



Hold the front page!

TN89 Training Notes series: Communication

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As I write this the national news websites are highlighting a Bad News Story for the Church. It's the standard 'Naughty Vicar' line. This time the issue is money not sex.

So where are the Good News Stories about our churches?

Well, 'Pastor preaches good sermon' isn't exactly 'News'. But that's not quite true because many of the day-to-day events in your church's life can be written up in a News format, provided you learn how to do it.

Some sectors of the national media appear to be anti-Church and any lack of Christian integrity is fair game for a tabloid splash. But the local media generally welcome links to churches provided you can send them stories on *their* terms.

So these notes make a plea for churches to engage with their local press and radio in a positive way and then show you how to do it through the use of a 'media release'.

Think clearly!

First, most churches need a change of attitude, so that is the place to start. The regional radio station, the local newspaper, the community magazine and their online representations are only too pleased to get quality stories from anywhere, including your church. If you fail to feed them the right kind of narrative nothing will happen.

But many churches hold the media at arm's length – perhaps because of what they read in the national press. We all need to jolt ourselves out of our victim mentality and open ourselves up to the possibilities. This isn't just another church activity, it's a mission goldmine!

The local media offer unparalleled opportunities to get a message across to those who have little or no contact with the Church. We fail to capitalise on this because we are fearful of

what the media might do with our precious messages. Churches love to be in control. So take risks! Learn how to feed the media with the stories you've got and they want. Confident media engagement should have a top place within your church's mission strategy. The media is not an excuse for free advertising, but they offer a resource where we can tell interesting stories if only we will take the trouble to do so.

But there is a cost to this. It's no good rushing out a weekly media release for three months and then giving up in despair. You need to be in this for the long haul, and expect disappointments along the way.

Yet to ignore this mission opportunity because we are not in control of the final output is a disaster of our own making.

Follow these steps to get started

1 Get the topic on the agenda

Depending on who you are, ask awkward questions at church meetings, request a major discussion on the topic at the Church Council or whatever body takes key decisions, get the topic into sermons, small group studies and news-sheets. Get excited about it!

2 Seek a champion

It is all going to depend on someone getting this message and wanting to do something about it. Yes, it needs some writing skill, but this can be learned. Ideally it needs someone with experience, but this can be gained. Make the need widely known, sell it not as another job to be done but as an opportunity for gospel work. This needs an enthusiast, not an overworked Administrator or Minister adding it to their 'To Do' lists.

3 Make them accountable

This person is going to be speaking publicly on behalf of your church so protect both parties. But don't shackle them with bureaucracy. They will need tons of encouragement because there are bound to be disappointments. Until you have established a climate of regular, positive engagement you will find much of what you prepare for the media is ignored. Support your champion with one or more advisers, and with those who can take good photographs.

4 Research your local media

Make a list of media outlets that reach your local population. Most areas will have at least one free newspaper and a local radio station. Rural areas may well have a community magazine. Ask how to email media releases in and when the weekly deadline for publication or for a particular radio programme falls. If there is a News Editor find out their name and then send them media releases personally rather than just to the paper as a general entity. Invite the Editor or Radio Producer to speak at a Churches Together meeting or equivalent and get to know them.

5 Read news stories

Read the paper concerned each week and listen to any religious affairs programme on the local radio. Analyse what you see and hear so that you can see what a good news

story looks and sounds like. You are going to have to present yourself in the same way. This is very different from writing a church newsletter article or preaching a sermon!

6 **Use social media**

Make use of Facebook and Twitter to promote the good things that are happening in your church (with photos) and link to your local press and radio's social media output. If they then link to you, they can pick up stories without the need for media releases!

7 **Plan ahead**

List likely stories over the coming six months (but be ready for surprises too). Anything on your church's involvement in the local community should be on the list, anything unusual that would create interest, any national or local celebrities visiting you, any church members (especially children) winning awards. It is best to put out a release about every six or eight weeks but only when there is a good story to tell.

8 **Close something down**

If your resources are really limited and all this activity is more than you can manage, find something that you regard as less strategic and close the activity down. It may be tough, but unless you learn to do this you will never start something new. If engagement with the secular media is so strategic, there will be something else that is simply taking up resource with relatively little impact.

Search out good stories

The key to getting your media releases taken by press and radio is to spot what makes a good story. What church members feel is news-worthy may not come across in this way to those who know little about your church or the Christian faith.

