

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE U.S.A.

The Churches' Role in Media Education and Communication Advocacy

A Policy Statement Approved by the General Board
November 16, 1995

Introduction

Communication is a key thread in the fabric of life. It shapes us mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually. Communication--including the Word made flesh and Holy Scripture--is the way in which God is made known to us, and the way we respond.

Communication forms and sustains society and at the same time develops and maintains our individuality. It is the nervous system of the social and political body.

As communication is central to any culture, so the tools of communication are essential to our highly technological culture.

This policy statement addresses two areas of mediated communication in society in which our churches need to play a role:

(1) Media Education: Promoting understanding of how media work, how media affect our lives and how to use media wisely. This includes differentiating among the values, messages and meaning of life as espoused by faith groups and as interpreted by media; and

(2) Communication Advocacy: Influencing the goals, structure and policies of communication by advocating positions and actions based upon Christian faith and conviction.

This paper should be read in the context of other NCCC policy statements, such as *Global Communication for Justice and Violence in Electronic Media and Film*.

Our Faith Perspective

We are churches gathered in communicating the story that is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe that in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God makes the ultimate communicative act toward us and the whole creation. We affirm that forgiveness takes place through a communicative process of confession and absolution, pointing to the death and resurrection of Jesus as the source of power for that process. We are empowered by God's love to share this message of good news and grace.

Several Christian doctrines derived from the witness of Scripture, Christian tradition, and the reflection of Christians today bear directly on the social role of communication. They include: creation and stewardship; sin and redemption; the newness of life; good news and proclamation, and Christian witness.

1. **Creation and Stewardship.** To us, God is creator of "all things visible and invisible." By this we understand that all things are interrelated, that the eternal order of things is revealed in history, and that we humans are not the creators but rather are bound together in mutuality and community as part of creation along with all other parts of creation.

Among God's more recent gifts are advanced communication systems involving satellites, cellular phones, and computers. These gifts make possible new communication experiences -- from interactive video games and "virtual reality" to "smart" homes, on-line shopping and high speed data transmission around the globe. They also make possible new forms and speeds of communication between and among people who are able to take advantage of these new technologies, including the Internet. These technologies will bring changes at least as dramatic as the changes brought to society by radio, television and film.

Without many of the new technologies, humankind would be unable to live in the complex social structure we now enjoy. But since all elements of social communication are first of all God's creation, and not our creation, they must be considered as being held in trust for the community by those who control them. Therefore, stewardship is a necessary corollary of creation.

Media are powerful forces. The importance of exercising stewardship in their use means educating others about their power and their limitations. It also involves making wise use of media.

God, in giving humankind stewardship over creation, demands accountability and justice. As communication industries participate in establishing power and control over people's lives, they may be tempted to yield to the baser instincts of greed, conflict, and domination and, therefore, must be called to judgment when they succumb to these temptations. The church can be prophetic on communication justice issues only out of a recognition that "all (including the church) have sinned and fallen short" - and that all are in need of repentance.

2. Sin and Redemption. People are not thrust into sin by events; rather, they sin as they do not live up to God's expectations and their God-given potential. We humans constantly misuse the power that God has given us over creation. Instead of using our gifts to bring about harmony in all creation and its interrelatedness, we misuse power for selfish purposes, to further self at the expense of others.

The communication media are major sources of power with great potential for good as well as evil. Because we depend upon them for information, media hold key elements for many other forms of power: economic, social, and political. To the degree that they represent concentrations of power, media are increasingly likely to become a locus for sin. The primary manifestation of sin within mass media is based on their ability to manipulate persons, treating them as objects and turning them into passive recipients rather than helping them become active participants in society. In addition, mass media have the power to reinforce the dark side of our personalities as well as to support the positive, creative side.

As Christians we confess that we not only have permitted this concentration of power but we have also participated in the manipulation of persons. Either as shareholders in media industries or as consumers of their products, we, too, have succumbed to some of the questionable techniques of the marketplace. As shareholders and as consumers, we, too, may have encouraged profiteering at the expense of human welfare. Our enthusiastic encouragement of technological development is generally uninformed, uncritical and, not infrequently, a form of idol worship. Taking something that is a gift of God -- money, power, prestige, technology -- and treating it as if it were God, is the sin of idolatry.

