



# Writing for the media

**TN75** Training Notes series: Communication

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**Local newspapers continue to reach large audiences. Most also have busy websites and social media channels that increase their readerships.**

**The local media often welcome well-written topical, locally-relevant comment columns from a range of contributors – including faith groups.**

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So these notes have been prepared with four groups of churches in mind.

- 1 Those who have the opportunity to write a regular or occasional column in a local newspaper. The examples cited come from one such feature.
- 2 Other churches, to encourage them to pursue this possibility whether in print or in a 'Thought for today' feature on local radio.
- 3 Churches that put out media releases. But see also Training Notes TN89 for this.
- 4 Any church seeking to write material for those who are not members.

The particular examples given come from St Albans in Hertfordshire where *The Herts Advertiser*, a free weekly newspaper, carries a weekly column entitled *Faith Focus*.<sup>\*</sup> A team of about ten regular contributors write the column. The author of these notes has had the privilege of being part of this team for over 25 years.

It is a brilliant discipline to write for people who do not necessarily have any links with a church and to say something that would interest them in only a few words.

The team consists of members of various local churches (of different denominations) and a local Rabbi. The editor of the paper is happy to host the column because of the high quality

of the writing and the professional way in which the team is led and co-ordinated (by someone who has been a comms professional).

\*Until 2019 the column was titled *Public Pulpit* and appeared in another free newspaper in St Albans, *The Review*.

## How it's done

Here are the guidance notes that present contributors of the column work to (written by the team's co-ordinator who checks each contribution before submission). They provide a clear idea of the technique required and how this differs so markedly from the way many churches write material to be circulated outside their membership.

- “1     **Make it local.** Earth it in our local community. Try to include the words ‘St Albans and Harpenden’ (or another part of the local district) *in the first paragraph or two* or cite something clearly local in the piece.
- 2     **Make it relevant to local people.** You are not writing just for your own church or faith community but also for those with no faith. So copying something you have already written for your church etc. is unlikely to work. Avoid ‘jargon’ that only the ‘in crowd’ would understand.
- 3     **Make it punchy.** You only have 370 words so you can only make one point or tell one story. Cut out unnecessary words as you edit your piece before submitting it. Please don’t feel you have to explain everything by the end. A final sentence to make the reader think can be good.
- 4     **Make an impact.** But do so gently, as if you are speaking to someone in their front room, not standing on a soapbox. Please don’t be afraid to be controversial but, if so, do make it clear it’s your personal opinion and be true to the beliefs and values of the faith you represent.
- 5     Articles need to be submitted to (the [Co-ordinator] on (email address) who will forward them to the *Herts Advertiser*, who will publish them in print.
- 6     The deadline is Thursday evening the week before publication so please don’t be late. The deadline will be one or two days earlier when a bank holiday occurs before the publication date.
- 7     Break your piece at one or sometimes two sentences per paragraph. You are not writing prose! Occasional sentences can be devoid of a verb for impact.
- 8     Try to find a national or local story that will still be around next week, a national date that applies next week, or something that will not look silly if the paper is behind schedule. It needs to be relevant the following Thursday.
- 9     If your place of worship has done something unusual or special, it is fine to use the column to tell the story. Try to make a comment or create a challenge.
- 10    Please pray for all of the *Faith Focus* team on a regular basis: that we may write in a way that is interesting and provocative, and make people consider their beliefs.”

These ideas mean that writers have to 'unlearn' some of what may come naturally to them. Most newspaper items have only one or sometimes two sentences per paragraph which feels strange when writing like this for the first time. The point is to hold people's interest with frequent breaks.

You have to put yourself in your readers' shoes as you write because most of them will make no claim to be Christians and what interests you may well not be what interests them. Crucially, 370 words is not very much. There is no space for wasted phrases.

## What does it look like?

Here now are two examples from the author's contributions since the column switched to *The Herts Advertiser* to show how one writer has tried to follow these guidelines. Both were written during the Covid pandemic as will become obvious.

First, here is a column designed as a comment to fit the Christmas / New Year season (published in late December 2020). Note how it brings in the Christian faith in a natural way, trying to avoid any hint of preaching.

