked, and be sure you have concise, confident answers. You know what you want to say—spend some time getting your messages clear in your mind. Have printed information available to prevent errors. This preparation should be enabling, not paralyzing. This is your story: that means *you* are in control, with more power than you think. Restrict yourself to two or three points you want to make. Think of yourself doing the interviewer's work—prepare a headline or sound bite for each message. The interviewer is after a story: give them the one you want them to have by giving your quotes and sound bites life. Understand they are busy, don't be offended if you are rescheduled, and don't hesitate to reschedule if you are not ready. Here is a good maxim: Underpromise and overdeliver.

News Releases

For churches, well-written news releases are a must, but once they are in the hands of an editor, the process is out of

your control. The way you wrote the release might amuse the editor and he or she might print it as you sent it—but *don't bet on it*. The editor may give the assignment of rewriting to the reporter who has the "religion beat." Since at least 75 percent of news releases received by a given publication are simply thrown in the trash, you should be pleasantly surprised if that does *not* happen and your information ends up in print at all.

Press releases can convey time-sensitive information, but they are not meant to tell everything. Rather, they should be designed to get the relevant people interested. Make sure the gatekeepers at the various media think your news is exciting!

For the sake of brevity, some organizations compose a list of pertinent information in the form of a "news tip sheet" that alerts editors to possible news or feature stories. In addition, you can initiate calls directly to a newspaper to see if they would cover key events—press conferences, ribbon cuttings, and groundbreakings. Getting attention is a long shot since it is up to editors to decide whether or not to assign reporters. Having the event covered as you would have wished is yet another long shot, since reporter perspectives invariably differ. However, if the event is well planned, and your plan for involving the media is strategic, news coverage should reflect it.

Specific Messages

When a church prepares publicity for the mass media, they rarely maintain any control with regard to the timing of the delivery or the exact details of the message. Information about an institution, product, or person that appears as *news* in newspapers, magazines, radio, or television is used at the discretion of news editors, and only so much room is allotted. It may be used in any context or not at all. An acceptable news release must be submitted in the style familiar to the particular medium, and in a form that matches the technology of the medium. Awareness of these two elements—style and technological form—is important to know of each medium you approach if you expect coverage.

Much of the bad publicity an organization gets can be attributed to errors that they committed themselves: poor planning, ineffective communication, or generally bad policies. One way to eliminate "poor planning" is to add a media item to each staff meeting and ask, "is there anything we are doing that needs better distribution to the community?" Different staff members have different fields of expertise, and local media should be made aware of this information. Daily newspaper reporters throw away as

much as 80 to 90 percent of the news releases they get, not necessarily because the information is bad but because the releases themselves are not usable—often incomplete or with ill-thought-out pertinence to general news needs.

The following general tips will help avoid the simplest of reasons for your news releases not getting the attention they deserve: (1) make sure that the information you offer is appropriate to the medium; (2) make sure the content and style are above reproach; (3) make sure the news is timely; and (4) make sure you give the name and phone number of the contact person.

Good Working Relationships

Good working relationships with media personnel are always important, but they are *crucial* when they can facilitate, impede, or even destroy a public relations program. The secret of success in placing publicity is to develop good working relationships by knowing and anticipating the needs of the media.

Be proactive and build relations with the media. Know what kinds of stories they carry and how features are handled. When talking to them, ask how and when is the best time to contact the reporter. Make sure the media source knows that your organization can provide expert information on various religious topics. Accept that reporters are always busy and leave clear specific messages when you call. Give them enough information that the story can write itself. Do not, however, be ambushed by a reporter. If you are not ready, feel free to reschedule a phone call if you are not ready to talk. Keep on top of when the newspaper changes reporter assignments so you always know the current person you would have communication with concerning your organization.

Conclusion

Finally, to recap, here is a helpful hierarchy for arranging concise releases in the order of important information: (1) include the most important answers to who, what, when, where, why, and how questions; (2) supply key quotes, supporting evidence, and details; (3) give supporting facts, explanations, and more quotes; (4) give alternative explanations with more supporting quotes; (5) list pertinent but least important details. You are providing the most accurate information to be conveyed to that medium's public, telling the truth in an articulate manner.

A reporter needs certain ingredients for a story. If you know what those ingredients are, you will know how you can help yourself and the reporter at the same time, and you will also get your stories to the right media sources. ■

SYNOPSIS

Sometimes churches shy away from sending out formal news releases when it is really a very simple process. Morel makes the process seem so seamless that there should be no fear in attempting to place key articles in the daily newspaper.

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Reputations and Image Restoration Strategies

Publicity, publicity, publicity is the greatest moral factor and force in our public life.

—Joseph Pulitzer, newspaper editor and publisher

difference between what we do is, we tell true stories and other people tell make-believe stories.

—Don Hewitt, executive producer, *60 Minutes*

YOU CAN COUNT on Sears” was a catchy corporate slogan until the day a leading Department of Consumer Affairs director publicly added, “I’m here to tell you, in auto repair, you *cannot*.” At that point, a viable motto became a bombshell in need of immediate defense.¹ In 1992, the auto shops of Sears were accused of adding unneeded repairs to customer invoices. Obviously, Sears’ reputation needed serious strategies for damage repair. It was not the first time for a large company to have accusations leveled at them—the media firestorm surrounding the misbehavior of

Image Restoration

What of those times when—whether at fault or not—the image of an organization becomes tarnished and needs to be restored? Image restoration research is a relatively new pursuit in the field of public relations, with case studies that include such recent events as the Exxon Valdez incident or ancient cases such as Jesus’ impact on his times. The purpose is to analyze the interesting ways people try to respond appropriately in times of “key occurrences.”² When an accusation occurs, restoration of an individual or corporate reputation is necessary for self-protection and survival.

