

THE TASK OF THE MEDIA TODAY

By Nyansako-ni-NKU

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this seminar on Communication, organized by the Communication Department of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. The Rev. Achowah Umenei, who heads that department is himself a trained media man with a lot of experience in that area. He currently holds the position of Africa President of the World Association for Christian Communication.

Jesus Christ said, **“He who does not gather with me scatters”** (Mtt. 12:30).

We in the Presbyterian Church have a long history of involvement in Communication. Soon after the attainment of constitutional autonomy, a small journal called “the MESSENGER” was born. It has evolved with time into a beautiful colour magazine, done by highly trained media professionals. In the area of electronic media, we were amongst the first to engage in broadcasting when what is now known as CRTV, Buea used to broadcast through Eastern Nigeria Broadcasting Service, Enugu, Nigeria. And as far back as the very early seventies, we started investing in training personnel in this area.

This workshop is only one of many that we have organized for media personnel in this country, irrespective of religious belief and without gender limitation. Communication is a rapidly evolving discipline, and we believe that those involved in it should be constantly abreast with the new ideas and practices. And since communication is so much rooted in human behaviour, it is extremely necessary for its practitioners to be versed with behavioural change because all of humanity is in a state of rapid social change.

The Church is the harbinger of human salvation in Jesus Christ. It is also God’s instrument of love to the world and a channel of blessing to the human society. Now all this has to do with good communication. God communicated himself to the world, (Jn. 1:14). God visited the human race through his Son Jesus Christ who paid the supreme sacrifice of love by his death on the cross. Jesus Christ stands out as the perfect

communicator. In about two years he had unfolded God's plan of salvation for the world and was gone. Yet the impact of his presence and the strength of that message continue to mesmerize the world. Like one Christian writer has said, **“I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that have ever ruled, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth, like this one solitary personality (Jesus Christ)”**. So we in the Church have the greatest story to tell. We have to let people know that good communication can lead to life and construction, while bad communication leads to confusion and most often death.

That explains why the Church pays such a high interest in communication. During the war, a message was sent from the Commander of the Army in the battle field to the headquarters, through moss code. The message read, **“Send re-enforcements we are going to advance”**. By the time it reached the headquarters it had been so mutilated to read **“Send three and four pence we are going to a dance”**. It left the generals in the headquarters wondering why troops in the battle field would have to go to a dance. In the meantime, the troops waited in vain for badly needed re-enforcement. In another instance, a young pastor wanted to help his parishioners to improve their literacy skills. He sent an announcement for a course in **“rapid reading”**. An old woman who had always wanted to rear rabbits turned up, because the reader read it to sound as **“a course in rabbit breeding”**. She was so utterly frustrated. Communication touches deeply the human life. It has to do with our emotions and sentiments. It influences behavioural patterns, affects our psychology and contributes immensely in influencing human dignity.

Furthermore, our communication endeavours have to be firmly situated in our African culture. Our value systems are different from those who live in the industrialized, secular cultural contexts of the north. As communicators, we should be very sensitive to this, and ensure always that our endeavours in communication, while upholding its universal canons, must remain strongly rooted in our cultural milieu.

It is said that, Rene Descartes the French mathematician and philosopher, was the first to liberate philosophical thought from the confines of tradition bound scholasticism. That is why people like Hegel have referred to him as the father of modern philosophy. But he influenced western philosophical thinking a lot in the realm of the rational individual, when he said, **“I think, therefore I am”**.

In sharp contrast to that, African thinkers like Nkrumah, Nyerere and John Mbiti, locate the centre of our being in the community. In fact Prof. John Mbiti, the Kenyan theologian says, **“I am because we are and since we are therefore I am”**. The African believes that a person only exists in his relationship to the community. As communicators, if we fail to be sensitive to this we would run into so many road blocks and all our work in communication would be futile.

It has been emphasized over and over that the goal in communications is to get someone else to know or experience something that you do. The more complete this transfer of knowledge is, the better the communication.

I read the experience of somebody who was translating for a visiting American preacher in a small church in an African village. The preacher wanted to talk about God’s gifts to humanity through an illustration. He said **“Last winter when the fuel man delivered oil to our house he gave my wife a thermometer for a Christmas present”**. The Youngman tried in vain to translate this sentence because the ideas were so alien to people who lived in an entirely different cultural context. I think an American audience would be just as mystified if a Cameroonian should begin a sermon with the sentence, **“One of the most powerful objects in the village was a cow’s horn which contained medicine purchased by several goats from the Ngambi man”**. The point we are making is that all our efforts in communication must aim at relevance. If there is no relevance, all our work will be an exercise in futility.