Exercise 1: you are the (Christian) editor of this column. How would you improve it to fit the guidelines given above?

### **2020: Not a year to forget**

The usual emphasis at New Year is to look ahead to what might be to come, whether we live in St Albans, Harpenden or one of the surrounding villages.

You may be longing for the vaccine for yourself and others. Or for the chance to see family members in the flesh.

You may hope you can get your business or workplace back to something approaching normality. Or to have the holidays you lost this past year.

But before we look ahead, let me commend the idea of reflecting on the past.

I am very aware some will want to forget 2020: the pain of the deaths of friends or family, the struggles to keep ourselves financially afloat, the job we lost, the loneliness we felt. It will be different for each one of us.

But to look back, to review, can also remind us of good things we have forgotten in the general mood of despair.

In the first lockdown, there was the team of those who spent a whole day sorting out the burst water main outside our house when most people were sheltering indoors.

There were those who kept the trains and buses operating. I was grateful for the AA man who sorted out our failed car battery and could not have been more friendly.

There were and are the check-out staff at the supermarket with only a plastic screen to protect them.

It was good to meet our neighbours each week as we clapped the NHS staff from our doorsteps. Oh, yes, the NHS staff and other keyworkers.

Then there are the people who invented Zoom without which life would have been very different (even if I have at times moaned at too much of it!).

As a Christian I also look back 2000 years to the baby who was born in Bethlehem, who became the man who was crucified in Jerusalem. He was gloriously raised to life and is alive as Lord today.

That is known as the gospel which means Good News. It is far more significant than all the bad news of 2020, and even of all the good memories of the past year too.

The second example from just a few months later in 2021 was written just after a funeral for a loyal church member. It seeks to make its point by telling a human-interest story.

Exercise 2: again, you are the (Christian) editor of this column. How would you improve it to fit the guidelines given above?

### **The secret I never guessed**

I was one of the permitted 30 people at a funeral in St Albans last week.

The lady who had died was 97. Covid had got her, appalling thing that it is, and she died without friends around her in Watford General.

I thought I knew her. How wrong I was!

She was an inspiration. We often gave her a lift to the early Sunday morning service at our church.

She loved being there – and over coffee afterwards she was all smiles, interested in everyone.

Dear Alice. What a lovely person. Few worries it would seem.

The tribute at her funeral was read by a cousin. Then came the bombshell.

Her mother died giving birth to her youngest sister. Then her father died when Alice was seven.

All the children were sent to an orphanage where they were separated so they did not see each other. Alice was brought up there until she was 11, and then in a school which took some orphans in.

But it was all rather cold – never a cuddle for a poor, lonely child.

Aged 16 she had to leave with all her possessions in one bag in the middle of the Second World War to make her way in life.

Amazingly things went well for her. After the war she went on to become a telephonist at the GPO.

Her enunciation was so good they played a recording of her voice to new recruits as an example of the standard expected!

She then worked at St Albans Police Station until she retired.

So here was someone who always saw the positive side of life, who radiated joy, who had a firm Christian faith, but whose early life was so tough.

It made me think.

Why do I moan at minor inconveniences in my relatively easy life?

Why am I so self-centred?

Why did she not tell me what she had been through?

But Alice would have smiled at that last question and have told me that God had been good to her. That Jesus was her friend.

I made assumptions so I never discovered her secret story. What else in life have I missed?

So how about trying your local newspaper or local radio station? If you already do something like this, please email me so I can share your experiences through the 'Author's notes' box for this item on the website.

If you write columns like this, do flag them up on your church's website, Twitter feed and Facebook page. It's worth using every channel that is available.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes> then TN75. John is grateful to Peter Crumpler, who co-ordinates the *Faith Focus* writers' team, for his permission to use the set of guidelines printed here and for all his wisdom and support for the column.

See also Training Notes TN39, *We've got news for you!*, TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*, and TN89, *Hold the front page!*, which should be read with these notes. Also Article A21, *The use of print in outreach* and A39, *A plan for your communications*.

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

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN75 under Communication.

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