Types of Strategies

Offensive behaviors leave organizations open for attack. Image vulnerability also results from events that are either beyond an organization’s control or are labeled as misjudgment. The question is, *what is the best way to handle the event and still maintain the favor that preceded the event?* Naturally, in times of image damage, responses should be based on the highest impact and benefit to a bruised reputation, with the least financial and emotional cost.

Scholarly literature elaborates on ways to respond to a variety of different crises, drawing from case studies of airplane crashes, product tampering, and lapses in presidential leadership.³ This research provides handles for setting in motion attack-defense ideas with the intention of “image restoration.”

An attack to the reputation comes with two punches: a charge of responsibility to the accused and a statement interpreting the offensiveness of the act. Image repair strategies are similarly two-pronged. Toward the first, the charge of responsibility, secular responses usually employ one of two general strategies: denial or evasion of responsibility. Neither

of these responses, however, is appropriate for an institution that purports to stand for truth. Churches require special attention since they are perceived to be above reproach. In any case, the first in the strategic series of reactions is to address blame—who deserves it and how much?

Publicity is a great purifier because it sets in action the forces of public opinion, and in this country public opinion controls the courses of the nation.

—Charles Evans Hughes, American jurist and statesman (1862–1948)

When there is in-depth debate on the offensiveness of the accusation, damage control may still be a possibility. Immediate indication of corrective action can reduce reaction to the offense. Denial can be employed in two ways: addressing whether or not the act was harmful or even whether it ever occurred. President Bill Clinton’s rhetorical dexterity in this strategy, with reference to the charges of an affair with Monica Lewinsky, made this defense famous. Culpability can be absolved by strong denial with blame shifted to a third party, but this type of scapegoating is difficult for an audience to accept and may not result in restoration of the image anyway. (This is probably the worst strategy for a church to take.) One way of evading responsibility is called “defeasibility,” where the accused asserts that there was a lack of information or control (e.g., “it was out of our hands!”). Yet another strategy is to assert that the wrongful act was an accident: the accused claims that the offensive act was done with good intentions, implying that negative consequences were unforeseen and unintended. Those who do things badly while *trying* to do good may be held less to blame than those who intended, or premeditated, harm.⁴ This has worked somewhat for religious organizations. Another simpler reaction is to express remorse for the wrongful act and ask forgiveness.⁵

Image Repair Strategies

Image repair strategies vary in style: bolstering the source (as someone who has been good up until now), minimization (making light of the issue at hand), differentiation (trying to explain details that compare to other events), transcendence (trying to rise above existing circumstances), attacking one’s accuser, or offering restitution. Offsetting the negative feelings resulting from the wrongful act with bolstering may cause the audience to raise their emotional attachment to the accused.⁶ Minimization, on the other hand, tries to reduce the negative feelings. If the audience agrees that the act is not as bad as it first appeared, the damaged reputation should be

less severe.⁷ Differentiation distinguishes the act in question from other similar but more offensive actions. Transcendence tries to place the event in a more favorable context, such as when the spokesperson succeeds in focusing the audience on higher values that justify the behavior in question.⁸ The following statement by President Bill Clinton is a prime example of transcendence: “The people in this state are fundamentally fair; they’re hurting; they desperately want this election to be about their tomorrows, their future, their problems, not about my yesterdays.”⁹

Compensation offered by those accused of wrongdoing is intended to lessen ill feelings.¹⁰ This restitution can take many forms including goods, services, or monetary reimbursement. If the audience views the inducement as acceptable, this may help balance the negative feelings from the offensive act, thus repairing the source’s image.

The strategy of corrective action entails the spokesperson promising either to repair the damage caused by an offensive act or to prevent recurrence of the offensive act or both. For example, when Tylenol found that their bottles of pain medicine had been tampered with, they introduced new, improved containers. They did not, however, admit responsibility and did not apologize. When there is a demonstrated willingness to correct or prevent recurrence of the problem, the reputation may improve.

In “mortification,” the accused accepts responsibility for unpleasant actions and apologizes. Mortification involves confession of committing the wrongful act and then a request for forgiveness.¹¹ If the apology is perceived as sincere, the wrongful act may be pardoned. Mortification is similar to the notion of concessions, in which those accused of wrongdoing admit guilt and express regret. Famous television evangelists have, on occasion, used this strategy when they faced their own shortcomings. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of examples of key figures who, in these situations, should probably have used mortification immediately but used denials instead.

Expressing articulate apologies and sincere expressions of regret is a difficult and uncomfortable task, but it has long been a part of the rhetoric of societies. When these expressions have the added stress of being delivered in the public arena, the task for the person who has to deliver the message may become overwhelming. Dr. Ruth Faden, a medical ethicist and professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, emphasizes that engaging in this difficult process is important for initiating the healing process. From a larger perspective, the same sadness and need for healing can be applicable to the society itself. Episcopal bishops in Virginia have repeatedly called for

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Responses that emerge during crisis events in the life of a person or organization fill the public relations scholarly literature. Reynolds reviews key examples and encourages religious organizations to learn from the mistakes others have made in the past.

a bad strategy that only makes reporters suspicious, and even more adamant in pursuit of the truth at all costs.

