

Carry the Light-giving Message into the Night

Larry Hollon
General Secretary
United Methodist Communications
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Here are the headlines: Weeks before Russian tanks rolled into Georgia a cyberattack was mounted that shut down Georgian government websites.

No longer just for teens, social networking is a tool for high paid managers to find about job opportunities.

Text messaging is so widespread state legislatures are debating laws to prohibit texting while driving.

CNN and NBC are re-organizing news bureaus to take advantage of new technologies.

Immigration and the movement of peoples are surfacing cultural conflicts in every part of the world. In a generation, those who are defined today as minorities in the U.S. will be in the majority.

Now for the stories: Internet security experts say the Georgia cyberattack is the first time such an attack has coincided with a shooting war, but they say it won't be the last. It emphasized how dependent the world has become on the Internet and how an attack of magnitude could affect banking, power, transportation and governance.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html?scp=1&sq=Cyberattacks&st=cse>

Social networking is changing how we relate to each other in significant ways, and it's growing at breath-taking pace. Facebook began in 2004 and today has 80 million active users. The fastest growing segment is users over the age of 25.

The social network LinkedIn is designed for professionals earning more than \$100,000 per year. It offers contact, mentoring, chat groups and recommendations in addition to online resumes. LinkedIn has 25 million members. It's adding 1.2 million new users per year, one every two seconds.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/technology/personaltech/14basics.html?scp=23&sq=LinkedIn&st=cse>

Beyond the obvious public attention it garnered, Barack Obama announced his Vice Presidential choice for three additional reasons: to collect millions of names for a database; to mobilize supporters; and because it's as efficient, inexpensive and direct a medium as any available.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/TECH/09/01/sanchez.obama/?imw=Y&ieref=mpstoryemail>

Eighty percent of the world's population lives within range of a cellphone network. In the year 2000, 17 billion text messages were sent globally. In 2001 the number ballooned to 250 billion. In 2004 it had doubled to 500 billion.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/opinion/13graff.html?scp=1&sq=Text%20the%20Vote%20by%20Garret%20Fraff&st=cse>

The Philippines sends an average of 400 million text messages a day, or 142 billion a year. Texting played a major role in mobilizing opposition to the government of Jose Estrada which eventually fell due to lack of popular support. This simple text, "go to 2 EDSA. Wear blk." became a call to radical reform.

It is for this reason that the government of Myanmar shut down text message services during the widespread protests by Buddhist monks in that country recently.

Digital media are bringing yet another breath-taking form of change.

Cable television now attracts 50% of the audience, as network television's share of the audience has declined significantly.

Daily newspaper circulation declined 8.4% in 2007, while online readership actually increased 9% in the third quarter of the year.

http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2008/narrative_newspapers_intro.php?media=4

The Pew Internet Project reports that 93% of teen girls and 99% of teen boys play games on the Internet and this cuts across the racial, ethnic and socio-economic spectrum.

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/263/report_display.asp

Pew says gaming is a social experience for 74% of these teens. They play in-person with friends or connect online.

Games often serve as a topic around which interaction occurs, and is organized. A third of teens, Pew says, visit websites and online discussion groups for the games they play.

What this means is that digital media through gaming offers teens social capital that they use to enhance their personal relationships.

In an addendum to the Pew research project Dr. Joe Kahne writes that games hold promise for teaching and learning, particularly in the realm of civics and civic engagement.

Nicholas Carr, writing in *The Atlantic*, reports on research by scholars at University College in London that identifies a change in our attention span accompanied by our reading style on the Internet. “It is clear,” the reports says, “that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of ‘reading’ are emerging as users ‘power browse’ horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.” (*Is Google Making Us Stupid?* Nicholas Carr, *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>)

Carr’s point: new media are *re-programming us*.

Is your head spinning yet? If so, you’re not alone. Writing for the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Cathy Taylor says of ad executives what she might say of all of us, “one gets the sense that few know how to cope even with the changes to the media landscape that have already happened, let alone the ones that are still to come...Simply put, the concept of mass media has ended. It is less clear what will replace it and how advertising will play a role.”

But let’s not forget that interesting demographic information we noted at the outset. By 2042 persons identified as ethnic and language minorities today will outnumber non-Hispanic whites in the U.S.

