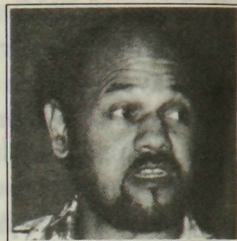


# The prophetic role of Christian media



By FR DIOSNEL CENTURION

Communication is essential to human living and development. People need to share their ideas and experiences in order to develop both individually and as a group or community. Communication, then, aims to foster community life and growth.

Communication is also fundamental in the process of building a nation, giving people a sense of direction and purpose. Through communication people become aware of each other's needs, problems, concerns and aspirations. Communication links people and places by shortening distances, narrowing the gap and integrating different cultural groups, making the possibility of seeing beyond one's worldview real. Communication then opens the window toward a greater group, a larger community, a wider environment.

Communication, therefore, is an essential human right. It is the condition for the survival and existence of a group as a defined cultural unit within a nation, and as a distinct entity in the community of nations. At the micro level, communication helps individuals to attain self-fulfilment. Communication is necessary to build persons to become active participants in society, oriented toward the realisation of the common good.

Communication is each person's property, a gift and a bundle of possibilities. A person's inner dimension is imbued with possibilities that need to be expressed and put forward in order to make freedom happen, community become a reality, and the goodness of life and nature placed over matter and ephemeral things. Communication, then, *is not just a right. It is a person himself or herself as extension of the Creator, who is communication par excellence.* 'In the beginning was the Word ...'

'The Pacific,' remarked a statement on behalf of the WACC-Pacific working committee at the Communication for Community Congress in



Manila, 'offers the world community perhaps the greatest challenge for creative and constructive communication for community.<sup>1</sup> Its location and geopolitics could easily be used to serve manipulative and vested interests. But it is a place where, when imbalances are rectified, it will exhibit exemplary ways of building a community despite heavy odds'.

In Papua New Guinea, a country with rich and unique cultures, people exhibit a prolific communication practice. The folk media are part and parcel of their various cultures, with their own language and cultural expressions, i.e. arts, crafts, customs, value systems and beliefs.

The conversion to Christianity has not been able to undermine the rich cultural heritage, yet, the transition toward modernisation has left many gaps difficult to bridge. It will be up to the national scientists, thinkers, policymakers, and the people themselves to begin a process of bridging those gaps.

The adoption of Western ideas and social systems has created new needs, problems and concerns. The mass media have opened the gates to the world beyond and have brought in new ideas, values and lifestyles. On the way, PNG is rapidly losing its original cultures, though it is strongly attached to cultural elements such as belief in ancestors.

Within this changing situation, what difference does the presence of the churches make? What has the role of the churches' media been? What role did the churches play in the development process of Papua New Guinea? How did and do the churches accompany the nation in this process of change? What communication model do the churches use to manifest their mission in PNG today? How do the churches answer the question of culture, gospel and church in PNG today? What do people expect from the churches? What should be the principal concern and goal of the Christian communicators in PNG today? What should be the relationship of the churches and the media in playing their roles?

The church is people with a culture and history. It does not exist in a vacuum. It began with a concrete situation, within a concrete social reality. The early churches that came to Papua New Guinea had the goal of proclaiming the Good News of Christ and teaching people to be Christians, often following Western standards, lifestyles and values. It appeared that a few churches had no regard for people's culture and history when they arrived and began their apostolic work.

The trend has changed. The mainline churches, in particular, have been involved in trying to integrate the gospel and traditional practices. The gospel has helped purify many beliefs, attitudes and values that were limited in scope and served the purpose of limited interests in the community.

Presence of the churches in PNG has made a difference. In many cases, they brought schools, hospitals and community development projects, the media and others. The well-established churches have done a lot in unifying



people, in drawing people together for cooperative work, study and worship. However, the rapid modernisation process has created a great many imbalances in PNG society. An urban job-oriented education system did help build a national management system. But the rural areas were slowly deserted by the educated.