There’s a fine line between show biz and news biz. The trick is to walk up to that line and touch it with your toe, but don’t cross it. And some people stay so far away from the line that nobody wants to watch what they do. And other people keep crossing that line . . . But there has to be a line, because the line is called the truth. And the

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seeking atonement for dropping a nuclear bomb on Japan toward the end of World War II, asking others to use public requests for forgiveness to be used with regard to the treatment of Native Americans and the issues of slavery.

Kenneth Burke, author of numerous books on using language as symbolic action, urges his readers to understand the redemptive function of language. It is heart-warming when a national leader can show enough character to formally apologize and make a public pledge that the issues involved in the wrongdoing will not occur again. Showing remorse improves the spiritual environment and gives society new hope. If a major figure like the pope addresses the world with regard to the church and its shortcomings, the expression of regret gives an opportunity for a fresh, cleansing atmosphere to ensue throughout society.

A lie gets around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.

—Sir Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister during World War II

Seeking atonement is the correct response when denying or sidestepping wrongdoing has been exposed. Spiritual communities can be examples for society at large to witness righteousness, even if they do not understand the intricacies of the spiritual process. A beautiful example of this takes place during the Jewish Holy Days at the recitation of the *Unetanneh Tokef*. It magnifies repentance, prayer, and charity as the presiding themes of the process of atonement. Embracing the concept of charity within the atonement process illuminates redemption of wrongdoing, urging an embracing of healing. These concepts magnify the need for ministers of the gospel to come into the forefront in clearing the air and showing the way toward forgiveness. The communication theory called “social learning theory” purports that people learn by what they see on television and what is acted out right in front of them. Numerous examples can be given of times when Christians failed to walk in righteousness and instead became social lessons of bad conduct in the areas of sexual improprieties or illegal money management. The world desperately wants to witness integrity played out in the lives of their religious and political leaders—an integrity that includes how to respond in the face of one’s own failure or malfeasance.

In the case of the damage to the reputation of Sears auto repair shops, the official response was to deny they had made unneeded repairs, only to later characterize the unneeded repairs as “mistakes” when their denials were weakened in light of overwhelming statistics to the contrary.

Sears countered that the accusation was politically motivated by the director of consumer affairs but did not offer evidence to support their claims. Although they proposed a plan for corrective action, they never truly apologized. In another questionable move, Sears used an attorney as spokesperson, which gave the impression of an unconcerned management.

Conclusion

Crises should be evaluated in terms of the communication process. Organizations must designate a team of staff members to consider possible issues in advance, create a response plan, and designate a single spokesperson.¹² However, even good communication without action is not enough. If corrective action to a situation is required, the plan should be announced publicly if appropriate. A unified message, framed across organizational lines, must be crafted to prevent rumors that inevitably fill the vacuum of information surrounding a crisis. Rumors should be counteracted with prodigious amounts of concrete, authentic information—often difficult to get, especially at the last moment. Generally, spokespeople should avoid repeating a rumor as they disseminate the truth. Once a crisis has passed, it is important for the organization to evaluate every aspect of what was done, to determine what might be a better approach next time—because there *will* be a next time! ■

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Speaking to the Media with Confidence

MS. SMITH, DIRECTOR of an affordable housing organization, was surprised to receive the call from a television reporter. He wanted to interview her (on camera of course!) about a perceived lack of services for the homeless. Ms. Smith, a passionate and experienced advocate for the homeless, felt paralyzed at the prospect of being on camera. She declined the interview, suggesting that the reporter find someone else.

Rev. Barnes, pastor of a downtown church, spoke at a citywide conference about the ways that partnerships between congregations and public schools can empower youth. After the conference, a television reporter tried to interview Rev. Barnes about recent violence in the high school. Rev. Barnes quickly declined, as he recalled his last television interview when his two sentences on air failed to make much of a point.

Dr. Jones, a professor and author of many books about faith and culture, received a call from a major radio station, asking her to be a guest on a one-hour show about religious tolerance in an increasingly multireligious culture. Although Dr. Jones wrote and lectured often about such issues, she felt unsure of the questions and direction the interview might take. Too risky, she thought, as she said “no” to the invitation.

Although these media requests were turned down, Ms. Smith, Rev. Barnes, and Dr. Jones will likely have future interview requests to consider. And, because they have informed viewpoints that they already share with significant audiences, they may ultimately decide that some media interviews are necessary, however uncomfortable. Perhaps a voice for the homeless will not be heard unless Ms. Smith shares hers. Perhaps the unique perspectives and experiences of Rev. Barnes or Dr. Jones will provide audiences with information as well as hope and inspiration.

There are often legitimate reasons to be reluctant, even fearful, when it comes to a radio or television interview request. Yet, in many situations, there are stronger reasons to say “yes” to that interview. With planning and practice, most

of us can attain the confidence and control to articulate our expertise and express our views on the air in a way that both informs the public and supports the work about which we are passionate.