3. The Newness of Life. Christians take seriously the concept that God makes all things new and that novelty and creativity are essential elements of God's world. Therefore we resist attempts to constrict communication which might limit the choices that an individual can make. New relationships, new ideas, new values, new understandings can be essential to growth and to development of human potential.

Christian doctrine insists on remaining open to newness while submitting it to critical analysis. It rejects attempts to restrain the way newness comes into the world. It advocates openness, not only to novelty, but also to that which is not yet completely understood, since God works in mysterious ways which can never be fully grasped, predicted, or controlled. For these reasons, censorship must be avoided, since it allows one person or group to determine the information available to all others.

4. Good News and Proclamation. Christians testify to the good news that Christ came to set us free from personal sin, from systemic bondage, and from all kinds of oppression -- spiritual, mental, social, physical, economic, and political.

In the Bible, God's promise of a new future for the people is central and must be communicated effectively. This vision is deeply rooted in the Exodus, the story of the liberation of the Hebrew people in ancient Egypt. And Jesus' message about the Realm of God is the good news that God restores, reconciles and heals us and delivers us from oppression. Communication -- a genuine, open give-and-take of ideas and feelings -- is what connects and binds people together in community.

So communication is more than technology, more than gadgets and machines. We must understand technology as an interrelated system which has its own laws of development and in some ways even a life of its own. Technology includes management, corporate structures; psychological approaches and marketing strategies. Part of technology's power is that it has enabled men and women to control nature and, in doing so, has created a new environment for humankind.

The illusion persists that technological progress necessarily brings freedom and happiness. But it also can enslave us. If we worship technology, we elevate it to the realm of the sacred, making it an object of humanity's awe and veneration. It is only when we realize how this can happen that we are able to liberate ourselves from the demands of technology. Therefore, Christians must use every communication medium to help people understand the Good News which opposes any such enslavement by the technology worldview.

5. Christian Witness. Christians challenge falsehood. Christianity is not evenhanded. It has a bias toward truth and liberation through the gospel and a bias away from untruth and bondage. We eagerly proclaim this understanding of the gospel and explain our worldview in theological terms. However, since this is a pluralistic society, we Christians must witness to the truth as we perceive it and still be open to hear the truth as it is perceived by others. The church acknowledges that women, racial/ethnic minorities, lesbian and gay persons, and people with disabilities historically have been excluded from or negatively stereotyped in the media. Consistent with our values as Christians living in a pluralistic society, we must work to insure that media reflect, in a balanced fashion, the views, opinions, and cultures of all segments of society.

Media influence the way we look at everything. Subtle and not-so-subtle messages with symbols, sounds and metaphor push our society toward a market-driven, violence-prone, self-centered lifestyle that challenges our Christian values. Therefore, our churches

have a responsibility to educate us to understand media symbols, images and language from a faith perspective.

Media play a major role in setting the agenda of what in society will be discussed or ignored. Therefore, we have a responsibility to learn how media operate and to challenge that which we believe to be false.

The Churches' Response In A Media Saturated World

Telling stories, the most effective communication method, remains the same as it has been throughout human history. Today's media-savvy storytellers' techniques have so improved the impact of images and so amplified their presence through broadcast, cable, satellite, and VCR's and through video games, fiber-optics, interactive television and CD-ROM, that the traditional face-to-face storytellers -- parents, pastors, and teachers -- frequently feel replaced and powerless.

We invented these media, using the gifts of God's creation. We spend more of our discretionary time with them than with anything else. They are woven so thoroughly into the economic fabric that they are indispensable for marketing goods, services, and ideas. We are all part of creating the problems we seek to correct. We can also be part of the solution.

If we are to make and influence choices which better represent the values for which the gospel stands, then we must greatly expand our understanding and utilization of media. We must become media literate.