There has been an ongoing migration to the urban centres, doing little to develop the rural countryside. The Government has now ventured into joint business projects with foreign timber companies, which do go to the country, but to exploit the forests. The Government appears to exist and operate extremely far away from the people in the remote areas. Policies and plans never reach them in any form. Even the radio system in place has not been able to address their needs, nor has there been any significant effort to use this tremendous potential for literacy, education, awareness and motivation.

### **A brief historical overview**

The churches have been involved in media work from the very beginning. It is noticeable in the ongoing involvement in printing and publishing by the Lutheran and Catholic churches. They have also been into broadcasting and audiovisual production. Moreover, they have done a significant amount of research work.

The great communication revolution was caused by the translation and publication of the Bible into Tok Pisin. Ever since, the Bible has become the sole Tok Pisin 'textbook' for most Papua New Guineans.

In Wewak, Fr Patrick Fincutter, SVD, has been producing religious programmes for Radio Wewak for many years. The Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG, through the Communication Institute of Goroka, has provided the National Broadcasting Commission network with several types of religious programmes for more than a decade. Among these programmes is Sunday's *Lotu Bilong Wailis*, aired in all 19 provincial radio stations. In Lae, the Lutheran Kristen Redio has also been prolific in its contribution to NBC's religious department. Its programmes are aired by both Karai and Kalang services.

Lately, with the help of Fr Zcislaw Mlak, SVD, and Anglican Bishop Paul Richardson, there has come into existence the Religious Television Association, which aims to provide EMTV with religious programmes. In fact, EMTV should be commended for its support and commitment to this effort, which is now in full operation through weekly programmes.

The churches have been in media training through several institutions: Divine Word Institute, Communication Institute, Word Publishing. DWI has been training communicators for the past 15 years, graduating about 70 journalists so far, with a Diploma in Development Communication. They are in the media as well as communication-related work.

In 1990, DWI began its degree programme in Development Communi-



cation, with four graduates so far. The programme was started as an answer to identified and felt communication training needs. DWI also began a certificate programme in 1989 targetting communication professionals with little formal background. The first head of the Communication Arts Department was Fr Frank Mihalic (1980-85), then Br Dan Kelly, (1986), Fr Mihalic again (1987-88), Sr Evangelista Nite, (1989-90) and myself (1991 to the present).

The Communication Institute, based at Kamaliki, Goroka, has two functions. It produces audio-visual aids for church workers (sound cassettes, sound-slides, video); and radio programmes for NBC. It also runs short courses in video and radio for church workers of the entire South Pacific, for the Catholic Church as well as for private or public agencies. These courses are intensive, given by staff made up of local and foreign professionals. Sr Mary Hudson has been the director of CI for the last decade.

The major church involvement in the media has been through Word Publishing Pty Ltd — one of the most influential and unique newspaper publishing operations in the Pacific. Started in Wewak by Fr Mihalic as Wantok Publications, it was later developed into Word Publishing by Fr Kevin Walcot, and later run by the late Fr Jim Franks. Among its early staff were Fr Paul McVinney, Fr Walcit, Rowan Callick, Anna Solomon, Neville Togarewa, Franzalbert Joku, and others. In later years the staff included Loujaya Dunar, Frank Senge, Patrick Matbob. The company, which started as an SVD project, later became an ecumenical consortium owned by the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and United churches. It publishes several papers: *Wantok*, *The Times of PNG*, *Business Monthly*, *Sports* and *Rugby League*. It has also helped in the printing of other publications.

The churches have a well-established communication network. Some of the dioceses have their own newsletters. Among the regular publications are *Tanget*, a monthly magazine in Tok Pisin published by the Madang Catholic Archdiocese, and *Niugini Luteran* (Lae).

Another great ecumenical endeavour is the Melanesian Institute based in Goroka, which is run by the Divine Word Missionaries. It does research work on anthropology, pastoral sociology, missiology and pastoral-related activities. It publishes a quarterly series called *Point* and a quarterly socio-pastoral magazine for Melanesia called *Catalyst*, with articles on the mentioned fields, including communication and the mass media. The MI also publishes a monthly newsletter called *Umben* in Tok Pisin.

