



# We've got news for you!

**TN39** Training Notes series: Communication

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**These notes form a natural partner to TN38, *We've got news for us!* That applied the concept of NEWS to your church's internal communication. It showed that we have stories to tell that people want to hear, but we often drain the life from them by turning them into dull notices or by using inappropriate means for putting them across.**

**In these notes I apply the same principles to what you tell people *outside* your church's membership. Some of the material in TN38 still applies, but the examples and approach are different.**

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- 1 Your church would like to invite people to your Christmas services by means of a leaflet to be posted into local letterboxes. So your Minister writes a letter starting 'My dear friends' and you follow it with a programme of your Sunday services and other activities. There is a 'warm invitation to join us'. Job done?

No! This is so predictable. If the same leaflet arrived on *your* doormat from a somewhere else, I doubt it would grab your attention. Is there not a better way in which to approach this?

- 2 A week ago you had a great Foreign Missions Anniversary Service. Praise the Lord that the church was full. The worship was uplifting. The visiting missionary speaker gave a powerful testimony. Ten people were convicted and came forward for prayer ministry. The love offering raised £156.59. (*Need I go on?\**)

The church leaders decide now to put out a press release. They ask you to do it. How would you go about this?

So, what is the answer to the closing questions in 1 and 2? First, some background.

\* *Underline any phrases in this piece that are **not** jargon of a certain Christian kind or unhelpful in some way.*

## What NEWS are you putting across?

By deliberate action, most churches are doing very little. For example, how many churches in your area have someone who is a 'press officer' or responsible for getting good stories into the local media on a regular basis? How well known in the community are all your website addresses? (See Training Notes TN89, *Hold the front page!*, for advice in this area.)

The means are there. They include:

- website (when seen as a means of outreach);
- local newspapers and radio;
- letterbox leaflets;
- visitor packs;
- community magazine;
- external signboards.

But bear in mind that you are also giving messages that may be more powerful than any of these by means of:

- the appearance of your church building and grounds;
- the behaviour of your church members at home, at school and at work (not to mention at church!);
- the activities you run (or don't run) within the local community.

There is little point in having a great website if your church members' cars clog up the streets around your church building on Sunday mornings, annoying the local population. The leaflet about the meaning of Easter may have little impact if church members have no concern for the problems of poverty, litter and drugs in the local area. How consistent is your church's total witness? Print should only support other means of communication.

## Get into NEWS-mode

### 1 Think NEWS

The first point is simply one of attitude. Most churches have human-interest stories that people outside are actually interested in. But they won't necessarily be interested in the same stories that your members want to hear.

Next month's sermon series announced to be on 2 Chronicles? Probable not! Home groups being restructured? Unlikely. But it's probable that your church has a number of stories about ordinary people doing unusual things today, linked in some way to the local community. Those are the NEWS stories you need to focus on.

### 2 Examine NEWS

For print, get hold of any local newspaper and see how to do it. Each news item is the telling of a story. Look at how the whole story is summarised in the first sentence. Count how many sentences there are per paragraph (you may be surprised). Note the difference in size between the heading and the text. Watch out for sub-headings and quotes. See what information is given about the people involved. Examine the pictures that go with the stories.

For speech, watch TV News with a critical eye. Note the use of presenters standing and sitting, and the different camera angles. Time the longest period on any one shot before it changes. Watch the variety of approaches. Examine the use of interview and the techniques for doing it well.

### 3 Understand NEWS

To be the kind of news that people want to read or hear, check out these points. This is the list from TN38 but it is even more important to note it in the external context here. The story needs to be:

- people-centred (all about real people, or given a people-angle if it is not);
- visual (with people-pictures);
- colourful (including interesting details or unusual aspects);
- topical (bang up-to-date – with a hot-off-the-press feel to it);
- relevant (to those who are reading or listening to it).

### Learn how to put NEWS across

The point is that you have to overcome a natural reluctance to read or listen to what you say. There are also many misconceptions about what you say if you are the Church (based on anything from the Vicar of Dibley to the latest tabloid scandal about any other Vicar).

When it comes to getting through to a reluctant readership or audience, here are actions that professional Christians find it very difficult to do. But each one is a vital lesson to learn.

- 1 Write in simple, jargon-free English. Test this on anything your church has written for non-members to see what would not be clearly understood. Remember that the following will not be familiar to many people: 'Easter' (its meaning), 'the cross', 'Holy Spirit', 'worship', 'Eucharist', let alone the denominational terms you may use.
- 2 Write paragraphs of only one or two sentences. If you have carried out the exercise above, you will now know that local newspapers rarely have more than two sentences per paragraph. They also have sub-headings and quote boxes to break up the text.
- 3 Give as much space to pictures as to words. Christians are people of the word and use as many as they possibly can. Sadly.
- 4 Deal with tangible ideas rather than concepts. We love to discuss the 'Kingdom of God' or 'incarnation'. The Gospels show Jesus talking about day-to-day farming life, or giving humorous accounts of ordinary people going about their daily business.
- 5 Tell stories and paint pictures rather than provide detailed teaching.
- 6 Leave matters open-ended. We tie everything up neatly. Jesus may have done this when he explained his parables to his disciples, but the crowds were left to work it out for themselves.

### Example

Here is a different approach to the letterbox leaflet idea outlined on the first page. I will follow some of the principles outlined in these notes.

- 1 Try to mobilise the church so that the leaflets can be handed over in person rather than posted through the letterbox. Print should back up personal contact rather than be a substitute for it.
- 2 Design a leaflet that has few words but plenty of people-pictures (in colour, naturally). If you have no one gifted in print design, you may need to buy this skill in.
- 3 Scrap the Minister's letter idea and go for four or five one/two sentence jargon-free commendations from members of the congregation. Aim to find a range of ages,

genders, family types, newcomers v old stagers, etc. Their words go alongside their photos (avoid convict-style photo-booth pics). See examples below.

- 4 By all means promote the Christmas services but let people know what to expect if they come (length of service, whether it is child-friendly, type of singing, etc.) and answer some of their likely questions (What's the dress code? Are there toilets? How much do I have to pay? Where do I park? Can I sit wherever I like?).
- 5 But see its purpose not as an invitation to one service but as a taster of what it is like to belong to the Christian community that is your church.

Here are some typical commendations (based on actual examples I have seen):

- ★ "I enjoy (name of church) because, for the first time in my life, I am accepted for who I am, and I've made loads of great friends." (teenager)
- ★ "When we first came here, the welcome was awesome. The friendly atmosphere embraces all ages. God is alive here, and the coffee and doughnuts each Sunday are great!" (young family)
- ★ "We're new to the Christian faith, but the members of the small group we belong to have become our closest friends. The teaching and laughs we have together help make sense of daily life." (older couple)

Small point: if people say things like these, do make sure the statements are true!

## Exercise

Writing a media release requires a certain technique (not covered in these notes, though for something similar see Training Notes TN75, *Writing for the media*). But have a go at the second example on page 1 by writing a story for the church website based round the event (you can make up the details for this exercise) and avoiding all jargon. That last point means you need to ignore most of the detail presented in the exercise! Don't forget the principles: people-centred, visual, colourful, topical, relevant.

In the example given it is now far too late for a press release. This needed to have been prepared before the event and then sent in immediately after it with some good quality, digital photographs.

These notes are available on John's website at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes) then TN39. See also TN9, *Which newspapers do people read?*, TN22, *Appoint a church photographer*, TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*, TN75, *Writing for the media*, TN89, *Hold the front page!*, and Article A14 *Create a quality website*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on communicating church news, either within or outside your church's membership.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow and cover the six categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN39 under Communication.

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