If you are approached for an interview on radio or television, consider the following:

- Understand the reporter’s request and the direction of the story. If there are points of the issue you do not know or do not want to comment on, let the reporter know during the initial conversation. If the request is to participate on a panel of speakers, find out who the other guests are. You ultimately control whether you accept the interview.
- Clarify the reporter’s deadline and schedule for the interview. If at all possible, allow time to prepare for the interview. Always respect the reporter by meeting his or her deadlines.
- If you are unfamiliar with the reporter and time allows, do a little computer research on the stories he or she has done in the past.
- Before the interview, prepare “talking points.” Make a list of the most likely questions you will be asked in an interview. Include in this list even the most difficult questions—the ones you hope you will not be asked. Prepare notes and responses to all the questions with straightforward, simple, and focused answers. The better you prepare your “talking points,” the more confidence you will feel during the interview.
- Consider and emphasize one or two points—your message—which you definitely want to make. Say what you need to say. After all, this is the primary reason for doing media

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SYNOPSIS

Messick, long-time media adviser and radio personality, gives general tips on how to take the intimidation out of an on-camera or radio interview. He emphasizes that preparation and confidence are two major factors in overcoming fear of being “on the air.”

Fred Messick, as associate vice president of Public Affairs at Fuller, helps represent the seminary through media and community relations as well as connections with public officials. He was previously media spokesperson and legislative liaison for the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services and also served with World Vision in communications and as director of U.S. projects. Messick has worked as a reporter, writer, and radio broadcaster and won an award for the best local radio public affairs program in Los Angeles. He currently hosts a weekly radio program on KZLA-FM called “Southern California Pathways,” which profiles community empowerment programs and volunteer opportunities.



Christian Print Media: Who, What, When, Where, and How

MOST OF THE estimated 3000 Christian publications in the marketplace today are invisible to the general public—and to most Christians—yet some 20 million people read them each month. From large circulation devotional guides like *The Upper Room*, to denominational publications, to news and analysis magazines like *Christianity Today* and *World*, the breadth and depth of these publications guarantee that nearly any subject or brilliant insight will find an audience of willing readers. With so many publications, it's not surprising that editors struggle to find quality writers with something fresh to say. You may be that person.

Even if you aren't a gifted writer, if you have news to share with a Christian magazine or broadcast outlet, these suggestions will help you better approach an editor with your idea.

SYNOPSIS

Waters gives an overview of who, what, when, where, and how to approach publications that may be interested in a story about your organization. He includes practical advice on everything from story development to query letters to how to survive rejection letters.

Why would you approach a magazine to suggest a story or to suggest that you write one?

First, there's the noble reason: your news may inspire, educate, or motivate others. Sharing stories of faith, helping people better understand a social or cultural movement, or illuminating a passage of Scripture,

can be extensions of ministry. Years ago, I wrote an article on how to deal with self-pity. I was surprised to receive dozens of letters from people sharing how my words of encouragement and advice assisted them.

Sometimes our words have lasting value as God uses them to inspire others. A piece I wrote more than 25 years ago on the work of World Vision's rescue vessel "Seasweep" helped raise funds for ministry to Vietnamese "boat people." I thought that was the end of it. But a few years ago, a

college graduate contacted me. She was eight months old when I wrote about the rescue of her family. She had recently found an old copy of my *World Vision* magazine article in her parents' belongings. She asked if I could share with her more of what happened since her parents were reluctant to discuss their ordeal and their incredible courage. Our reunion had a positive effect throughout her family and the Vietnamese community, linking me with other young people from that same boat. One young man is finishing his medical degree at the Harvard Medical School.

A second reason to pursue an article in a Christian publication is more pragmatic. If an editor considers something we have to say—or something our organization is doing—worthy of publication, readers assign credibility to the subject of the article and to the writer. That would certainly be true if, for instance, you wrote an article—or someone else wrote an article—in your denominational paper providing tips on financing capital building campaigns, or you furnished a Q and A interview with a scientist sharing his views on Intelligent Design. This positive mention of your church or organization, or the people associated with it, can be helpful if you are approaching a large donor, a foundation, or a corporation for support for a ministry opportunity. News, opinion, devotional, or theological articles you write may also build credibility for you as a writer should you decide to pursue a book-length project.

How do you start the process?

The first step in approaching a Christian publication is to realize you must sell the editor on your idea. Editors are entrusted with ensuring their articles meet the needs of readers. Journalists sometimes call editors "gatekeepers," and this is an appropriate term. To get an article into a newspaper or magazine, you first have to convince the gatekeeper to open the gate and let your idea through to the reader. Editors must believe that your idea is consistent with their editorial needs and that it can be written in a style

Ken Waters is a journalism professor in the Seaver College at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, who teaches media ethics, media effects, feature writing, opinion writing, and public affairs reporting. He also conducts research on nonprofit agency communication strategies and religious journalism. He has counseled numerous nonprofits and parachurch organizations with regard to print media. Currently, he nurtures budding journalists on the graduate and undergraduate levels and advises the journalism student magazine *Currents*.

consistent with other articles in their magazine. While your intent may be selfish (to get your article in print) your approach must be as a servant (meeting the needs of the editor and her readers).

Perhaps you read Christian publications already and are familiar with their content. Ask yourself questions like these:

1. Can you see your idea on the pages of that publication? If so, how would it be written?
2. Is the language and style formal or informal?
3. Does it use footnotes or endnotes?
4. Is it journalistic or academic in its approach to the subject?
5. Does it use examples and anecdotes?

