

COMMUNICATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

DECEMBER 2012

Telling the truth

The right to public memory

BY DIANA SWIFT

In North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia and Australasia—wherever groups of people have been systematically victimized—thousands are still living with the pain of past atrocities, acts that have remained publicly unacknowledged. Their right to public memory has been suppressed.

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has been a pioneer in advocating for the right to public memory. “It came out of our long-term work in communication rights,” says Philip Lee, WACC’s deputy director of programs. “You can’t really claim to have freedom of expression unless you have the right to know and remember what happened in the past, and to tell your stories in public.”

Sometimes, governments and others may try to repress these stories in an effort to move on and leave the past behind. Not surprisingly, those most affected by the loss of their history are the most vulnerable: minorities, indigenous peoples and the poor.

But to reconcile should not mean to forget, Lee points out, adding that sweeping tragic events under the national rug is no foundation for social renewal. WACC, therefore, supports projects that help people reclaim the past and bring them into the public sphere so that all citizens can understand the basis on which their country moves forward.

“We are looking at the role of the mass media in this process since they are often owned by government or conservative business interests that stand to reap political and economic gains by suppressing these stories,” says Lee.

After the 12-year civil war in El Salvador ended in 1992 and left some 75,000 people dead, WACC supported the production of several videos documenting government-sanctioned massacres. One of these was the 59-minute 2008 documentary *Colima*, recounting a 1980 massacre by the paramilitary in a remote village. It broke the silence and opened up the long path toward acknowledgment and restoration of dignity. In 2010, WACC supported the production of several short videos documenting other massacres that took place in El Salvador during the 1980s and ’90s.

WACC also supported the creation of a communication network for the families of victims. The group CO-DEFAM organized discussions with



MUSEUM OF MEMORY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

LEST WE FORGET At the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, a young girl touches a wall that names victims of the brutal dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–90), in which more than 3,000 people “disappeared.” The museum functions as a healing bridge between past and present, and aims to restore a sense of dignity to those who lost family and friends. WACC has been a pioneer in the concept of the right to public memory, insisting that public memory and acknowledgment are essential aspects of political justice.

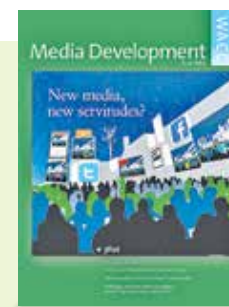


WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A THOUSAND WORDS An audience watches the film *Colima*, which served as a catalyst for the exhumation, identification and return of the bodies of massacred victims in El Salvador’s civil war.

family representatives and local action groups, and set up a witness web page for posting stories and testimonies. It also co-ordinated training programs for young people wishing to take part in the project. In special workshops, families from different parts of the country came together to share information about their legal rights and the role of communication in restoring public memory of suppressed events. “Some 240 individuals were empowered to communicate their stories and needs,” says Lee.

Continuing WACC’s role as a standard bearer for the right to know the past, Philip Lee served as editor of the book *Public Memory, Public Media and the Politics of Justice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). This collection of papers explores how memory is constructed and controlled in different societies, and identifies links between the politics of memory, media representations and the politics of justice. “It basically questions what we think we know about recent history,” says Lee.



READ ALL ABOUT IT

WACC’s flagship publication, *Media Development*, is an international quarterly journal dedicated to the theory and practice of communication around the world. Many contributors write from the perspective of the South, highlighting that hemisphere’s social, cultural and spiritual values. Each issue offers informed opinions on topics related to a main theme. The journal also publishes relevant documents and conference reports, as well as film and book reviews. To order, go to <http://tinyurl.com/adz5erm> or email info@WACCglobal.org or call 416-691-1999, ext. 221.

This report was made possible with a grant from the World Association for Christian Communication.



Knowledge is power

BY DIANA SWIFT

Most of us in North America believe that communication is free—like the air we breathe. Yet that is not always the case. Many countries face communication restrictions or censorship. Many are information-poor.