### **The Churches Council for Media**

The churches have also organised themselves into a media body called Churches Council for Media (CCM). The CCM started 20 years ago to facilitate ecumenical work in the media and serve as a catalyst for policy making both in the churches and for the Government. Presently, CCM has member churches (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, United, Evangelical Alli-



ance, Evangelical Lutheran, Gutnius Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, and the Salvation Army) and several church agencies: DWI, Word Publishing, Melanesian Institute, Communication Institute, Liturgical Catechetical Institute, PNG Bible Society, Kristen Pres Inc., Kristen Redio, Christian Book Melanesia, PNG Council of Churches, Summer Institute of Linguistics Media Service, Bible Translation Association, Voice of Prophecy (SDA, Lae), Gospel Recordings, Christian Leadership Training College, Communication Department of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Lae), Anglican Communications. Invited observers are NBC (Religious Section), EMTV (now with RTA) etc.

The Churches Council for Media, formerly called Churches Council for Media Coordination (CCMC), was formed in September 1974. Six major CCM involvements in the national media scene have been:

1. Awareness and commitment of the churches in media work.
2. Becoming the churches' media voice and presence in the NBC network.
3. Sounding its concerns and proposals regarding the introduction of TV in PNG.
4. Contributing toward the analysis and debate over former Communication Minister Gabriel Ramoi's proposed Media Bill.
5. Influencing existing media regarding Christian content and policy in their operations and work in PNG.
6. Submitting a concrete proposal concerning the various aspects of the National Information and Communication Policy.

CCM has thus been an important body in the media work of PNG's communication history. Part of CCM's proposal to the NCIP committee was almost entirely adopted in the policy. The document began with CCM's Vision of Communication:

We believe communication is God's gift to humankind through which men, women and children share life, experiences, ideas, values, hopes, aspirations, plans and projects in a particular cultural setting and build community together.

For communication to be effective, it should be inspired by Christian values and principles and based on universal human rights and the goals and objectives of the National Constitution.

We believe in communication that fosters integral human development. This can best be achieved through participation and two-way communication process.

We believe in communication that promotes the total well-being and dignity of all men, women and children of Papua New Guinea.

We believe in communication that guarantees the freedom of expression, information and assembly.

The vision of CCM for communication, the churches and the future is as follows:



1. Communication ministries must be rooted in the life of the local churches, and must grow out of the churches' felt needs.
2. Communication work must be rooted in the soil of PNG, and not being developed according to foreign patterns. That implies that content, style or presentation and language must be understandable by local audiences.
3. Close cooperation among the churches is needed in the field of communication. There must be a willingness to pool our resources and coordinate our efforts in using the media in the overall mission of the church.
4. High professional standards in Christian communication must be maintained, thus the training function of the communication ministry must be constantly emphasised in order to meet the demand for qualified media specialists in the church and in the secular industry.
5. The communication media can never alone fulfil the churches' primary task of bringing the Gospel to all people. On the other hand, the mass media can never be a replacement for interpersonal, face-to-face sharing, teaching and proclaiming the Word of God. Even when properly used, these 'modern means' of communication fall far short. The mass media need to be used 'together with' the traditional forms of communication. Interpersonal communication is still recognised as the most effective means<sub>2</sub> for evangelisation, education and all forms of human development.

Aside from basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, clothing and medicine), people need education, affection/esteem, work/role, family/community, identity/culture/language, faith/religion/church, voice/vote/participation in society. The human person is essentially a social being who needs others to be and grow with. He or she must belong somewhere and feel a sense of acceptance in society. Among his or her fundamental needs is communication. Communication is an extension of the human person.

Each individual person in the Pacific belongs to a particular religion or church. It is within the church that he or she finds a space to grow internally and spiritually; an atmosphere in which he or she can nurture his or her psychological and spiritual needs and reflect on the meaning, direction and purpose of life. The church is a community of people who seek to express the fullness of freedom and realise, although in a limited way, the dimensions of the Kingdom of God. It is in the church that people find the space to understand and deepen their faith, project their lives in hope for a better future, and express their faith in the practice of love. These virtues and values are inspired in the Gospel of Christ and the practice of the living and faithful community of Christians.