Experts on writing suggest you study at least three recent issues of a publication to determine its style and to make sure your idea hasn't already been printed. If it has, move on to another publication. Since most Christian publications are not distributed on newsstands, you may need to turn to Christian college libraries or online versions of some publications to complete your study. Another way to get information on publications is through resources like *Writer's Market* (I use the online version at \$3.99 per month or \$29.99 for a year) or Sally E. Stuart's *Christian Writer's Market Guide*. These publications provide an extensive list of religious publications, along with guidelines and tips for writers provided by the magazine's editors. Using one or both of these resources is critical for the successful writer.

What is a query letter?

How do you approach the editor? Most publications require a one-page summary of your article (or a brief e-mail, if the editor accepts e-mail). This is called a query letter. The query saves you and the editor time and lets him quickly determine if your idea fits with his needs. If the idea you propose interests him, you'll get a return letter (in a self-addressed stamped envelope you've provided), a phone call, or e-mail giving you the go-ahead. Often this green light is "on spec," which means you write the article and send it to the editor. He is under no obligation to print it or pay for it until he has read the article and found it useful.

If your idea is timely, or strong enough, the editor may make a binding assignment and guarantee a rate of pay before seeing your finished piece—the best case scenario.

The query letter consists of four or five paragraphs that

- propose the idea,
- provide details on how you'll develop the article,
- present your qualifications, and
- discuss when you can supply the finished piece.

The first paragraph usually is written as closely as possible to what you envision as the first paragraph, or what writers call the lead. Then you provide a two- or three-sentence outline of the remainder of the piece. If you will be conducting interviews with experts, name them. Then give a short summary of why you think you're qualified to write the article. Your "qualifications" can be education, life experience, or a combination of the two.

It is vitally important to make sure you are sending the query to the correct editor. That may mean phoning the publication and asking who accepts article submissions or looking at the most recent copy of the magazine and finding the name of the articles editor. Job swapping in Christian magazines is common, and you won't get to first base with a publication if you send the idea to someone no longer employed there.

In the query, let the editor know if photos are available, and ask about the format and delivery system that works best. Writers who are also photographers are at an advantage when it comes to getting articles accepted for publication, because if you provide photos, the editor doesn't have to order her own or pay a freelance illustrator to create illustrations.

There's one exception to this rule of the query. If there's an event or a fast-breaking news item in your area (say, a mass wedding of homosexuals, an abortion clinic bombing, the opening of a new church outreach in an inner city neighborhood), an e-mail—or even a quick phone call—to the appropriate editor is recommended. This is tolerated better by editors in quickly moving situations or when you are merely suggesting a story, but not suggesting that you actually write it.

If you use the written query, once it's complete, send it off with a self-addressed stamped envelope, or SASE. When dealing with writers, some publications want the exclusive right to consider your story. Others will note in their writer's guidelines (available on their website or in the listings in *Writer's Market*) that they will accept simultaneous submissions. If there are a few publications you have in mind, and they all accept simultaneous submissions, you must make a note in your query that you are also submitting the idea to a few other magazines.

Proper etiquette dictates that you don't "bug" editors. Don't phone them a week after you mail your query to see if they received it. Be patient and trust that God will provide the right avenue for your idea. It may take a few months for your idea to be considered.

What happens next?

Often, you'll experience a letdown after mailing out a few queries and waiting, or, worse yet, receiving a form rejection

letter addressed to "Dear Writer." Don't give up. If I believe in an idea strongly enough I'll keep writing on it to keep my passion and enthusiasm going. It's not uncommon to be rejected by several publications before your idea finds the right fit.

If all this seems intimidating, you may be able to play another role in helping to get news about your church or organization into Christian publications. Identify parishioners or staff people gifted at writing. Perhaps they write for a living. Ask them to mentor you as you improve your writing for magazine audiences, or supply them with ideas so they can approach editors themselves. Someone in your congregation or someone who donates to your organization may do pro bono public relations work for you, contacting editors

with ideas and suggesting that the editor send a reporter to cover the story and interview the relevant newsmakers.

While getting news about your organization into print may take some time, the rewards, especially if those words touch and change the lives of others, are well worth the effort. ■

RESOURCES

Writer's Market, published annually by Writer's Digest Books, or subscribe online at www.writersmarket.com.
Sally E. Stuart, *The Christian Writer's Market Guide* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Books, 2005).
John Wood, *How to Write Attention-Grabbing Query & Cover Letters* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1996).
See www.Right-Writing.com for a great all-around writing resource.

Vibrant But Invisible: A Study of Contemporary Religious Periodicals

LITTLE ATTEMPT has been made to use religious periodicals to fulfill evangelistic outreach or to present a Christian perspective on the news for a largely secular audience. Religious publications, like other specialty publications, target readers who want the content and have indicated an interest in receiving that content. Their purpose is to reinforce belief and bind together the faithful. The publications are not vehicles for recruiting new members or believers. Thirty years ago the creation of a national Christian publication modeled after the *Christian Science Monitor* [was called for]. Today it appears unlikely that such a publication will appear, as the desire to defend one's theological or doctrinal beliefs would render cooperation nearly impossible. Indeed, it is the specialized nature of religious publications, and their overall small circulation numbers, that answers the question of why the genre is vibrant and dynamic, while their visibility in the culture at large is nonexistent. For better or worse, religious publications are faithfully carrying out a key portion of the ACP [Associated Church Press] statement of purpose: "to foster development and growth among the faithful."