Imagine living in a society where you do not have the right to listen, view, read or be heard; where you are denied access to information deemed essential in other societies for human dignity and quality of life. Imagine being ostracized like a medieval leper for having HIV because your country lacks the means to disseminate accurate information on transmission, prevention and treatment, and citizens lack the literacy skills to read it. Think of

“Think of the pain of living in a society where the records of past atrocities are ploughed under in a field of silence so that victims’ stories are rarely heard.”

the pain of living in a society where the records of past atrocities—of massacres and disappearings and genocides—are ploughed under in a field of silence so that victims’ stories are rarely heard.

This is the kind of society that the World Association for Christian Com-

munication (WACC) is striving to change, replacing silence with an inclusive climate of communication and knowledge sharing. WACC believes that the absence of communication, the withholding of information at both the national and community levels, are just as much a part of unjust global structures as unfair wages, inequitable land ownership, gender discrimination and restricted access to nutrition, water, education and health care. It believes that, through communication, many wounds can be healed and many unjust structures can be made right. Read on to learn about some of WACC’s important projects around the world.

DIANA SWIFT is a contributing editor to the *Anglican Journal*.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW

Strengthening networks of communicators

Do you know what WACC is? If not, you’re in good company. The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)—an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right—may be one of the best-kept secrets in Christian networking today.

WACC strongly supports the communication of human rights through the arts. In 2010, it gave its annual human rights award to the documentary film *The Garden at the End of the World*. Directed by Australian filmmaker Gary Caganoff, the film explores the tragic consequences of war in Afghanistan and the widespread hunger, homelessness and lawlessness that war leaves in its wake. In particular, it focuses on the lives of widows and orphans.

Rooted in the Christian faith, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, gender or illiteracy. It advocates inclusive information and knowledge, promotes societies with full access to communication and supports open and diverse media.

“WACC strengthens networks of communicators to promote greater understanding of peace and social justice,” says Philip Lee, WACC’s Toronto-based deputy director of programs.