Media Education

Media education is needed in the church and in society to help people:

- 1) recognize and understand the role of media in using metaphor and symbol to shape our understanding of who we are, individually and relationally;
- 2) learn how interactive communication can shape and influence the emerging social fabric of human life and society;
- 3) demonstrate responsible use of technology; and
- 4) use media as tools by which the church shares the good news.

Media literate consumers will recognize the complexity and subtlety of the issues. Unfortunately, poorly informed media consumers sometimes have created more problems than solutions. Misinformation and confusion have resulted in ineffective boycotts and letter-writing campaigns, often organized by Christian groups, which have furthered defensiveness rather than dialogue and productive problem-solving. Problems most often associated with the electronic media, such as gratuitous sex and violence, insufficient or inappropriate programming for children, a flood of sameness in entertainment programming, superficial news coverage of politics; inadequate attention to religion and its influence in society, and the trivialization of news and information require media-literate persons committed to making their religious perspective relevant to these complex issues.

The Church As Advocate For Responsible Media

Media have a tremendous potential for good, often under-utilized. They add exciting new symbols to our culture. They provide chances for people to witness events as they happen. They have great democratic potential and can extend knowledge to all people, providing a global perspective. They provide diversion as well as entertainment, information, and education.

Media today reach virtually every member of the society with messages that reinforce a worldview that says technology can solve all problems. These media have been so woven into the economic fabric of our culture that to question the underlying implications of the system appears destructive, perhaps, for Americans, even unpatriotic. In this environment the churches can be a voice for greater responsibility in the use of technology to solve our world's problems.

During the past five decades economic criteria increasingly have come to dominate decisions about the messages and means of communication, until today nearly every element of what was once thought of as "public discourse" has been commercialized. At the same time, most of what is seen on television, in books, newspapers, magazines and movies is controlled by a handful of (media) conglomerates. Local owners of media outlets find it expensive to rely on locally produced material. Much of the syndicated material for television, radio and newspapers is distressingly similar. Neither as citizens nor as Christians can we continue to support strictly market-structured media which reinforce a limited worldview and provide enormous profit to a privileged few. Instead, we must advocate for open media channels with a genuine free flow of communication to enhance and broaden public discourse.

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA believes that communication problems are systemic. Thus, communication advocacy must deal with the media as an enormous power base--social, economic and political -- both as a producer and definer of culture. As advocates for change we must recognize our complicity as ordinary citizens and church-goers, media consumers without whom the problems being addressed would not exist. Without a demand for particular media products, neither good nor bad will flourish.

Within media, authority and responsibility rest with many participants: actors, writers, directors, publishers, technicians, producers, executives, station managers, sponsors, and viewers. But no one individual feels responsible or can be held responsible for the cumulative effects of media because so many participate in the creative process. Therefore, social, political, and economic structures must be created which provide a framework in which individuals can act responsibly while simultaneously working in a highly competitive marketplace.

Communication advocacy must deal with the power realities of the system while recognizing that many individuals within that system already are deeply concerned about the problems being addressed. There are persons throughout the industry who are as much a part of the solution as part of the problem; they need our encouragement and constructive criticism. Communication advocacy is therefore both important and difficult.

Summary

Home, church and school traditionally have shaped and maintained values, worldviews and the meaning of life in our society. These functions rapidly are being assumed by media and the commercial interests which control them. That shift will continue and worsen unless the church, the school and the family take their roles more seriously.

Media education and communication advocacy present the churches with significant opportunities. The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA challenges church members to recognize our complicity in media's negative impact on society. We challenge church leaders to question publicly the distortions and failures of media. We encourage openness and diversity in programming, and support for media industry people who share our concerns. The Council challenges all people of faith to strive for some measure of localism and local control so that the media may better meet the needs of every segment of society.

Historically Christians have understood that government must play a role in regulating the abuse of power. We understand government can be a strong force for expressing the public will. Responsive and responsible government could limit the exercise of power by the strong at the expense of the weak. We therefore recognize and support the necessity for advocating for governmental regulation of any mass media which could become a monopoly. Media self-regulation does not work by itself. On the other hand, the same media are called to be vigilant against the unjust use of power by government. Christians should encourage this positive role of media.