While religious magazines rarely rate a mention in journalism history studies, the genre itself continues to grow, as publications for an ever-smaller niche of readers proliferate. While most may fail, the sheer numbers of religious publications reflect a continued interest in religious issues that affect both personal piety and how these readers negotiate life within the society at large.

Because of their rich tradition, and their continuing vibrancy, religious publications provide a fertile ground for future research by magazine scholars. Of particular interest should be the extent to which these nearly invisible publications leave their mark, if any, on the culture at large.

For Your Information

The researcher asked editors to describe their editorial content. Their responses show remarkable consistency with their historical forbearers. . . . [showing] that religious publications are primarily concerned with creating editorial content that inspires, providing theological education, or educating people about organizational causes.

Editorial emphases deemed less important were providing advice and educational materials to ministers and teachers, educating Christians about the culture at large, providing "how to" articles on human relationships, reporting missionary news, providing stories encouraging people in particular vocations, and reporting denominational news. The least likely editorial foci are soliciting donations to an organizational cause, providing product reviews on books, CDs and gift items, and providing a Christian perspective on the news.

—Ken Waters

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Why Do You Write?

IT'S IN MY skull and it has to come out."

That was writer Allegra Sloman's colorful response to the question, "Why do you write?"

If you are ever in a pinch for entertainment, you could do worse than to pose that question to writers. As articulate creatures, they tend to reward the inquiry with insightful and strange replies. Daniel J. Boorstin's: "To taste life twice." Or consider William Saroyan's motivation for setting pen to paper: "To get even with death."

Others are bracingly honest. "To get attention," responded one writer. "Because I'm so darn good at it," boasted another. One brilliant novelist, locked in a long battle with terminal cancer, responded simply, "To pass time."

For Christian writers, finding the answer to the question, "Why do you write?" is a more urgent matter. While we face the same fog of tainted motivations that beset other authors, we must not be content to surrender to its depths. Writing has to be about something more than ourselves. It must escape the confines of mere self-expression and serve a larger purpose.

Theology and Writing

I have some experience writing for a variety of Christian magazines. I write in order to enter into conversation with others, which, to me, touches on the central purpose of the practice. Though it is often perceived as an isolating act, writing is all about community. Every article, essay, and book is, literally, a conversation writ large. It may strike some as insular to write for Christian publications, but it has given me the opportunity to enter into meaningful dialogue with thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ. My hope here is to engage the readers of *Theology, News & Notes* in a similar way.

A theology of writing begins with God's own desire to reveal. I once spoke with a man who offered an odd explanation for his refusal to write. With a sigh he claimed, that "people would never be able to understand (his

thoughts on God." He balked at the idea of tinkering with his lofty reflections in order to make them accessible to others. Though he was content to revel in his own musings, I found his stance a little silly—and sad. Such an attitude contradicts the generous nature of Christian revelation. The God of the Bible is no esoteric snob. Rather, the image that emerges in Scripture is one of a restless revealer, a lover who pursues us endlessly in a quest to be known. This passionate, expansive vision should shape our approach to writing. There is nothing novel about using words to convey truth; God has been at it for some time. We write because God reveals. We use words to connect with others because God has used words to connect with us. Our words will always reflect our unique talents and interests and they should. But we must also be conscious that our best thoughts are never entirely our own; they are rooted in God's prior revelation. "Truth through personality," was how the great preacher Phillips Brooks defined preaching.¹ That description works equally well as a standard for the Christian writer.

Writing's Effect on the Writer

While writing may ultimately be about community, the first benefit still belongs to the writer. The very process of writing prepares us for entering into more meaningful dialogue by developing what we think. Writing changes your mind. Those of you who wrestle thoughts into words know what I'm talking about. Something happens in the fight. Writing not only conveys ideas, it constructs and discovers them. As novelist Frederick Buechner said of words, "Not only do they have the power to make things clear, they make things happen."² When words are crafted

SYNOPSIS

Fuller student and writer Drew Dyck addresses other writers on the reasons, the rigors, and the effects of writing. He concludes that writing is, especially for the believer, a form of community-building that can leave a legacy far more lasting than the published word.

Drew Dyck is in his second year at Fuller, pursuing a master's degree in Theology and Biblical Studies. He has published over 100 articles, primarily in the Christian market. In addition to writing a column for the young adult webzine, *Boundless.org*, he contributes regularly to *Today's Christian*, *Faith Today*, *The Oregonian*, *Prism*, and *Relevant* magazines. After graduation Drew hopes to pursue a PhD in Theology and Culture.

to address Christian topics, the rewards are even greater because writing becomes a way for the writer to encounter God. Words and sentences serve as tools for working out theology and clarifying belief. Verbal exchange is valuable, but limited in this regard. The written word, however, enables exploration and expression of thought with great precision and clarity. For quality of thinking, talk is cheap. Writing, on the other hand, is precious. This tendency of writing to order our thoughts is often a necessary precursor to fruitful dialogue.