Although the association’s

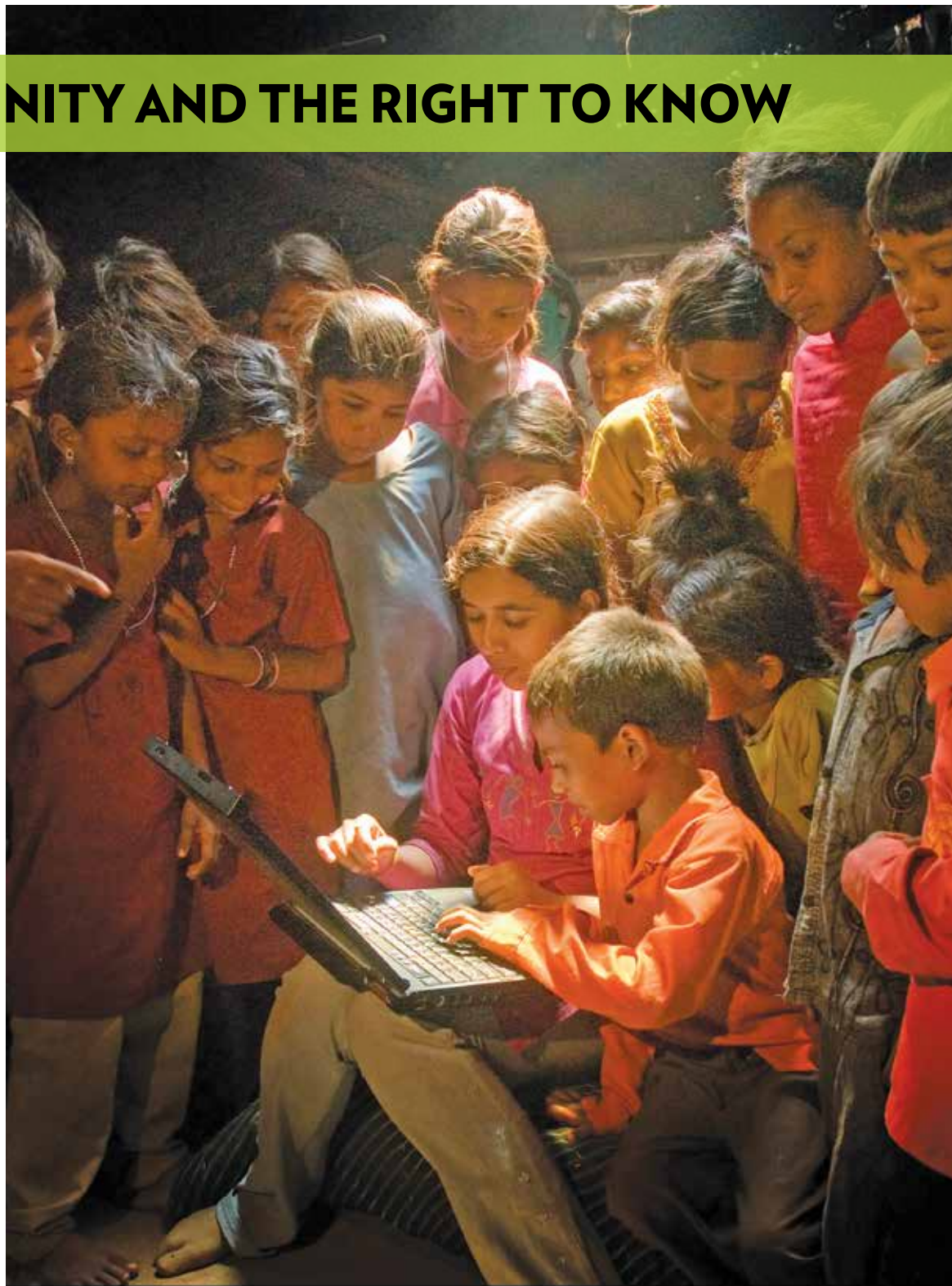


PHOTO: TEACH FOR TOMORROW BY CHETAN SONI

OPENING UP THE WORLD A volunteer teaches basic computer skills to tribal children in India.

history dates back to 1950, the current organization was established in 1968 when the former World Association

for Christian Broadcasting merged with groups of North American communicators. WACC Canada was

registered as a not-for-profit business in Canada in 2006 and became a Canadian charitable organization in 2008,

with its headquarters based in Toronto. It also maintains an office in London, England.

The association’s broad base of international funding partners includes churches, government agencies, charities and social justice groups.

Today, WACC has 1,500 corporate and personal members and affiliates in 120 countries across eight regions: Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America and the Pacific.

Under the leadership of WACC’s Toronto-based general secretary, the Rev. Dr. Karin Achtelstetter—a Lutheran minister and former director of the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva—members champion communication for social change. Their abiding belief is that communication defines people’s common humanity, strengthens cultures, enables participation, creates community and challenges tyranny and oppression.

Significantly, WACC is genuinely ecumenical in its composition and activities, encouraging co-operation between Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic communicators. While challenging Christian denominations to seek the broadest possible base for their communication activities, WACC also promotes co-operation between people of other faiths and ideologies.

For more information about the World Association of Christian Communication and how you can become a member, go to www.waccglobal.org —D.S.



“Maybe it’s easier for university students to lose their fear. But for us women, because we have only a basic education, to lose our fear is a very big challenge. Thanks to the varied training we’ve received in communities such as this, we have overcome, bit by bit, our fear of speaking into microphones, and have gone on to explain, to show our faces and to say, ‘I belong to the community.’ For women it is especially difficult, but I feel proud to be a people’s reporter who transmits news from her community to society.

