

Media and the Message

If the Church wants to have an impact on society, we need to share our stories



Take an editor or news director for lunch. Tell them what a Salvationist really is

RECENTLY I INTERVIEWED BRUCE WILKINSON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *The Prayer of Jabez*, *The Dream Giver*, and now, *Beyond Jabez*. He's living his dream to make a difference for the neediest parts of Africa. Not content to worry about the poor or wish something could be done, he has his eyes set on planting a million gardens to help the impoverished be employed on their land.

I was impressed that a wealthy Christian had the courage to begin a new mission out of South Africa. As founder of Dream for Africa and Global Vision, Beliefnet reports that "Mr Wilkinson was speaking to 1,000 religious leaders in Kenya when he asked them to stand if they had anyone from their immediate family die of AIDS. Everyone stood. Stunned by that response, he then asked how many had preached at least one sermon on AIDS. Only three stood."

In a subsequent conversation with Kenya's president, Wilkinson felt led to get involved in a film for Africans about AIDS. As I talked with Mr Wilkinson, he explained some of the negotiations underway for *Beat the Drum*, the movie he's involved with that is based on the life of a Zulu boy whose parents die of AIDS.

"If I wanted to make any strategic investment for God's work, I would invest in media," Mr Wilkinson told me, and passionately explained his interest in television and film. I've been thinking about his conviction ever since.

Here's a preacher whose work has taken him all over the world. He's seen great need, dreamed big dreams and has realized that, when it comes to spreading the news of Jesus and hope for the world, media is the frontier to be conquered.

It reminds me of when Oprah Winfrey was asked if she would consider running for president of the United States. Oprah, the woman we all know by her first name, replied that she had more power and influence through her television show than she thought she could gain at the White House.

As the people of God in our country, it's time we start to dream some Great Commission dreams about the power of media. Where do we begin?

We start by encouraging our leaders to have a relationship with

media bosses in our communities. They need to know how Christians think, work and play. Don't feel pressure to convert them, but let them know The Salvation Army is an approachable, listening, learning and serving part of the community. Take an editor or news director for lunch—find out how they got into their craft, and tell them how you got into yours. Tell them what a Salvationist really is.

Next, let's share our values. As few as 10 complaints may be enough to get a program or commercial pulled from airtime—sometimes it takes hundreds, but generally, even a few calls gets action. Quite simply, public feedback really matters and every phone call informing a station manager of the values of their constituency is noted and adapted to.

Most importantly, we need to share our stories. The Army is packed with them, and the way to pitch to the storytellers of our day is to think through five basic questions: What's the situation? How did it happen? What are our options? What were the critical moments? What was the turning point? If you're having trouble rousing the interest of an editor, simply announce: "We're facing a critical situation here at the Citadel, you may want to send a reporter over."

Reporters turn a story around in less than a day. Your availability and quick access to facts are important. During the federal election I was part of a CBC National report assessing the power of Christianity in the upcoming vote. I winced as the report aired a news clip about a church with less than 15 people.

I called the reporter to ask why she had chosen that particular church, and she sighed with frustration. She had tried over 10 churches, some of them several hundred strong, but none had been willing to let the CBC in on a Sunday morning. I know it's a risk to let the media have access to you, but it's also a risk to deny them; we risk growing stranger and more unknown to our neighbours.

Prior to Easter our TV program went to downtown Toronto and spent 90 minutes asking people on the street if they could tell us why they celebrated Easter. Only two people gave the Christian meaning for the holiday, and one of those was Buddhist. Our producer was nearly in tears, appalled at how unknown the Cross of Christ was to the masses. We desperately need to introduce our stories and personalities into the media.

Finally, encourage the Christian media and Christians working in media. Let's not forget a new generation holds the hope for involvement. Teens interested in this field should be trained and mentored on how to redeem this powerhouse for Kingdom purposes. **H**



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