Writing has another advantage: it enables us to identify with others. Working for a variety of publications prevents me from getting too comfortable in my own skin. Recently I was asked to write a devotional piece on the story of the woman caught in adultery, found in John 8:3–11. Sounds like a simple enough assignment until you consider my audience: Baptist teenagers. I'm not Baptist. I'm not a teenager, but suddenly I'm seeing the scene through their eyes, hearing its voices through their ears. No longer a 28-year-old male seminary student, I'm a 13-year old girl, a 16-year-old boy. I'm asking different questions of the text, setting my interests aside in favor of theirs. Such assignments force me to make my theology practical and practicable, while freeing me from the limitations of my own perspective. During the process I get to glimpse God through different eyes. Referring to literature, C. S. Lewis wrote, "Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do."³ I believe the same can be said of writing.

Engaging Others

Contributing to Christian magazines is an effective way to instruct, inform and inspire other believers. The connection we make begins before the words even go to print. Nineteenth-century novelist Jules Renard called writing "the best way to talk without being interrupted." Though I find his description amusing, it also strikes me as false. We are always interrupted as we write—if not by literal voices, then certainly by the ones we anticipate hearing. We shoulder the reader's expectations and needs. We are forever answering imaginary objections, fielding unasked questions, and fulfilling disembodied desires. Anything less is not writing; it's journaling. So even before the first set of eyes scan down the page of our creation, we've entered into dialogue. Writers are never alone, even when they are all by themselves.

Of course the internal dialogue is no substitute for the real thing. Writing also fosters literal communication. I remember logging onto my e-mail account, the day after an

op-ed piece of mine appeared in a large newspaper, to find over 100 e-mails in my inbox. The messages were all from strangers. Many corresponded with me for months. Some of the readers I met in person. They told me details about their lives and I learned how the issues addressed by the article affected them personally. It was a real honor. When I wrote the article, it was more about ideas. After encountering the readers, it was more about people.

In the title of one of his books, the cultural critic Richard M. Weaver famously noted that "ideas have consequences." Writers are people who bet their lives that he was right. We may not always have the correct ideas, or be able to communicate the correct ideas perfectly, but we trust that communicating good ideas is worth all the effort—not because we're after intellectual titillation or bent on being heard, but because we think that ideas truly do matter, that they affect the lives of real people in the real world.

That's a distinctly Christian perspective. Christians must write with great seriousness and passion because they believe that God is still in the business of changing lives, and that he often does so through the medium of the written word. Inevitably our efforts to express God's reality will fall short. They will always sound hollow when they slam up against the real presence of the living God. "I have seen things," said Aquinas, "that make all my writing seem like straw."⁴ Additionally, our motivations as writers will never be perfect. We all get tangled up in ourselves from time to time, but we keep struggling to get free. We keep trying to sing God's song because we know there's a body out there, a body of which we are a part. Writing is one way to connect with that body and keep it moving. And what motivation for writing could ever compare to that? Self-expression alone is not enough. Money is just paper. Immortality is great, but who wants eternal life in the cold incarnation of words? The Body of Christ is different. It is past and future, here and now, alive and blood-warm. Through writing we can strengthen the bonds between its members and, by some bizarre mystery called the grace of God, participate in its life forever. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1877).
2. Frederick Buechner, quoted in an interview by *Christianity Today*, October 1990, 54.
3. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 140–41.
4. Quoted in Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 65.

Evolving the Medium and the Message

WHEN I FIRST read [Marshall] McLuhan, I found it disconcerting to discover the subliminal power of media to shape my view of the world. I wasn't fond of the thought that I might be unknowingly controlled or manipulated by the media forms involved in nearly every aspect of my life. I didn't like the idea that I was a fish oblivious to the hook holding the worm. Why didn't anybody ever warn me about this?

This was so troubling that I began looking at McLuhan's critics, only to find few who offered compelling critiques. The more I studied and explored, the more I resigned myself to agreeing that McLuhan was right and that media have the power to change us, whether we know it or not. I remember thinking, *If media inevitably shape us this much, what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to respond?* This felt a bit like trying to stop the wind and the tides.

Over the years I have searched for answers to these questions. While there was no single lightning bolt to clarify everything, eventually an inkling of an answer began to emerge. It seemed too simple to be useful at first and felt like a cop-out. However, the more I lived with it, the more I became convinced it offered a legitimate direction for my understanding. It will not surprise you that the answer initially came from one of McLuhan's many sayings: "There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening." In other words, the hidden effects of media are not inevitable when we seek to understand the things that shape us. Too often we want to determine whether something is good or bad before we understand it. But doing so means we will always encounter . . . media with . . . flat-footed enthusiasm.

The awareness we've gained through our examination of media thus far is perhaps the most critical faculty necessary

to develop navigational skills for dealing with the hidden and formative powers of our media and technology. Just by becoming aware that the medium, regardless of content, shapes both our message and our minds, we are well on our way to responding appropriately. However, this awareness means we need to revisit the evangelical rallying cry: "The methods change, but the message stays the same."

Obviously, our methods for communicating God's message have undergone a series of seismic shifts. Because the medium is the message, our media revolutions—from the printing press to the Internet—have led to unintended changes in our message. Among them is a shift from a modern, individualistic, and highly rational concept of the gospel to a postmodern, communal, holistic, and experiential one. These innovations are not occurring in a vacuum. They are partly the result of reading Scripture through the new interpretive lenses created by our media.

Like it or not, our theology and interpretation of Scripture have a long history of mirroring our forms of media, a fact most easily seen in the way modern approaches to faith mirror the linear, rational, and abstract attributes of the printed word. This is not an inherently negative reality, especially if we're aware that it's happening. In fact, I believe some of our methods, and thus our message, should change and evolve—this is part of God's ongoing creation and relationship to God's people.



