

## **Facing the media; Media relations for Missionaries**

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You know it's going to be a bad day when you find Mike Wallace and a 60 Minutes crew waiting for you when you arrive at the office.

While most missionaries and Christian workers will probably never meet Mr. Wallace nor his colleagues, many will, sooner or later, run into a journalist who is working on a story and wants an interview.

Unfortunately, many Christians are as afraid of the local religion reporter or the correspondent from a Christian publication as they are of the most hard-nosed investigative reporter. The result: they clam up, refuse to speak or turn out to be as deceptive as the church treasurer who was just caught embezzling a million dollars.

One of the most common complaints from church leaders who are interviewed by broadcast or print media is that their story is misrepresented. Quite often they accuse the reporter of twisting the facts, misquoting, having a hostile bias or, on the other side, not giving them the exposure that they thought they deserved.

Let it first be admitted that reporters do make errors. Many secular writers are not believers and are prone to get the name of the organization wrong (how many times has the United Church of Christ been confused with the Church of Christ), to let erroneous stereotypes creep in (not all Baptists are fundamentalists nor do all Presbyterians support the ordination of homosexuals) or, at worst, to look for the ridiculous in religion rather than that which means so much to millions.

That having been said let it be known that the vast majority of journalists are professionals who work hard to do quality work. Their job is to report on what is happening as honestly and accurately as possible. Clarence Matthews, the now retired religion writer for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, once said that he felt he was such a professional journalist that he could cover a Ku-Klux-Klan rally objectively. Clarence knew how difficult that could be--he is an African American.

Let's affirm that print or broadcast coverage is good for the missionary and the organization. News stories let the public know that an agency exists, that neighbors and friends are involved in Christian service, and more broadly, that Christians are making a positive contribution to the world (not to mention the cause of Christ).

More specifically, news coverage allows believers to know how to pray and churchgoers to know more about organizations they are supporting. Missionaries seeking support will find more credibility when they are able to present a newspaper or magazine story about their work for church members to carry home and read. Print especially carries authority and authenticity to the person who has never heard about the mission being presented.

So how, then, should a missionary react when approached by a reporter? There are several attitudes and actions that will lead to a successful interview both for the reporter and the interviewee.

1. One must bear in mind that the reporter is a human being who has a job to do. In that regard she or he does not differ from any missionary or church worker. Many reporters sense a call to

their job and feel that they are performing a public service. That reporter has been given an assignment that must be completed by a deadline. For broadcasters, that deadline could be an hour away; for newspaper writers it may be only six or eight hours in the future. He has an editor breathing down his neck, several other people to interview, a sick child, a troubled marriage, financial difficulties--all putting him under stress while he tries to carry out a professional job.

2. Most interviews are not investigative. The missionary has no reason to fear a reporter unless he has absconded with mission funds, is carrying on an affair with a parishioner or has misused his position for his own gain. Most religion stories, aside from those that are investigations of malpractice, are assigned to highlight the work of religious workers or Christian programs or to explore an idea, issue or theological position.

3. The Christian worker should show every courtesy and amount of cooperation possible. If the reporter has left a message, call back immediately. With a deadline looming, she can't afford to wait half a day or two or three days for you to get around to calling her. She may go on to another source or may just use something your secretary or teen-aged son said when they answered the phone.

3. The missionary worker should never refuse to speak to a reporter. If you do not have the information the reporter needs or you feel uncomfortable answering a particular question you have several options.

- You might want to say that you will obtain the information or answer and call back. If you agree to do it, do it right away. Remember, the reporter is probably working on deadline. Ask them when their deadline is so you will know how much time you have before you must return the call.
- Option two, if you are uncomfortable answering, refer the reporter to a supervisor or someone with more information. If you are at the top of the pecking order, the buck stops with you. You may want to call back after you have time to get your answer together, but ultimately you must respond in one way or another.
- An alternative is to speak to the reporter "off the record." However, to do so, you need to know the rules of the game. To speak "off the record" means that you are going to give the reporter some information but she may not use that information in her report unless she obtains it from someone else "on the record." In order for you to use this method, you must inform the journalist before you make the statement. You can't say, "that man stole \$10,000 from the mission--but that's off the record." The journalist may be nice and honor your request even though you made it after the statement, but she is not under any journalistic ethical code to do so if you don't tell her first. Your best bet? Don't say what you would rather not hear on the radio or read in the newspaper.

Most journalists dislike anonymous sources and many editors will not let them use unattributed quotes in news stories. Watergate's Deep Throat is an exception, not common practice. Reporters will protect sources if that person's life or work may be in danger. For example, many journalists occasionally hide the identity of missionaries in Colombia when asked.

Be frank and honest. To obviously hide material or to be less than forthcoming will just raise suspicions or frustration and anger on the part of the reporter. He probably has other sources and will go to them if you aren't forthcoming. Besides, if you have nothing to hide why not cooperate?

A few other comments worth mentioning.

- It is not the job of any media outlet (other than one that you own) to promote you and your ministry. As newspaper publisher Barry Bingham, Sr. once said, "it is the job of your church (or mission) to do something significant enough that we will want to come out and cover it."
- By the same token, it is not a reporter's job to make you look good. That's your task. The reporter reports what she sees and hears.
- Be sure to spell the name of your organization, your name and any other names that you give to the reporter. This applies to radio and television reporters as well as print.
- Secular reporters may not be as sympathetic to your good work as a correspondent from a Christian magazine or your denomination's newspaper may be. You need to help them see how what you do is relevant to society and how the track of your activities intersects with the broad interests of the readership.
- Don't ask to see the article before it is printed. Generally, most secular and Christian publications prohibit their writers from letting you review it. Some may run a quote or two by you to see if they are correct, but you won't see the piece until it is published. You may not like that idea, but that's the way it works.
- Just because you or your organization bought an advertisement in a publication or on a broadcast station does not mean that they owe you anything. Any legitimate media outlet operates the business side and the news side separately.

So, what if you are interviewed and when the piece comes out there is an error or you don't like it?

1. Evaluate the piece from an outsider's point of view. Does it do you an injustice or does it just not speak the way you would? Does it misrepresent you or merely include your opinion along with a host of other, perhaps contrary opinions? Is the error slight or does it cast your organization in a bad light. Here's the hard one--was your name misspelled? In each of these, determine how really important it is for you to call and complain or ask for a correction. If the article is generally on track and presents your ministry in a positive way, leave it alone. Yes, even if your name is misspelled, don't call. The next time you are interviewed you can gently mention the correct spelling. If you get a reputation as a complainer and someone who is difficult to work with, the reporter will probably look for another agency or another subject the next time, or may not treat you as sympathetically in a future article.

2. If there is a grievous error that will give the public a grossly erroneous impression of your mission, call the reporter (not the editor) and gently explain the problem. Then, leave it to that journalist and his editor to decide whether it is worth running a correction or not. Human relations and the reporter's professional image are at stake here.

So, the next time a journalist calls you, welcome them as you would any other believer or non-believer. Get to know them as a person. Help them to get their job done in a professional manner. In the long run, you will find that you and your mission benefit from a proper relationship.

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