The church provides that space. But the church is also the voice of the people. Its presence in the world is to share the Gospel of love with God's people, try to interpret the 'signs of the times' in the light of the Scriptures and communicate it to the world. The church is there to 'announce the Good News and denounce anything that opposes it'.<sup>3</sup> That is its prophetic role.



## The prophetic role of Christian communicators

When BBC Radio was covering the uprising at Tiananmen Square and the massacre of students by the army in the 4 June 1989 crackdown, a voice could be heard from the background saying loudly, "Tell the world."<sup>4</sup> An essential dimension of prophets is to tell the truth, reveal the real facts, to give total information and guide the audience toward wise decisions based on veracity.

Being a Christian implies being part of a concrete community of believers with a concrete history and culture. It also implies being prophetic. It means having an insight which enables one to evaluate contemporary trends and events, assess the consequences of human responses, and call the community to repentance and new ways.

Walter Bruggeman<sup>6</sup> suggests that we free ourselves from the stereotypes of the prophet as foreteller and social protester. We must see them as concerned with elemental changes in human society, possessing deep understanding of how change is brought about.

"The prophets understood the strange incongruence between public conviction and personal yearning. Most of all, they understood the distinctive power of language, the capacity to speak in ways that evoke newness "fresh from the world".

Bruggeman's thesis is basically that 'the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us'. This *alternative consciousness* functions by criticising the dominant culture and by energising persons and communities to move in the direction of God's 'new' thing.

Alan Kirton believes that the 'alternative consciousness' is a whiff of that community which Christians call the Kingdom of God.

The Bible is replete with literary devices for communicating the message and for creating alternative consciousness. There are histories, myths, poetry, drama, hymns, love lyrics, genealogies, codes of laws, parables, allegories, collections of wise sayings, heroic legends, cosmogonies, and apocalypses. Marshall McLuhan has reminded contemporary society how word-centred and print-oriented it tends to be. The fact is, whatever the place and whichever the channel, communication and communicator must relate to receptor or receiver. Contemporary society needs many Martin Luther Kings, Desmond Tutus, Mahatma Gandhis, and other prophets ... to remind us that wherever someone is deprived from his or her rights, none of us is free.

Prophets use words with a different power than ordinary citizens do. There is a certain analogy with the Biblical use of words. The power carried by such words comes from the source Himself, who is the Word—God. He has pronounced a word and it happened, the creation at work. The effectiveness of the world was its result — healing, feeding, dominion of nature, the



realisation of justice, freedom, hope. There is a wisdom and love nurturing such words. There is also a concern for people and creation. And there is a dynamism to recreate, to beautify, to dignify, to see human rights being fulfilled. In Jesus Christ, the medium and the message coalesced.

Probably this explains why the prophet did not feel bound by words for self-expression. He would use non-verbal cues; incongruent actions and contradictory behaviour. The Bible provides us with numerous symbolic examples in the life of such prophets as Isaiah and Jeremiah, the two greatest prophets of Israel. Isaiah strips himself and walks naked and barefooted through the city as a 'sign' of what the king of Assyria should do as he conquers and subdues. Hoseah's marriage to a harlot and his naming the child of their union 'Not my People' is another symbolic action. In the case of Jeremiah, he purchased a piece of land just as he was waiting his turn to join his people on their trek to exile in an alien land. Some would have called him a fool. Others in our time might have accused him of 'insider trading'. They might say that he used his knowledge of what God would do to make a personal investment when the market was depressed so that he could make a 'killing' when prices went up. We would say he dramatised his hope in the nation's future when all of his colleagues were in a state of hopeless panic.

These examples seem to point to one thing: That we, as people, constitute the most effective audio-visual aids at our disposal. And it challenges us to use ourselves prophetically and creatively. As Brazilian Bishop Helder Camara<sup>8</sup> would put it: 'Our life is the best one Gospel can preach because even illiterates can read it.'

However, creativity must be based on Gospel guidelines. We all remember what happened to the 'electronic church' of the 1980s, when its standard bearers became highly criticised and evaluated, after their misuse of media creativity in the name of prophecy. The electronic church had an approach to religion committed to the support of a political, economic and social status quo which has within it the seeds of its own destruction.

