Christianity – Orthodoxy and the Media in the Modern World

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"Communication Rights, Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue"

Philip Lee DD (h.c.)

The vision of the World Association for Christian Communication[1] (WACC), an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, is "Communication for All". Ecumenical by nature, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, or gender. It advocates full access to information and communication, promotes open and diverse media, and seeks to advance peace, greater understanding and justice.

WACC believes that creating meaning in common reflects the spiritual values at the heart of human identity. Consequently, creating meaning in common is a journey that Christians share with people of other faiths and none. It is a journey that sets out to build relationships and a sense of connectedness.

Communication builds connectedness
Today's globalized world is mired in multiple conflicts, ranging from ethnic and religious tensions, to wide disparities between rich and poor, to the challenges of climate justice. Contemporary media narratives, rooted in the conviction that polemic attracts bigger audiences, tend to exacerbate rather than assuage these tensions.

In today's world, developing communication skills that flow from an understanding of what all people have in common – their *interconnectedness* – is urgent. Building connectedness through communication affirms the uniqueness of each person and each community: their faces, stories and experiences. In this way "the other" is not merely a set of sociological data, but a being who is valued and who deserves to be understood. This implies giving "others" the space to be themselves, a space in which they are free to say what they think provided it is not intended to harm or misinform.

Connectedness emphasizes human dignity, potential and creativity, as well as human vulnerability. It persuades us to seek new forms of dialogue and action that transcend the boundaries of religion and ideology and that empower persons and communities.

Communication that builds connectedness means establishing relationships of loving care with each other and the wider creation, acknowledging and taking responsibility for humanity's place within creation's interdependent whole.

In 2005, the World Council of Churches held a conference titled "Critical Moment in Interreligious Relations and Dialogue". It was aimed at promoting debate about the significance of being in dialogue and at facilitating critical reflection on future directions. The conference took the form of a bridge-building conversation between those who focus on inter-religious dialogue and those who concentrate on social justice issues in the midst of religious differences.

Calling for partnerships, alliances, interaction, and collaboration, His Holiness Catholicos Aram I identified the essential conditions for what he described as "credible dialogue". His Holiness outlined the following framework as a way of helping religions take a coherent approach to crucial issues in the life of societies and a way of leading towards healing and reconciliation. He said that:

- By deepening knowledge of each other through inter-religious dialogue, we must affirm, assess and respect the integrity and distinctiveness of each religion.
- Dialogue must be guided by a comprehensive approach and broader vision; at the same time it must clearly spell out existing differences.
- If dialogue is to be credible, we must recognize its limits, its limitations, and its risks.
- As an exchange of perspectives and experiences aimed at convergence, dialogue must take place in a concrete milieu and derive its agenda from its place and be responsive to the particularities of that place.
- In dialogue we must not only talk with each other; we must listen to each other in the spirit of belonging to a common humanity.
- Credible dialogue shapes and reshapes our attitude towards the other and enriches our identity in relation, not in opposition, to the other.
- Credible dialogue does not question the claims of other religions, nor does it seek compromise. It enhances the common search for truth through awareness-building and education.

Recent thinking among communication experts and practitioners stresses the need to reinvigorate the essential meaning of "to communicate", understood as a process of sharing, making common, and creating community. In other words, what might be described as a conversational mode of communication that is not confined to providing and imparting information, but in which people are listened to and have access to public spaces where dialogue can take place.

Where does one learn such dialogue? By and large, it is not taught in primary and secondary schools. It may be an element of university education in the model of the tutorial, less so in the model of the debating club. And the mass media are not particularly helpful, since traditional media structures have tended to be one-way and only recently have more interactive models appeared in the shape of digital platforms. Is genuine dialogue taught in seminaries? It's an open question.

And yet, when two or more people experience a sense of common purpose and are fully engaged with what is taking place and its potential for positive change – what elsewhere might be described as being in communion – it is transformative. It becomes the kind of engaged dialogue that is most democratic, in which everyone is listened to and everyone takes part on an equal footing.

In this respect, ecumenical dialogue can be represented as a co-pilgrimage that must remain open, fluid and dynamic. In other words, ecumenical dialogue is always on the move, adapting to changing circumstances. I do not mean that it lacks substance or depth, but that its resilience depends on its ability to deepen knowledge, to celebrate difference, to take risks, to listen, to seek truth, and to respond justly. But, in order for ecumenical dialogue to become process, communication bridges must be set up where there are none and warm encouragement given to people to cross them – people who are concerned about issues of social justice and human dignity.

Today's communication technologies – digital platforms, community and social media – offer a historically unparalleled opportunity to build such bridges. People are able to tell their own stories, to create understanding, and to exchange those stories and understandings rapidly and at relatively low cost.

Of course, there are problems. No technology comes without ideological strings attached and it was to be expected that digital media would raise many questions of journalistic integrity, credibility and ethics. But there is still enormous potential for communication technologies to help build bridges and to enhance social, cultural, and ecumenical dialogue.

Communication for All
In light of the above, and believing that communication embodies respect for the dignity, integrity, equality and freedom of all human beings and their communities, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) recognizes communication rights as underlying all other human rights.

Communication rights claim space in the public sphere for everyone to be able to engage in transparent, informed and democratic debate. They claim unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to democracy, empowerment, responsible citizenship and mutual accountability. They claim political, social and cultural environments that encourage the free exploration and exchange of creative ideas, knowledge and cultural products. Finally, communication rights insist on the need to

protect a diversity of cultural identities that together enhance and enrich the common good.

The document *Communication for All: Sharing WACC's Principles* (approved by WACC in 2012) [2] affirms the centrality of communication – including mass, community and social media – to strengthening human dignity and to promoting democratic values, social justice, and peace.

It is the kind of communication identified by His All Holiness, Bartholomew I, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch in his address to the 17th Eurasian Economic Summit (4-6 February 2014) in Istanbul, Turkey: Communication that "draws people of diverse religious beliefs and differing cultural backgrounds out of their isolation, preparing them for a process of mutual respect, understanding and acceptance."

His All Holiness concluded that, " It is our unswerving conviction that when we truly desire this kind of encounter and communication and our hearts sincerely seek these, then we will somehow find ways to coexist in spite of differences in our faiths and in our cultures."

Notes
1. http://waccglobal.org/home
2. http://waccglobal.org/who-we-are/our-organization/principles

Philip Lee joined the staff of the World Association for Christian Communication (www.waccglobal.org) in 1975, where he is currently Deputy Director of Programs and Editor of the international journal *Media Development*. His publications include *The Democratization of Communication* (ed.) (1995), *Many Voices, One Vision: The Right to Communicate in Practice* (ed.) (2004); *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares* (ed.) (2008); and *Public Memory, Public Media, and the Politics of Justice* (ed.) (2012). In 2013 he was conferred Doctor of Divinity (Honoris Causa) by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration, Chennai, India.