— Marta Condori
Tambillo de Laja, Bolivia

EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS AND DISABLED PEOPLE IN BOLIVIA

You’re a member of Bolivia’s indigenous Aymara community, living in a small rural village. As a speaker of an aboriginal language (one of 36 in the country), you have only a few years of primary school, a sketchy knowledge of Spanish and therefore limited ability to communicate your needs and to understand and receive your rightful entitlements as a citizen.

That’s why WACC’s current flagship project—based in Bolivia’s capital city of La Paz and its sister city, El Alto—is directed at helping indigenous people, particularly women. Co-funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, this year-old project is working with two Bolivian partner groups to train indigenous citizens to understand how the mass media work and how grassroots organizations can harness them to their benefit on issues that affect them.

“The program has two strands,” says María Teresa Aveggio, program manager for recognizing and building communication rights. “The

first is building capacity and empowerment so that people can make their rightful claims to entitlements like housing, education and health care. The other is a novel pilot project establishing a communication index, which is a tool to measure the degree to which communication freedoms exist in the country.”

In the first arm of the project, community leaders attend workshops in media structure and organization. They learn how to write stories clarifying their needs and aspirations, and how to approach, say, their community radio stations to spread important messages and draw more people into the discussion. In case their requests for a village teacher, doctor, housing or water are ignored, they also learn how to take their concerns up a step to a newspaper or television station in a nearby city, and so on up to the national level, until their issues are addressed.

Aveggio is particularly excited about the second aspect of the Bolivian project. Based loosely on the United Nations’ Human Development

Index, this instrument is designed to evaluate access to communication at different levels of society, from local to national. Is communication available to speakers of indigenous languages? And since the project also focuses on people with disabilities, is information available in Braille or via devices for the hearing-impaired?

WACC chose Bolivia for this experiment because about two years ago, Bolivia became the first country in the world to write into its constitution the universal right to communication. “If it works in the context of Bolivia, the model can be replicated in other countries,” says Aveggio.

For the Rev. Dr. Karin Achtelstetter, WACC’s general secretary, the ultimate outcome of this communication project is human dignity for indigenous and disabled citizens: “A person will be able to say, ‘This is my right. I am not begging. I am not asking for charity. This is in the constitution and it is my right to ask for it because I am a full member of society.’”

— D.S.

CECOP (CENTER FOR EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND PEOPLES)

Marta Condori communicates her needs as a citizen of Bolivia’s indigenous Aymara community.

PROMOTING ACCEPTANCE OF PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS

In the Nigerian city of Lagos, home to almost eight million souls, WACC works with Hope for HIV/AIDS International (HFA) to promote acceptance of people with HIV/AIDS.

“Mainstream society tends to ostracize whole families because of HIV/AIDS in violation of their rights,” says Dr. Sarah Macharia, WACC’s Kenya-born program manager for HIV/AIDS communication and stigma. So WACC is helping HFA sponsor a communication training program for Christian and Muslim clergy to combat the stigma.

Upon completing the joint training program, Christian pastors receive a wooden cross tied with a red ribbon. Muslim imams get a wooden crescent tied with a red ribbon. During recent sessions, which take place at a Christian office, some Imams may well have stood up and graciously said, “Praise the Lord,” with the Christian pastors



“The two major faith groups are willing to work together as a team, as community change agents.

— Lolade Abioye
Project Administrator
Hope for HIV/AIDS International, Lagos

responding in Arabic with “As-salaam alaykum” (peace be upon you).

After training, clergy return to their congregations and act as communicators to challenge the stigmatization of affected people and their next of kin. The clergy remain the principal purveyors of information in their regular ongoing interactions with congregants. But at the same time, there’s a “knock-on effect in the congregations, a snowball effect,” Macharia says.

Conceived in 2010, the project will end in 2014. “But we hope the commu-

nity will take ownership and continue on with it,” she says. Funded chiefly by the U.K. government’s department for international development, this initiative receives input from WACC in terms of staff time and consulting visits to Lagos.