Although it advocates particular techniques of communication and marketing, it ignores prophecy, reducing it to occasional excursions into apocalyptic denunciations. 'It affirms a culture of affluence for its own sake, of wheeling and dealing—the very corruption which has proved its undoing.'

In failing to be prophetic it let evil off the hook, and by refusing to judge itself it became insensitive to that accountability which is at the heart of any community brought into being by the Christian Gospel.

How, then, can communication be an instrument of prophecy? What are the areas of human activity in which there is an urgent need for creating an 'alternative consciousness'? What principle should underlie this enterprise as Christians attempt to render it a vehicle for the effective proclamation of the Gospel?



### Crucial mass media questions and realities

Firstly, while the entire spectrum of human life and relationships demands transformation, there are certain aspects that cry out for *urgent attention*. There are crucial issues that need to be addressed as PNG continues to develop speedily.

So often, the mass media have been used to misinform, disinform and even deform popular consciousness — particularly when the media are concentrated in reduced geographical areas and are markedly involved in covering governmental and political doings and issues. Thus, the media tend to, and sometimes do, create half-truths and blatant falsehoods as a means of ensuring 'business as usual'. From a more realistic point of view, although the PNG media are relatively free and independent, the tragedy has often been and continues to be that they have been catalysts for community disintegration and social alienation. A process of rapid increase in cultural dislocation is taking place before everyone's eyes.

Examples abound. One issue that continues to cause concern is the question of illegal drug trade and drug abuse. There are other matters that may get out of hand such as secret negotiations done with timber companies that come to reap the forests keeping hidden agendas. Meanwhile there is a rise in crime, restlessness and open violation of people's rights, to the point that the law enforcing bodies are unable to contain them.

The shallow news stories and the almost indifference shown by many decision makers and communicators do not provide any attempt to come to terms with the problems. The media has the task of exposing the real and complete stories, make people aware of their possible effects and teach them to find possible solutions.

The logging issue, for instance, is closely linked to an international concern—the ecology. The World Council of Churches, in its 1990 assembly in Seoul, Korea, called on the community of nations to look after the environment and the 'integrity of creation'. For the sake of our famous friend Development, developers come to the country to exploit nature, often causing 'ecological genocide'.

Media consumers in Papua New Guinea might now be familiar with the idea of 'sustainable development'. In fact, our media must be commended for their effort to devote space and time to the issue. But there is also the need to address the issues at the grassroots level, where extension communication can make the balance. The most effective means of communication at that level has always been person-to-person contact. It is a challenge for the churches to do more in raising people's awareness and teaching them about the importance of the environment. Communication is concerned about community building.

If the communication enterprise is to play a pivotal role in the creation of community, it must itself 'be transformed by the renewing of the mind'. If we would be transformers we must ourselves be transformed.



But I also believe that if Christian communicators want to be transformers, they must be well informed and aware of society's needs, problems and concerns — their pain and suffering, their anguish and their doubts, their uncertainties, hopes and aspirations. That is, they must develop a great amount of sensitivity and empathy.

### Notes:

This is abridged from the original paper presented at 'The Role of the Media in PNG' seminar organised by the PNG Council of Churches at the University of PNG, 19 August 1994.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Roche (ed), *The Pacific at a Glance*, Report from the WACC-Pacific region, A documentation presented to the Congress '89 on 'Communication for the Community', Manila, October 15-19, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Juha Auvinen, *The Objectives of the CCM and Principles of Christian Communicators as viewed by CCM*, paper presented at the seminar on Christian Communication Principles and National Communication Policy, Alexishafen, 23-26 April 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Liberation Theology*, CELAM, Lima, Peru, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Webb, *Communication and Culture—Sharing the Inheritance*, paper presented at the WACC 1990 Manila World Congress. London: Media Development, April 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Alan F. Kirton, *Communication and Prophecy: Tackling Today's Fundamental Issues*, paper delivered at the WACC 1990 Manila World Congress. London: Media Development, April, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brüggerman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Kirton, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Dom Helder Camara, *Hope Against Hope*, Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Kirton, *op. cit.*

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