



Good local news changes society ‘from the bottom up’

Local media has the opportunity to change society for the good, according to News paper entrepreneur Duncan Williams, speaking at the *Church and Media Conference*.

Local media outlets are varied and extensive. There are, for example, 40 local BBC radio stations whose output is marked by a distinctive focus on news, travel, weather, sport and faith in the locality; backed up by 45 local websites. There are 12 regional BBC TV weekly current affairs and politics shows and, on top of that, the local regeneration radio stations, commercial radio, print press, and more.

The local media give people influence where they live and provide an opportunity for the Christian community. At the recent *Church and Media Network Conference*, newspaper entrepreneur Duncan Williams emphasised that amidst a disproportionate interest in negative news in the national papers, local papers have the opportunity to change things from the bottom up. Historically, local papers started out as church newsletters. Local media provide a huge opportunity for the Christian community.

At the 2007 *Forum for Change* conference, we decided to aim for developing Christian engagement with the local media. While local media is an excellent platform for the good news message, we considered that the Church would benefit from help to make the most of this opportunity. At the time, a media savvy catalyst generated multiple opportunities for the Christian community in the local and regional press in Norwich and Manchester, which at times spilled over to the national media outlets.

Since then, local Media Hubs have started in Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Newham, Bradford and Leeds. Also, in Bournemouth, Cambridge and Dundee, local journalists have further developed the church’s media coverage. These local Media Hubs are developing in their own way as the Christian community communicates the multicoloured mission of the church and builds on its particular local strengths.

Some vignettes of their activity illustrate the range of local opportunities:

The Network **Norwich & Norfolk**¹ Christian community news website received the *Surefish.co.uk 2009 Church Website of the Year Award*. The website acts as a first port of call for anybody wanting information or news about the local Christian community. According to Keith Morris the local press regularly draws stories from the website. “We send out a weekly e-news bulletin from the website to over 2100 people; including around 15 news stories each time. A number of local newspaper and radio journalists are on the mailing list and almost every week they follow up on our breaking news stories and reproduce them to a wider audience. They also often use the website as a source for information and contacts”. The site is included in the British Library UK Web Archive project, which selects websites that are considered to be of long term research value and are chosen to represent a subject of social, political, cultural, religious, scientific or economic significance and relevance to the UK.

The **Manchester**² Hub provided media support for a number of high profile initiatives, such as Peace Week, Mothers Against Violence, and an acting project with the

¹ www.networknorwich.co.uk

² www.network-ea.org.uk

homeless. Working closely with the Conservative Christian Fellowship and Christian Socialist Movement, the Party Political Conference held in the city provided an opportunity to feature the work of the Church to those in authority and the city-region. Regular contributions to the BBC Manchester Sunday Morning Breakfast show are given in the form of a Thought for the Week and a Review of the Sunday papers.

Building on the media success during Hope '08, journalist Marianne Clough set up the **Bradford** Media Hub³. "The limited time I can give sometimes means I have to sacrifice hard news for features ideas but sometimes this is where newspapers and the media need a bit of inspiration as they can't always see the wood for the trees due to the stresses they are under." The Bradford media outlets are switched on to the benefits of the Hub and hence the Church community features regularly.

Veron Graham, who spearheads the **Birmingham** Hub⁴, has found the networking with churches particularly rewarding. The Hub has three aims: to help churches understand and engage with the media; to increase Christian-related coverage in the mainstream press; and to upload testimonies from local people online. "This stuff needs to be shared with the world. We've had enquiries for training from an ecumenical church group and offered support to umbrella groups who see the value of media but lack the resources and expertise to work with it".

In **Belfast**⁵ Judith Hill had many opportunities to shed rays of light into local culture. The vision is to raise a hopeful voice and ultimately point people to Jesus. The *Tell It In Colour* website gives a window into the work of the Christian community. One of the most popular stories this year has been that of a 16 year old with cerebral palsy whose local community raised money to buy him a stand-up wheelchair, which has transformed his life, enabling him to play football for the first time. The story of Christian friends known as 'Beautiful Feet' who engage with homeless people featured on UTV. Media training days equip leaders to target the media in a more effective way. Judith adds, "We've hosted two storytelling nights attended by 60 people, hungry to hear the good news".

Alison Hull has concentrated on media skills training in the **Bristol** Hub, holding a well attended media training day with speakers from Bristol BBC Radio, Bath Evening Chronicle and a local Diocesan Communications officer. This will be followed by a radio training day and a 'Meet the editor' day with the News Editor of the Bristol Evening Post. "Following the training day, one attendee has had a lot of success with stories of her local church. I am also setting up a Bristol Christian Writers' Group, not just for those who want to get material into the press, but anyone who wants to improve their writing skills." Ali also did one-to-one work, particularly with Changing Tunes, the Christian Television Association, the Unchosen film festival, Hope's Place and Aspire.

In **Poole and Bournemouth** Fiona Julian is charity editor to a free listings magazine for an 18-40 readership of which 20,000 copies are distributed free to pubs, clubs and restaurants. The nightclub chaplaincy, street pastors and an anti-sex trafficking charity are among the projects which have featured (also in the Southampton edition). Fiona also hosts and produces a community radio show and gives individual PR support, ranging from an audit of PR, preparing a PR schedule, or editing and advising on print; and has produced a media kit for people with guidelines.

³ www.mediahub.org.uk

⁴ www.gmagency.co.uk/christian_media_services.html

⁵ www.tellitincolour.com

Annual gathering

Since 2008, at the annual *Church and Media Network* conference, a dedicated stream for the facilitators of the local Media Hubs and the existing Media Trusts provides an annual opportunity for mutual encouragement and peer learning.

In 2009, I was invited to the European Evangelical Alliance conference 'The Gospel as Good News' in Barcelona to engage European leaders in a vision for developing a more proactive media engagement in terms of storytelling, followed by an article in the European Alliance's socio-political newsletter, *Impact in the Public Arena*.

The gospel is surely good news. The active engagement of the Christian community in the local media can undoubtedly bring change from the bottom up as we seek the wellbeing of society, fill our society with the testimony of Christ and give an ongoing account of the hope we have.

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June 2010