By 2023 so-called minority children will constitute a majority of the nation’s children under age 18 and by 2039 minorities will constitute the majority of working age persons in the U.S.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/washington/14census.html?pagewanted=all>)

Demographic changes are affecting *how* people live and *where* they live. This year, according to the Worldwatch Institute, for the first time in human history half the population of the planet lives in urban areas. We are an urban population. Thirty two percent of us, or 1 billion people, live in slums, many of which lack the most basic services including fresh water, sanitary sewers and police protection.

(<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5455>)

In thirty years the World Bank estimates the urban slum dwelling population will have doubled to two billion people.

(<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:21405637~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html>)

Let’s assess this environment and de-construct it for a few minutes. The Barna Group recently released survey results revealing that 16 to 29-year-olds are more critical of Christianity than any previous generation. In this group, only 16% have what Barna calls

a “good impression” of Christians. Eighty seven percent say Christianity is too judgmental and eighty five percent say it’s hypocritical.
(<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=280>)

The study also found that those who describe themselves as non-Christian is growing in every age group. Interviewed by TIME, Barna researcher David Kinnamon said “23% of Americans over 61 were non-Christians; 27% among people ages 42-60; and 40% among 16-29 year olds. Younger Christians, he concludes, are therefore likely to live in an environment where two out of every five of their peers is not a Christian.” (*Christianity's Image Problem*, TIME, Tuesday, Oct. 02, 2007, By David Van Biema)

This is the environment in which we operate as the church’s communications agency, but equally significant, this is the environment in which every local congregation is called upon to carry out ministry. It’s the environment you are asked to become familiar with as you serve the church by providing policy guidance as the board of directors of United Methodist Communications.

We face a multiplicity of media and competition for mindsapce; we are living through changes in lifestyle and values in post-modern, post-Christian culture, changes that are continuous, require adaptation and the ability to turn on a dime.

Writing in the *State of the News Media 2007* by the Pew Research organization one journalist says, “There is no single or finished news product anymore. News use is continual.” (<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008/chapter%20pdfs/PEJ2008-Overview.pdf?cat=9&media=1>)

We seek information 24 hours a day, seven days a week on-demand—when we want it, and how we want it, through search engines. We’re multi-tasking; watching TV, or emailing, or browsing the web, or texting, or talking on the telephone. We’ve created a 48-hour-day.

The Pew Report goes on to say, “News is shifting from being a product — today’s newspaper, Web site or newscast — to becoming a service: how can you help me, even empower me?”

“A news organization and a news Web site are no longer final destinations. Now they must move toward also being stops along the way, gateways to other places, and a means to drill deeper, all ideas that connect to service rather than product. ‘The walled garden is over,’ the editor of one of the most popular news sites in the country told us,” says the Pew Report.
(<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008/chapter%20pdfs/PEJ2008-Overview.pdf?cat=9&media=1>)

So, to summarize, everything is speeded up. Our time is marked by increasing secularization, consumption, skepticism of institutions and authority, globalization of

media, reality mediated through images, sound and screens, and the appearance of, if not the fact of, empowered individuals.

Institutions such as the church are not designed to be adaptive and reactive, they are designed for stability, to provide a vision of the eternal and unchanging love of God, to offer comfort and solace, and to anchor us in faithfulness to God. The challenge old line denominations face is how to continue to proclaim a gospel that is relevant to the needs of the current age in words, images and sounds that communicate and invite those seeking the embrace of God's love to experience it. And they do this with organizational charts that were created in another age with many walled gardens.

When those who tend to the walled gardens think their own flowers are the most beautiful and deserve attention it's disappointing. We spend an inordinate amount of time discussing how to maintain, nurture, protect, and keep others from walking on our flowers.

And as we do this, those seeking a relevant message of hope for their souls look elsewhere, and children die of malaria, and between the guns of insurgents and armies, of privation and starvation, and the world, not concerned with our gardens and their maintenance, passes us by; and I fear, God weeps.

No matter where you turn, no matter what your theology, there is a commentator telling you the current organizational structures of the old line institutions are creaking under their own weight and are inadequate to the task of serving the needs of the emerging global digital society.

Moreover, mainline denominations have lost, to a considerable degree, the capacity to do theology through media because they withdrew from the media thirty years ago and failed to consider communication as more than a set of technical, functional skills. While the media were re-shaping culture and our view of the world, the mainline church turned its back on media engagement and gave it over to corporations and religious entrepreneurs.

This is a significant position of weakness.

Today precious few mainline theologians reflect upon the media in more than a critical way and fewer still interpret faith by engaging an audience through media.

The cost is high. It includes the loss of a significant voice on such matters related to faith as care for the environment, peace, health and just concern for those living in conditions of poverty, the loss of skills to do theology in an image-rich, media-based culture, and loss of influence to seek justice for those who are left out of the mainstream culture, ignored, or demonized.

Religious entrepreneurs, however, were not so disengaged. The National Religious Broadcasters claim 1700 producers of radio and television programming reaching an

audience of more than 141 million. (<http://www.sott.net/articles/show/165954-Feeling-the-hate-with-the-National-Religious-Broadcasters>)

In the United States alone 1, 463 Christian radio stations deliver 15 or more hours of religious programming weekly. (*Number of Religious Broadcasters Continues to Grow*, Gustav Niebuhr, New York Times, Feb. 12, 1996)

Internationally, the Trinity Broadcast Network utilizes 9 satellites and 33 carriers to beam its programming to Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Australia. (*Media Power, Politics and Proselytizing: The Global Gospel of American Christian Broadcasting*, Michael Serazio, University of Pennsylvania)

These religious entrepreneurs have gained substantial influence on social policy and are viewed by many the world over as the voice of the Christian community because they are present through media in ways that other Christian voices are not. Others advance a gospel of wealth that seems politically harmless but connects religious faith to material riches in a way that is contrary to what Jesus teaches in Matthew 25.

To the degree that the mainline turned away from media, it also turned away from engaging with people yearning for spiritual connection, many of whom will not cross the doors of a mainline church. A gulf has developed that is wide and deep.

I believe the absence of the mainline in media over the years has communicated, however unintentionally and inaccurately, lack of concern, if not lack of relevance in addressing the life concerns of people today and the social policies and cultural values that shape human life in this swirling media context. More harshly, I regard our absence as an abdication of responsibility. We, in effect, said to folks like Pat Robertson, James Dobson and Jerry Falwell, “You can have the public airwaves, we’ve got our own gardens to tend.”

There will be no recovering that lost ground. The whole media environment has changed and we don’t have the will, the resources, nor the personnel to engage it at the level required in older broadcast media.

This begs the question: In the emerging digital environment is United Methodism today capable of communicating with those to whom the Wesleyan Movement in its earliest days delivered a message of life-changing hope? Are we equipped and skilled to stand as John Wesley in places equivalent to the coal fields of Birmingham and speak to miners or to those living in poverty circumstances on the streets of London who were left out of the Industrial Revolution?

I know these are hard words. Now let me turn to hope and success.

As I see it, that’s the challenge before us. Here’s how we are going about addressing the challenge: First we have sought to establish the voice of the church in the wider conversation. Globally, it has taken the form of equipping annual conferences with

technology to enable them to connect across the conference and with internal national audiences. We have conducted training for communicators and bishops to develop skills to use computers and other equipment. We are moving to the next stage which is to establish radio stations in three locations and to develop online learning capacity in a partnership with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. It has the potential to connect the African continent through Africa University with universities in Brazil, Argentina and Japan for truly global sharing of knowledge and resources.

In the United States this has taken form in multiple ways, one of which is public media. Our most visible, sustained effort is the Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors. Campaign that relies heavily on television, radio, billboards and earned media coverage.

When we started this campaign The United Methodist Church was indistinguishable from most other mainline denominations. Only 14% of those polled knew of the denomination. Someone called us a “generic” denomination.

Now, after 8 years of media engagement awareness of the church is at 30% and among those surveyed by the Gallup organization earlier this year United Methodists have the highest positive and lowest negative perceptions of 10 different religious groups.

Ninety six percent of those surveyed have a positive or neutral view of United Methodists while only 4% have a negative perception. (Gallup Panel Survey, March 24-27, 2008)

Knowing that people don't join organizations as they once did and are skeptical about institutional religion, we chose to identify The United Methodist Church as “the people of the United Methodist Church.” This is more than a marketing expression. It is consistent with our understanding of ourselves as a movement of people committed to principles Wesley articulated that faith is active—“do no harm, do good, stay in love with God.”

What we promise, if people will engage with the people of The United of the United Methodist Church, is a welcome manifested by open hearts, open minds and open doors.

This promise resonated with those who seek a community of faith. It remains, however, a challenge and a marker of our capacity to live up to what we promise.

That's why United Methodist Communications staff put as much, if not more, time into local church training to offer the tools for welcoming and hospitality that will support the invitation as we put into media production. We've reached 55,000 leaders in 17,000 local congregations with training.

Let me share a small bit of history. Eleven days into the campaign we learned an important lesson—to be flexible. At mid-week the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked. The media environment, as our lives, changed dramatically. We met as a staff and considered what to do.

In a matter of hours we pulled our television ads, re-scripted and produced a new ad that

called people to prayer and affirmed that no matter who you are, nor where you live, the people of The United Methodist Church are praying with you.

A few weeks later we found a way to deliver yet another message we believe was important in the climate of fear that so affected the world. We secured a site near Ground Zero in New York to make the statement that fear is not the only force at work in the world. A message in stark contrast to those who said the death and destruction was the handiwork of God.

We have maintained a stance of flexibility and opportunity to project the voice of the church at critical moments of global import. I cannot over-state the importance of flexibility for this agency. We must be innovative, and we must be granted flexibility because the environment in which we work sometimes requires us to turn on a dime.

Innovative change can be risky. If the public media campaign had failed, our failure would have been very public, and very embarrassing not only for United Methodist Communications but for The United Methodist Church. We are very mindful of this fundamental reality and we keep our responsibility to the church foremost in our thinking.

Innovative change can also be disruptive, especially in an organization that values stability. But the disruption we face is not merely the result of our creation. The world with its tragedies and opportunities sometimes crashes in upon us demanding a response that has no precedent.

In addition to being innovative and flexible, we also seek to encourage the church's conversation with itself and with the wider world. In a global culture of story-telling, we are called upon to help the church to tell its story, or its multiple stories, in a compelling, engaging way. We say to ourselves in United Methodist Communications that our task is to inspire, inform and engage.

I'm reminded of Matthew's gospel when the disciples, according to The Message translation asked Jesus, "Why do you tell stories?"

He replied, "You've been given the insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. (Matt. 13)

The drama of storytelling is our art, and we do it in many, many different ways, through many media and with different audiences. This small book *Unsilencing A Voice*, tells the story artfully. It documents a range of work the past eight years that leads us to this place.

Over the past year we were called upon to assist the General Conference to experience two days of integrated messages to focus the mission of the church on four areas. It was

the first time General Conference had given this kind of attention to messages. The core message was the mission of the church, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Our staff worked across the agency, and across the church to distill these messages and put them into image, sound and words that would communicate effectively.

Now our task is to continue to work with our partner agencies to keep messages focused and effective. The Four Areas are:

- Developing Principled Christian Leaders for the Church and the World;
- Creating New Places for New People and Renewing Existing Congregations;
- Engaging in Ministry with the Poor and;
- Stamping Out the Killer Diseases of Poverty By Improving Global Health.

As part of our re-invention, we have organized our budget and staff around the four areas. In addition, we are working across the church with the general boards and agencies, the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, annual conferences and local congregations to keep these four areas in front of the church and to provide support for the ministries contained in them.

Perhaps I have given you more information than can be absorbed quickly. That’s a fault. On the other hand, given the tasks we face, I’ve barely scratched the surface and over the next four years you will see how much more there is about this agency and its staff to absorb and, I think, appreciate.

I conclude by pointing to the future. I believe we can take advantage of the digital tools that are re-shaping human life globally. In fact, The United Methodist Church may be among the better equipped to welcome it and give it deep consideration.

A researcher for a major firm recently said to one of our co-workers that the United Methodist Church among all others may be better positioned to consider reinventing itself than others because of its history, its resources and its system. We *are* re-inventing United Methodist Communications.

In the next few days we will start to encourage a global spiritual dialogue. It will ask who are we as a people of faith? It could involve us seeking to understand what we mean when we call ourselves a church. It will ask us to Re-think Church. And in doing so, it will encourage us to consider both the inward essence of our historic faith community and the outward expression of faith in our time.

We will ask, “What if church were a verb, and not a noun?” What if we were to see ministry as opening our hearts, our minds and our doors? What if faith were about becoming engaged with the world?

If we understand that God's love transforms us internally and individually might we also ask how it transforms our world collectively and globally? We will suggest that in The United Methodist Church we have 10,000 ways, 10,000 doors through which to begin the journey to engage with God and with God's world.

Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors. is not only about opening the doors of the church with an invitation to come in. It is also about opening ourselves to the New Creation entering into God's world by practicing an outward, active faith of compassion, justice and absence of harm.

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi he wrote to encourage them and to ask them to continue the work they had started, even if he were unable to visit them in person. In the second chapter of his letter as it appears in The Message translation he says: "Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Carry the light-giving Message into the night..." (Philippians 2)

Let this be our charge as we work together on behalf of the church in this agency these next four years. Let us provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Let us carry the light-giving message into the night.

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