We live in ominous times. Judging from the signs of the times, it is as if the world is poised to commit suicide. Most of the people who constitute our audience are weighed down by burdens and stress.

A young university graduate went home to see his family. His grand mother, old and feeble was quite disillusioned. He enquired to know what was the matter troubling her. In response, she complained about the difficult times. She said, **“Many years ago, when you were a little boy, the village health centre was doing very well. The school was functioning better. And the prices of kerosene, soap and salt in the village market were affordable. “But today” she said, “prices are impossible. They are up there in the sky”.** She turned to her grand son and asked, **“What is happening my little child?”** To which the boy responded, **“It is independence, grand ma. Those days are gone. Now is independence”.** Confused and frustrated the poor old woman retorted: **“Which time independence go finish?”** (In other words, “when will independence end?)

I have heard it being said repeatedly by state functionaries that the role of communication in Africa is to promote Government’s effort in the area of development. Well, I think that is fair enough. I also believe that the communication industry in our context should address the troubling areas of poverty, disease, good governance, road infrastructure, etc. But, it must also be recognized that in the pursuit of that goal, we have had to sacrifice the development of the individual. Since there is such a constant fear of the state axe falling on the press at anytime in the name of national security, there is a paralyzing fear in some quarters of the media to criticise the functioning of the state. In the name of national development the Press has been expected to stay silent when individual human liberties have been suppressed, or when there have been blatant cases of social inequities or when people have been exposed to injustice. The result is that because the media have been gagged or bought off, the governing elite comfortably metamorphoses into a dictatorship, which they insistently miscall democracy.

Let us also remember that the pursuit of excellence should be at the base of all our endeavours in Mass Communication. Facts are sacred. So what is not verifiable is not worth publishing. We have seen how fakes and charlatans, unable to withstand the rigours of merit and professionalism, have resorted to cheap, dirty yellow journalism that demeans the profession. Instead of resorting to a display of facts, they prefer an exhibition of sensation. In our context, the media would be contributing a lot to

development by upholding what promotes truth, justice and the economy of the earth. Thus, the media should seek to build a society that is just, participatory and protects the integrity of creation.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:32).

You remember the song **“Blowing in the Wind”**. It was one of the many protest songs that moved the world during the decade of the sixties. That was when civil strife reigned in university campuses in Europe and America, in demand of greater freedoms. It was one of the best songs of that famous trio, Peter, Paul and Mary:

“How many years must some people exist?

Before they are allowed to be free?

How many times can a man turn his head?

And pretend that he just doesn't see?

The answer my friend is blowing in the wind

The answer is blowing in the wind”.

The media have a role to play in the reconstruction of the nation. But that reconstruction also includes the promotion of human ideals for freedom and peace and justice. Hence the media should take upon the role of the watchman to ensure that human societies are so structured to foster good governance. Thus in any free society, the media serve as the conscience of the nation, being the voice of the voiceless and the advocate of the poor and the oppressed, who are mostly abandoned to vegetate in the fringes of society. By so doing the media will be complimenting the efforts of the state towards human development and the reconstruction of the nation.

I am reminded of an interesting story in the Bible. In the war between the Israelites and the pagan Amalekites, God instructed the Israelites through Prophet Samuel to wipe out all the people and their property. When the Israelites went to the Amalik country they discovered that the Amalekites had a specie of big, healthy sheep. So they disobeyed God's word and spared the sheep and carried them away. Saul then reported to Samuel the prophet that he had done as God had commanded. All the Amalekites and their property had been destroyed. But Samuel though blind and old could at least hear

the noise made by the animals. So Samuel asked Saul, **“What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”** (1 Sam. 15:14).

The media of any given society at any given age have a sacred duty to decipher these strange noises which confuse people and keep them permanently divided. It is the task of the media to decode these secret sounds of the alien bodies that are hidden in our midst and expose them in order to enhance peace and unity in the land.

It was William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet who called on his folk to look up to the future with hope when he said:

**“Sing on: Somewhere, at some new moon
We’ll learn that sleeping is not death
Hearing the whole earth change its tune”**

It is my earnest hope that you will raise these and other pertinent issues that pertain to good media practice in your seminar. I now declare this seminar officially open, and may God enrich you with his wisdom which surpasses all understanding.

Thank you, and may God bless you abundantly.

Rt. Rev. Dr. Nyansako-ni-NKU

MODERATOR, PCC