

Protagonist Corner

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Media coverage of religion is expanding. Secular newspapers are reinstating religion beats. Public radio and broadcast news organizations are attempting to move beyond the strident language that has dominated news coverage of religion for the last few decades. Understanding both the role of religion in global conflicts and the power of religion to better the common good has reemerged in mainstream American culture. Even so, many church leaders fail to appreciate why or how to work with news media. In 2003 I left my position as a local church pastor to become the publisher and editor of *DisciplesWorld*, an independent journal for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In that time, I have learned how essential traditional journalism is to the church.

Some basic facts: Religion reporting and religious reporting are not the same. Religion reporting is a term first used by reporters covering religion for secular news organizations. The term describes a traditional journalistic approach to news which is objective and critical. The Religion Newswriters Association, a non-profit trade association founded in 1949, changed its name from Religious Newswriters Association in 1971. They thought the former name unnecessarily “implied something about the spiritual state of the membership.”¹ In traditional journalism, the inner state of the reporter is beside the point.

Religious reporting, on the other hand, describes reporting that is in and of itself religious. When I was a pastor of a church, I wrote a weekly column for the newsletter. I wrote stories for sermons and other illustrations. I used many forms of communication to shape my congregation in the ways of faithful living. It was my call to help my congregation come to know the fullness of God’s love. Some of what I shared we could call “reporting.” But this reporting was accomplished in the context of the gospel. If there was bad news to share—like the suicide of a regional minister, or the scandal around a national church ministry—I was careful to interpret the events in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which shines hope even into the darkest corners of despair. Journalists who report about religion play a different role. Their job is not to interpret events, but to tell what happened in a balanced and objective manner.

We can debate whether anything, including traditional journalism, can really be objective and free of interpretation—whether the inner state of the reporter really doesn’t influence the reporting. But now that I am in the reporting business and see the work of the church from that perspective, I have come to understand how essential traditional journalism is to the health and faith of the whole church. It’s about trust. Religious communities are built on trust. Without trust among members and leaders, churches fail to thrive and do not weather difficult times well. Trust in God is the foundation for trust among God’s people. We are more likely to trust another person in the church who appears to trust God than we are to trust someone who doesn’t, because we find God trustworthy. Likewise, if we trust God, then we become more trustworthy in the sight of others.

Trust requires truth-telling. Open, honest, truthful communication, especially

during times of crisis, is essential to building and maintaining trust. Nothing kills trust faster than even the perceived withholding or manipulating of information.

An independent news source in the church like *DisciplesWorld*—the journal is not a product of the communications office, nor does it receive funding from the denomination—is an essential player in the church’s practice of truth-telling.

Interpretation cannot change the truth. Religious reporting, as pastors do, is about interpretation, of course, but such interpretation must be based in fact. When interpretation moves into a kind of “spin” that is intended to misdirect or even hide fact, then it is no longer trustworthy. We have all witnessed a circle-the-wagons reflex to church controversy. It’s understandable. We guard what we value. Controversies raise questions; we don’t want to jump off the wagon of something we love until we’ve had time to evaluate. So we hunker down.

It’s understandable. But it’s exactly the wrong response during a time of crisis because circling the wagons erodes the very trust that is needed to get through the crisis. The right response is quite the opposite: Open communication, a good flow of information, ideas discussed not suppressed. And you want truth, not the rumor mill setting the agenda for how you are going to get through the crisis.

That’s the role of independent journalism. Religion reporting can be a great asset to the church. Religion reporters help get accurate information into the public dialogue. How might religious leaders better use the essential tool of traditional journalism in building and maintaining trust in their church communities?

Get ahead of the story, especially if it is controversial. Don’t make the church rumor mill, or make the media dig it up.

A defensive posture gets you into trouble. You appear to be hiding something whether you are or not.

Rumor will sink you more quickly than truth, so it is in your best interest to get the truth out there.

Think about the questions people will ask and then answer them before they ask.

Provide contact information for further questions.

Remember that church members have the “right” to know.

Good communication stops triangulation.

Sometimes independent news sources can express your message better than you can.

When dealing directly with media, you can say, “off the record, please” or “don’t quote me,” if they get to an area with which you are uncomfortable.

It’s not the job of reporters to make you look good. But being honest and forthright is what will make you appear credible. Take time to understand and work with news media for the sake of the church, not in spite of it.

Note

1. Richard N. Ostling, “Reporting Religion: The Religion Newswriters Association,” *Theology Today* 31, no. 3 (October 1974).