In the early planning stages, the project was targeted at the Christian community only. Recognizing, however, that 30 per cent of the population of Lagos is Muslim, the organizers asked, “Why not include Muslims since they live alongside Christians?”

Among the perceived stumbling blocks were the project’s clearly Christian sponsorship and training venue and the presence of biblical messages in the program materials. Should they hold separate sessions for Muslims? But when men in skullcaps and women in hijab showed up, it was clear that a separate training course would not be necessary.

As follow-up after training, the Christian and Muslim clerics in each of the 10 municipal districts served by the communication program meet once a month with a community leader to discuss their experiences.

“The inter-religious connection was a big surprise for us and our partners,” says Macharia. “The Muslims come to a Christian office and see beyond the faith divisions. They see how they can better serve those who look up to them.”

— D.S.



LESLIE KNOTT

BREAKING WITH TRADITION Shrouded in a burka, a female journalist conducts an interview in the northern Afghanistan village of Maimana for her radio station's agriculture program. The program runs on Radio Quyaash, an independent broadcasting facility managed by women. This photo, taken by Leslie Knott, a photojournalist based in Kabul, was a recent winner in WACC's annual photo competition.

A VOICE FOR HEALING IN SIERRA LEONE

In November 2012, Radio Shalom, a peace-and-reconciliation station run by the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone, began broadcasting—thanks to funds raised by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

Operating from Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, Radio Shalom is expected to be an important voice for healing in this West African country, which is still recovering from a decade of devastating civil war in which 50,000 people died. Broadcasting is an essential medium of communication in this country since an estimated 80 per cent of the population cannot read.

The station will broadcast programs aimed at peace



and reconciliation, and work toward healing war trauma and promoting harmony between different ethnic and religious groups. It will focus especially on youth and children, filling in gaps in their education and encouraging them to become peace ambassadors in schools and communities.

"The broadcasting equipment reached Freetown in

October and was set up in the station," says Philip Lee, WACC's deputy director of programs in Toronto.

In an initial fundraising push during April 2012, WACC met the qualifying target amount of US\$4,000 and became a permanent member of GlobalGiving, an online funding platform for humanitarian aid and development (www.globalgiving.org).

As of mid-October, the campaign was just a few thousand dollars short of its goal of US\$12,000. One gift of US\$4,000 came from a donor in Tahiti who wanted to show solidarity with the people of Sierra Leone. Donations can be made at www.globalgiving.org.

—D.S.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



SOCIAL MEDIA

WACC is exploring ethical questions raised by the explosion of online information platforms and citizen journalists. "We have a plan to come up with a code of ethical practice that bloggers and citizen journalists could subscribe to—a standard that would encourage objectivity and impartiality in their reporting of events," says Philip Lee, deputy director of programs.



JUSTICE AND PEACE

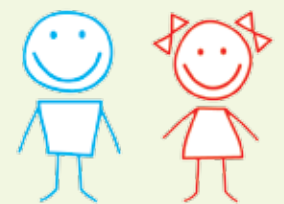
WACC will have a strong presence at the World Council of Churches' Assembly in Busan, Korea, in 2013. Its vision of communication for all will be explored in presentations, workshops and an exhibition of practical resources—yet one more way in which WACC is seeking to change the world for the better.



GLOBAL FINANCE

WACC is throwing its support behind efforts to redesign the global financial and economic architecture to be fairer to poor and marginalized people. At a recent international meeting in São Paulo, Brazil, it argued that since the global information and communication system is part of this unjust structure, communication rights and access to communication technology must be part of the transformation.

"To achieve economic and social justice, we need to bridge the digital divide as much as the North-South



GENDER BALANCE

WACC is planning to launch a learning resource kit for gender-ethical journalism and media-house policy, prepared in collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists. This resource will promote fair gender coverage and non-sexist language in the media. —D.S.

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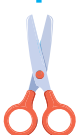
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