

# Redeeming Journalism: Well-reported Stories Can Revitalize Global Ministry and Engage the Church Like Never Before

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Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4, NIV)

These first four verses of Luke's gospel describe the purpose and methods of a journalist. Investigate carefully. Interview eyewitnesses. Write an orderly account of what happened. Educate, edify and inspire the audience.

Luke's gospel and his book of Acts have provided wisdom and a roadmap for the church from then until now. Yet, too often we forget the central role journalism played in his accounts—and how journalism can be just as central to ministry today.

COVID-19 has reminded the world of journalism's vital role—careful investigation to produce orderly accounts. News media have been exempted from stay-home orders as “essential services.” The best journalists report clearly and accurately what is happening and who is impacted. They tell true stories through the eyes of the people living those stories. Often, we find our own stories in theirs. These accounts can spur us to better strategies, informed prayer and wider engagement.

## Journalism and Mission: Setting the Scene

The pandemic notwithstanding: In the twenty-first century, journalists and their craft have been held in low regard by large numbers of evangelical Christians. In the United States, journalists are viewed as anything from oddities in a struggling industry to “enemies of the American people.” Verifiable facts are dismissed as “fake news” if they don't fit an audience's political agenda. This post-truth culture is dangerous, and a self-fulfilling prophecy for future uninformed generations.

Additionally, the rapid economic decline of local journalism creates news deserts: woefully uninformed communities with no real idea of what's happening or why. This

leads to cynicism and disengagement, not to mention governmental corruption.

The mission world is experiencing a similar news dearth. Most agencies pay lip service to the dire need for well-reported stories of God's work in their midst. However, their budgets and staffing priorities don't reflect this sentiment.

Agency staff complain that the Church doesn't adequately understand global mission or its relevance, let alone the dynamic changes occurring in the mission context. But no corrective action is taken, leaving the Church with a consistently anemic story of missions. The bigger story of God's work remains known only by a few. Church and parachurch drift farther apart.

Many mission agencies don't attempt to do adequate journalism. Others try, but as budgets tighten, marketing messages to motivate donations replace quality stories. Staff trained in journalism, photojournalism or videography become a luxury that seemingly can be replaced solely with amateurs and technology.

For several years, I (Heather) led a globally distributed journalism team for an international network of mission agencies. Our network funding came primarily through member organization fees. This gave our journalism team freedom from expectations to produce donor-driven content. While our network encouraged quality story contributions from member organizations, the global journalism team focused on filling gaps telling the untold stories of our cause.

We released stories about committed prayer groups in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. We shared articles featuring creative missionary care strategies from member organizations in the Netherlands and Germany. We challenged generosity narratives showing how churches in Chad,

Romania, Kenya and Indonesia gave sacrificially to support God's mission. And, we demonstrated global engagement in God's mission through personal stories about more than thirty, mostly non-Western, staff.

Each story was made freely available to member organizations and beyond. Coupled with member organization submissions, the result was a library of stories which collectively gave a fuller, deeper picture of God's global work.

Articles, photos and videos were then released for republishing and retooling worldwide through member organization channels or the channels of any advocate. From there, some stories were repurposed for donor audiences. Others were fitted with prayer information or used to encourage mobilization. Still others went out in their original form to inspire the Church to join in praise for what God was doing. Journalism sourced materials that educated and inspired the Church.

These stories had the added benefit of keeping those in our network connected to our collective vision. By putting the spotlight on unique strategies and lesser-known organizations, our stories helped every organization across the network feel that their part in our missional cause was equally valuable.

Our team relied on a small core team of supported missionaries as well as a network of volunteers around the world. Eventually, changes to network funding and adjustments to team members' availability made the initiative difficult to sustain. But we learned and accomplished a great deal that sourced my passion for the impact this work can have.

Several agencies have attempted models like this, but they are rare and often underfunded because mission has collectively failed to understand what many biblical

authors, including Luke, knew and modeled for the Church: people engage best with God's work through stories. As image-bearers, we are designed to engage in story—God's story and our own. God is glorified through credible, well-reported and well-told stories. We need to train, fund and appreciate people around the world who can provide those stories. It is time to redeem journalism's valuable role in the worldwide church.

### