RESEARCH TRENDS IN
RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

Christian Alternatives to Media Control

Most Christian communicators would agree that the patterns of communication arising in the concentration of media power are the very opposite of the values of the gospel. Power, self-serving manipulation and making information a commodity are contrary to the theme, 'I have come not to be served, but to serve'.

The Christian seeks to establish a pattern of communication in which the free, creative expression of the person is recognised, respected and invited. It is a recognition that every person is an active participant in building a culture. This means encouraging a broad access to channels of communication and taking part in the organisation of a communication system whether this be as small as the family circle or as large as a national broadcasting network. It means a special effort to open up the possibilities of active communication to the less powerful, the poor and those who are at the margin of society.

The survey of recent studies on concentration of economic control in the Review Article shows that designing our media systems in terms of these values is not simple or easy. In many parts of the world Christian communicators have had the courage — or the rashness! — to seek alternatives to dominant models of communication. Church documents such as *Communio et Progressio* outline in detail norms for possible reforms. One approach suggested is to open up more dialogue with media professionals.

Yet the professionals have a perfect right to demand, 'Show me some practical *working* models of what you are talking about. Especially, show me the way the churches run their own media and the way they structure their own patterns of communication'. It becomes obvious that the church cannot tell media professionals or policy-makers to develop more democratic communications if the church is not doing this itself. At least the church will have little real credibility.

Toward Participatory Church Communication

In October, 1982 leaders of the church's work in communications in Latin America — including representatives of the Communication Department of the Latin American Bishops Conference — met in Sao Paulo, Brazil to discuss the church's role in developing the New World Information and Communication Order. Also invited to the meeting were leading communication scholars, representatives of media professional associations and some communication policy-makers of Latin America. In the background of this meeting was the concern of the Latin America church with the increasing monopoly of the Latin American mass media by powerful economic interests. But more specifically, they wanted to reflect together on how the church could help

to implement the kind of Christian communication values outlined above. It was a week-long dialogue of mutual respect. The media professionals were impressed with the honesty of the Christian communicators and church leaders were impressed by the willingness of communication researchers and policy-makers to take seriously the church's intention.

The meeting opened with a discussion of the goals of more democratic communication in Latin America. As the church leaders saw the implications of this, they began to recognise that many of the problems of communication in the larger society could be found in the church itself. The church is only a microcosm of Latin American society and has picked up many of the patterns of communication and ways of using media that are prevalent in the dominant system. By the second day of the meeting, a number of the religious communicators were suggesting that there should be a 'mini-NWICO' within the church itself.

These admissions were coming from a Latin American church which was already sufficiently aware of the problem to think of holding such a meeting. Nearly all of the religious communicators present had been involved with some form of alternative communication: group communication, popular documentation centres, radio stations developed as the 'voice of the voiceless', and other uses of media which serve the poor.

Most of those present were aware of how difficult it is to develop the kind of working models that would offer an alternative to the communications controlled by powerful elites and supported by transnational interests. Many of the forms of alternative communication that the church has developed now appear obvious. But initially it was not obvious what might be done. The communication situation in Latin America is every bit as complex as the picture painted in the Review Article above. It was a challenge to the Christian imagination to translate ideals into practice in all of the confusion, repression and poverty of that situation. But in many cases they succeeded in developing something which was new and unique not only for the church but for Latin American society. Some had literally risked their lives to give this kind of living witness of Christian values in communication. This witness was by far the most impressive thing for the media professionals present. But for the church leaders these experiences only brought home to them how far they were from realising their own ideals and how much more work they have to do right at home in the church.

The Media are Never a Neutral Instrument

One of the ideas that surfaced frequently during the meeting

at Sao Paulo was the limitation of the 'instrumentalist' notion of media use that is still so prevalent in the church. There are minor differences of interpretations of this, but essentially it refers to the tendency to see the media as simply a channel — a big microphone — through which to pass the content of the gospel message. This perspective approaches media technology as a neutral instrument which must be used for the goals of Christianity. The desire to turn the media toward idealistic purposes is nothing but laudable, but the instrumentalist view forgets that technology never comes as a perfectly neutral package. It usually brings with it a typical social pattern of communication, for example, very vertical and authoritarian or more interactive, stimulating questions. Particular media already have a 'language' with its typical ways of conveying meaning through long-established symbols and audio or video artistic constructions. Media have typical genres of programming and they are directed to particular groups of people with particular needs. Also associated are characteristic social contexts of its use — at home with peers or family members, in a classroom or discussion group. Frequently the hardware and the software are designed for marketing with all this in mind. Furthermore, media owners expect that anyone who wants to use 'their' media will understand this and be ready to accept the editing of its gatekeepers. To get on the air, it has to be 'good' radio or 'good' television according to these norms of good.

The fallacy of the instrumentalist view is that it tends to accept this package either without questioning or thinking that the disadvantages are outweighed by the possibility of using the institutional structure of mass media to reach a mass audience. This seems to be the professional way to use the media. In fact, the institutional package that the media come wrapped in implies a long series of value choices. Many of these value choices may be in profound contradiction to Christian values, especially when one considers the institutional organisation of the media at a national or international level.

Peter Horsfield's analysis of religious television in America (and, specifically, the evangelical, prime-time preachers) in the United States is one of the best single studies of how the political, economic and cultural factors of broadcasting have had a profound *negative* influence on the content and strategies of religious television.[1] Also important is the theological understanding of communication technology which is implied in the instrumentalist view.

The Medium is the Gospel Message

The criticism of instrumentalism in religious communication is not a rejection of communication with the mass media or a preference for small media. The small audiovisual media or practically any other pattern of communication is subject to the same problems. Rather, it is a strong encouragement to examine every dimension of the institutional package and to see how and to what extent the 'technology' must be adapted so that it expresses Christian values. True, in many contexts it may be better to avoid the mass media entirely. In other contexts only a radically alternative transformation will enable the *institutional organisation* as a whole to be an expression of the gospel.

It is clear that the gospel is never expressed simply in its idea content. It involves the whole institutional complex that constitutes a particular medium. The adaptation might lie in the decision to serve a particular audience that is characteristically neglected. It might call for locating the medium within a new communication pattern: finding ways to make local media truly interactive and concientising.

It is difficult to lay down hard and fast rules for such a 'baptism' of the media. It varies greatly with situations and with cultural contexts. One has to go to these concrete experiences to look and listen to the people who have created the experience. This section points to some recent publications which are particularly useful sources for understanding what is meant by adaptation. Also included is a summary of the main conclusions of the meeting at Sao Paulo referred to above.

What is 'Christian' in Christian Communication?

Opening Eyes and Ears: New Connections for Christian Communication. Kathy Lowe. With a Commentary by Martin E. Marty. (Geneva: World Council of Churches in association with the Lutheran World Federation and the World Association of Christian Communication in London, 1983).

This book tells the stories of nine communication ventures which have discovered ways of translating ideals of alternative communication into practice. They have grown up inside, outside and alongside the churches. A keynote, as the author states it, is that the 'Christians active in these stories witness by what they do, not by who they say they are'.

The brief introduction notes that 'this book is a response to a crisis that has been quietly growing within the churches we serve. The crisis concerns communication credibility'. The problem of credibility is due largely to this contradiction of a very strong Christian content, but a manner of communicating that is questionably Christian.

The book developed out of a series of discussions between the Department of Communication of the World Council of Churches — with very active encouragement of its director John Bluck — the Lutheran World Federation and WACC in London. In part the discussions were an attempt to understand the possible Christian contribution in the search for a New World Information and Communication Order. This implied a clearer understanding of what is meant by 'Christian' in communication and what is 'new' in the world-wide movement toward the NWICO. Inevitably, in reflections on the specifically 'Christian' in communication, the discussion touched on deeper issues of theology and communi-

cation. But as the lives of the saints make clear, a theology is first a living of the gospel in an attitude of searching prayer within the complexities of the world. Later reflection may abstract and order the patterns of meaning. It was judged that at this stage it is better to allow the stories of Christian communication to speak their theology like a series of parables. Kathy Lowe, a British journalist and currently Associate Editor of *One World*, the WCC's monthly magazine, lent her skills to catching the characteristic spirit of each experience.

An Ecumenical Variety of Communication

The nine case studies are thoroughly international: India, Italy, the Philippines, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, South Africa. The three experiences chosen for closer analysis here are mostly 'inside' the churches. One describes a Lutheran weekly paper in East Germany, *Mecklenburgische Kirchenzeitung.* A second tells of CEDI, an ecumenical documentation centre in São Paulo, Brazil, which helps labour unions, community organisations and other journalistically inexperienced groups prepare their newsletters or

1 Peter Horsfield. *Religious Television: The Experience in America.* (New York: Longman, Inc., forthcoming late 1983). This book will be offered as part of the CSCC-WACC series on 'Communication and Human Values' available to subscribers of Communication Research Trends at a special discount.

pamphlets and links them to other similar groups. A third case deals with the efforts of the United Church of Christ in the United States to help volunteer groups to take advantage of provisions for community access cable television channels and to help organise community production studios in the face of growing opposition from the cable companies of the U.S. communications industries. Specifically, the case study describes one of the more successful access channels supported by St. John's Episcopal Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. This analysis attempts to single out some of the special characteristics of these three experiences.

Creating a Distinct Cultural Identity

A first characteristic noted in all of the experiences is the attempt to establish — through a newspaper, a radio station or a centre for popular movements — a collective universe of discourse that gives them a Christian identity. At the same time this Christian witness seems to bring them into opposition to the dominant culture. They did not set out specifically to 'oppose the system' but in trying to give Christian witness, they have found themselves at odds with powerful political and economic forces around them. In The German Democratic Republic, the church newspaper has made an attempt to support the beneficial aspects of a socialist government, but nevertheless find themselves working under the restrictions of a communist government. In Brazil, the work of CEDI with popular movements has made it an object of suspicion for the military-backed government there. In the U.S. the powerful National Cable TV Association, which represents the business interests of Time, Inc., General Electric, Westinghouse and Warner Brothers, is fighting provisions for community access channels that the United Church of Christ is trying to help establish in local communities.

At the same time, all of them have avoided a Christian ghetto attitude — the thinking that Christians can live in their own closed world. A Christian identity is projected not simply by external confessional symbols but by a distinctive Christian way of acting in everyday work and in community life. They therefore become involved with community and national issues. *Kirchenzeritung* has been a lone voice in the GDR questioning nuclear armament. CEDI has made a major effort to investigate and publicise the problems of Indian tribes in the Amazon. Channel 20 in Knoxville brought to the attention of the public the attempts of landlords to evict tenants from apartments in order to rent these at inflated prices during the World Fair in Knoxville.

Participatory Patterns of Communication

In all three of these cases the major function of the permanent staff is to coordinate the contributions of a large number of volunteers and to encourage a wide segment of the community to speak through these media. News, programme ideas and policy directions come from the people who make up the universe of discourse that constitutes this medium. It is much more a matter of encouraging different groups to speak to each other in a horizontal dialogue than a didactic stance by the staff.

The people associated with these communication ventures are conscious that this is a pattern of communication very distinct from that of the other media in their societies. The editor of *Kirchenzeitung* states that their relatively small newspaper is at least a weak alternative to the dogmatic uniformity of the GDR. CEDI helps semi-literate, inexperienced people prepare their newspapers and bulletins in the face of a mass media owned by a few powerful families in Brazil. But CEDI insists that the people speak for themselves. All these media offer at least a space of freedom and the opportunity to say honestly (to a degree) what one thinks.

Training People to be Communicators

A major objective of CEDI in Brazil is to train non-professionals to communicate effectively at least within the small circle of their neighbourhoods, local labour unions, or in basic Christian communities. The objective of the access channel in Knoxville is similar. In part this is to help demystify the experience of communicating through media and to convince people that they have something worthwhile to say. The purpose is not just to provide knowledge of techniques, but to cultivate a deeper sense of their worth as persons. This is not mass communication and is not intended to be such, but the multiplication of such small circles of communication eventually touches a very large number of people.

Linking Faith With Life

All of these experiences attempt to bring the commited members of churches into dialogue with the community and culture around them. This is a question of communication between the small Christian community and the larger surrounding community. CEDI specifically tries to bring priests, nuns and other pastoral agents into contact with and active involvement with popular movements. In East Germany, Christians could easily survive in a pervasive communist environment by segregating their Christianity to a Sunday ghetto. In fact *Kirchenzeitung* brings Christians into dialogue with Marxists and has won the cautious recognition that Christians do have something to say to the socialist society.

Adaptation of Technology

All of the nine cases have evolved a format of communication which is especially appropriate for the context, but rarely have they set out specifically to design innovative technology. They have thought first of the appropriate pattern of communication that responds to the needs of the people and the community. Then they have looked for a technology that fits into and strengthens this pattern of communication. Unconsciously they find themselves reorganising the institutional organisation of the technology. The case study of Radio Enriquillo in the Dominican Republic describes how the people participate in the programming, news reporting and management of the station — a style very different from the commercial stations in the region. What this means to the people is related by Kathy Lowe in a quote from a Haitian cane cutter regarding Radio Enriquillo, 'Before the radio came we were in the dark... Since we have found our voice through the radio we've become stronger and we will never go back to what we were'.

Christian Communication in Different Cultures

Another rich source of information on alternative experiences of Christian communication is the annual *Communicatio Socialis Yearbook* initiated by the Society of the Divine Word. The 1981-1982 edition has articles referring to Indonesia, different regions of India, Korea, China, Latin America, regions of Africa, the Philippines and Japan.

The Importance of Inculturation

Several of the contributions bring out a further dimension of

Christian communication: a deep respect for and an adaptation to the language and art forms of different cultures.

An article by Francis Barbosa, SVD, on 'Christian Values and Indian Classical Dance' describes how important dance has always been for religious communication in India. Barbosa stresses that Christianity in India has never been able to enter deeply into the religious tradition at the deeper level of emotion, symbol and gesture. Christianity has not been able to express much of the

religious feeling of many people in India and remains disincarnate at a fairly abstract, rationalistic level of the personality.