In Training Notes TN39 on this website, the key features of a news story are given as being:

- **people-centred** (all about real people, or given a people-angle if it is not, not about events as such);
- **visual** (with people-pictures);
- **colourful** (including interesting details or unusual aspects, the more unusual the better);
- **topical** (bang up-to-date – with a hot-off-the-press feel to it – it needs to be new to be news);
- **relevant** (to those who are reading or listening to it and so shown to be local).

Each of these points is vital. You might like to test out Jesus' teaching to the crowds on each of the five. A humdrum story about a church service is not going to look attractive to a News Editor, but something focusing on something unusual about the speaker at the service (with a photograph of them engaging with a group of people) could be different.

Write a cracking media release

It is not difficult to learn how to write a media release, but it's not the same as normal prose. Before you read on, get a copy of a local newspaper and have it with you to give you practical examples as you read the following points.

1 **Give it a professional look**

A release needs to be on a quality letterhead which looks attractive and gives your church's name and contact details. Head it 'Media Release'. This will be an email attachment but it should be in Word not pdf for cutting and pasting. Space out the typing at something like 1.2 rather than single vertical spacing and leave good margins. BUT some media outlets dislike attachments and prefer you to cut and paste the text into the email itself. Find out what your outlets prefer and give them what they want.

2 **Define your story in one sentence**

Your first sentence is crucial. Look at the local paper and read several first sentences to see how the basic story is told without superfluous detail. Aim to include key words that are arresting not bland. Take time to get this right and try to include something local: a place or street name, for example. Don't try to make it 'religious'.

3 **Gradually add colourful detail**

The next few sentences should be active not passive tense and start to fill out the story in the first sentence with detail that matters. So 'Chapelton's MP Mavis Partridge cut the tape...' and not 'The pretty blue and pink tape was cut by Mavis Partridge...'

4 **Describe don't comment**

The story needs to be capable of being lifted straight into the newspaper or radio news bulletin, so 'Over 200 people crowded into the hall to hear Mavis...' and never 'We were delighted to see so many people...' Blue-pencil church jargon of any kind!

5 **Add colour**

Use adjectival phrases to add personal detail so '18 year-old school-leaver Jude Judkins ...' and not 'Jude Judkins, who is 18 years old and is about to leave school, ...'

6 **Choose a quote**

This is essential. Some key person needs to say something within quote marks. Check with the speaker before you write this but get a message into the words, not something bland. So not "'I've had a great day with you all," said Mavis Partridge', but "'The Kids Klub project", said Mavis Partridge, "is a shining example of what local people can do."'

7 **Get the layout right**

It needs a pithy heading in bold to start the piece bringing in key words and with a verb as its focus. So, 'Local MP opens Chapelton youth project'. Follow this with the date of the release. Then forget all you were told at school about paragraph construction. In a media release make almost every sentence its own paragraph with a full line gap after it. Read your local paper and you will see this is how the story is broken up. The whole release needs to be about 200-300 words.

8 **Add a photograph**

You need a good photo of MP Mavis cutting the tape with a crowd of local people all round her – and so much the better if the mayor is there and the Minister too! Even better to send two or three photos for the paper to choose from. Try to find

interesting and unusual angles. Send mid-size jpg versions (1MB) as attachments rather than blocking the News Editor's inbox with full size files.

9 **Include brief notes**

At the end it is good practice to say END which tells the outlet that is the end of the release and the rest is notes for information. These notes need to include the name and immediate contact details of the person responsible for the release. If the person is at work during the day it has to be their work number. Add any extra notes, information and statistics about the story or your church that the outlet may want to use. But not too much.

10 **Get it in fast**

Email it in within hours of the event taking place: that night for an event that day and making sure you've caught their press day. If they go to press on Tuesday night, a media release on Wednesday morning won't get you far. But you can also put out a release to attract media attention *before* the event too, writing it in the future tense. Don't miss those opportunities.

For further help and examples on a wider front than just media releases, see websites such as <https://www.yourchurchinthenews.org> and books such as *100 ways to get your church noticed* by Neil Pugmire (Church House Publishing). There is so much more you can do than what I have had space to cover here.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN89. See also Article A39, *A plan for your communications*, and Training Notes TN22, *Appoint a church photographer!*, TN39, *We've got news for you*, and TN75, *Writing for the media*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on some aspect of church communication.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN89 under Communication.

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