Shane Higgs is a public speaker and pastor of Trinity Mennonite Church, a missional, urban, Anabaptist congregation in Phoenix, Arizona. Before earning a Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary, Shane had a career in advertising as a strategic planner. It was there that he gained expertise in understanding media and culture. This contribution to *Theology, News & Notes* is an excerpt from Higgs' *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Zondervan, 2006) and is used with permission.

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interviews. Except for longer features, your television or radio clip might last only seconds. A concise, clear message with just one point will come across more effectively than an eight-point discussion that lacks a central focus.

- Be honest.
- Practice the interview. If the interview is for television and there is time for practice, ask a friend to interview you on video. Take time to critique the video and look for anything that might distract from your message. Body language often communicates more than words, so make sure your visual presentation is as well prepared as your

verbal communication. For radio as well as television, make sure your voice and speaking style communicate clearly and appropriately.

- Build relationships of respect with reporters. Keep in mind that reporters need authoritative, quality spokespeople. Sharing your message and expertise over the airwaves can offer an excellent opportunity for you, as a leader, to inform and inspire the public as well as benefit your cause, ministry, church, or organization. Even if you have been "burned" in past experiences with the media, a little preparation and forethought will help you build new confidence, develop a greater sense of control in the interview, and communicate effectively to your audience. ■

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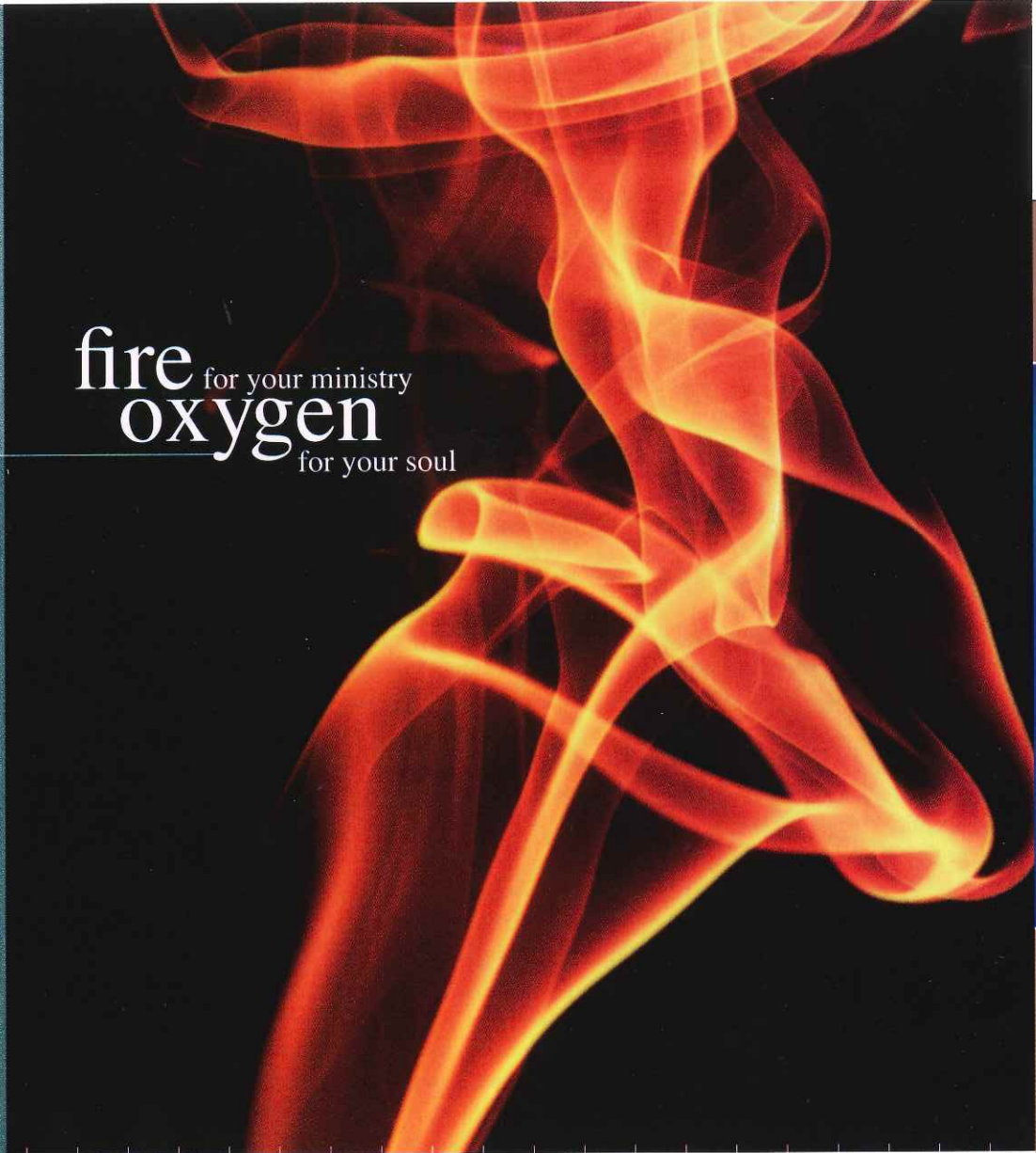
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