Joseph Healey's article on 'Using African Traditional Means of Communication on the Grassroots Level in Tanzania' describes how drama, music, drums, dance, story-telling proverbs and riddles are beginning to be used, especially in the context of the basic Christian communities in East Africa. The folk media enable all the people of a basic community to become involved in the production of their own means of communication.

Television in China

Kuangchi Program Service in Taiwan has received considerable publicity among Christian communication circles, but an article by Jerry Martinson provides one of the most complete descriptions of how Kuangchi has adapted television to Chinese culture and how Christian themes are expressed in the television medium in a way that builds on Chinese moral and religious tradition.

New Concepts of Christian Communication

Media Development, published quarterly by the World Association of Christian Communication, 122 King's Rd., London SW3 4TR, England.

The development of religious communication has been inhibited, in part, because it has been conceived largely in terms of traditional use of radio, television and audio-visuals. The most usual formats are still the sermon or the worship service. *Media Development* has provided a forum for exploring less conventional forms of Christian communication.

The issue on 'Pop Music and Pop Culture' (1982/1) for example, carries detailed descriptions of how Fr. Raymond Sullivan, MM, works with pop singers in Korea to adapt Korean pop music to Christian themes. Fr. Jim McLaren in Australia adds to this with an article on 'Present-day Aural Literature of the Young'. Fernando Reyes Matta describes how independent artists, not in the hire of the large transnational record corporations, have found help in popular movements and in the church.

An issue on 'Comunicación Popular' (1981/3) presents a wide range of new communication experiences in Third World countries.

Latin American Conference on "The Church and the New Communication Order"

The international movement toward a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) embodies many of the ideals of Christian communicators for a more just and humane communication. It is encouraging to see that Christians are increasingly joining forces with other leaders in communication policy to bring about practical implementation of these proposals.

On October 8-12, 1982, representatives of Catholic communication organisations met with some of the outstanding communication researchers and policy-makers of Latin America in a retreat centre near São Paulo to discuss the role and responsibility of the People of God in bringing about a new communication order. The meeting was organised by UNDA-AL, OCIC, UCLAP (UCIP in Latin America), the Department of Social Communication of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (DECOS-CELAM), the ecumenical Union of Christian Communicators of Brazil (UCBC) with the participation of the Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR) and WACC.

It was clear in this meeting that the central issue in the NWICO is no longer simply more balanced international news flows, but the *democratisation* of communication. How can we remove the inequities suffered by the information-poor? How can the media be less dominated by professional elites, big government and big business and become more accountable to the public? How can we achieve greater public participation in decisions on policy-making programming and administration of the media? How can we gain a more open access to the media and more local decentralised media?

A major emphasis in the document drawn up in the São Paulo meeting is that there must first be a democratisation of communication in the church itself if the church is to speak credibly and give effective living witness of a new pattern of communication in Latin American society. The practice of evangelisation cannot be a unilaterial imposition, but should find ways to be more participatory and dialogical, showing respect for the cultural values of the peoples of Latin America. Authority in the church should be exercised as service. Pastors should respect the liberty of the members of the People of God and recognise the right to participate in decision as persons co-responsible for the mission of the church. The liturgy, as the priviledged moment of communion with God and communion within the family of the faithful, should be open to indigenous expressions of praise and adoration and should provide contexts for an authentic celebration of faith, growth of community and liberation. The theology and theological formation should also support this more participatory spirit of evangelisation and communication in the church.

There was agreement that the church is most effective in bringing about a new communication order when it gives practical witness of participatory communication in the way it runs its many radio stations, newspapers, group media and in the way it teaches communication in its unversities and other training centres. The goal should be to train people — especially the poor and less powerful — to produce and administer their own media so that the media of the church can become truly the voice of the voiceless.

The meeting recommended that the church attempt to dialogue with media owners and media professionals regarding more popular participation in the public media. There was also stress on the right of media workers to participate in the editorial policies and management of media and a greater opening of media to labour unions and other organised sectors of the popular classes. It was recognised, however, that an obstacle to such a dialogue of church leaders and media professionals is the paternalistic attitude of the church to media professionals and the lack of respect for the competence and autonomy of those working in the media.

The document also recommends that the church, especially groups of competent laypersons, become more involved in the formulation of national communication policies.

Finally, the São Paulo document has addressed the Episcopal Conferences asking that these recommendations be part of the agenda of the church's deliberations on its mission. They have also asked that the international organisations of the church — UNDA, OCIC, UCIP and WACC — study more carefully the implications of the NWICO and take a clear stand regarding the democratisation of communication.