The family is where the most effective education about media can take place. When children are using media, parents and caregivers should plan to participate with them. Modeling by parents of responsible media consumption is the most powerful teacher. Churches must develop and distribute material to assist parents and caregivers in this educational task.

Congregations should encourage media education in public and parochial schools and engage in it systematically in their own churches. National denominational support for the development of media literacy and education resources will strengthen this local activity. All Christian educational agencies should demonstrate their support for development of curricular materials for use in local churches. Media education in schools of theology also is essential since that is where future church leaders are taught to make the Gospel relevant to the people and their culture.

Call to Action

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA calls upon its member communions to work together through the Communication Commission and other appropriate groups to implement, and encourage their congregations and members to undertake, as many of the following strategies as they can:

- 1. Challenge the communication industries, government, the general public and NCCC member communions each to take active responsibility for the impact which the structure of communication technology has on society.**
- 2. Work to preserve or secure legal processes that will ensure public accountability by those who control media. Encourage citizens to evaluate, at franchise or license renewal time, whether cable and television outlets in local communities are servicing the community interest, convenience and necessity.**
- 3. Prepare church leadership and members for informed citizen action in relation to media in their communities. Publicize and facilitate strategies for citizen involvement that could include visits with program directors, station managers, and newspaper editors, writing to program sponsors and the local media, organizing boycotts or taking other actions available to citizens seeking redress.**
- 4. Affirm freedom of speech and oppose censorship within a framework of social responsibility.**
- 5. Support the concept of "universal access" to all media, including the Information Highway; work with government and industry at local, state and national levels to ensure public access to a broad diversity of viewpoints in all media.**
- 6. Advocate for a "public lane" on the Information Highway, and set-asides (reserved space on the spectrum for broadcasting and newer communication services). Work to preserve current public access channels on cable, funding for public radio and television, and the restoration of public service requirements for broadcasters.**
- 7. Engage in and/or promote stockholder actions designed to encourage programming and practices that are clearly in the public interest.**
- 8. Affirm, encourage and support all who undertake vocations within the media industry. Christians are called to witness and minister within a pluralistic culture and to work with persons who serve in secular arenas.**
- 9. Work to advance the interests of women, minorities, and people with disabilities to ensure that they are authentically presented in TV imaging so as to avoid the promotion of stereotyping. Further, work to advance the interests of such groups to ensure that they are proportionately represented in the workforce and ownership ranks of industry, and within those media work forces of religious communities.**
- 10. Encourage the importation of programming which provides genuine insight into other cultures.**
- 11. Create centers for media literacy training within churches, church schools, and schools of theology. Develop and implement the use of media education materials to reinforce faith values.**

12. Encourage concerned parents and public interest advocates to be part of citizen advisory panels and to initiate dialogue with the owners and managers of media outlets in their own communities. This will allow Christians to conduct a ministry of concern and constructive response so that fundamental moral values can be preserved, perpetuated and shared with others.

13. Develop and encourage the use of critical viewing skills in the home.

14. Encourage parents to take responsibility for what their children and youth watch in the home by monitoring use of the Information Highway, movie and video rentals, to make use of lock-box or other technologies, to stay current on advertising for film, video, and computer game materials so as to make informed decisions about permissible viewing, and, above all, to help young people develop their own standards of taste and appropriate viewing behavior.

15. Encourage and support inclusion by the public schools of media education curriculum from an early age.

16. Support voluntary rating systems appropriate for each medium based upon product appropriateness for children, for films, television, cable, pay per view TV, and video and arcade games. Further, request that ratings be prominently displayed in all program promotion, in newspaper and other media advertising, and on video cassettes and video games, and that all previews at the beginning and ending of a program be appropriate to the rating of that program.

17. Support the 1968 Supreme Court ruling that children may legally be barred from theater showings of films considered unsuitable.

18. Continue public recognition and awards for writers, producers, and programmers who meet or exceed public interest standards. Publicize and support excellence whenever the public is served through the media.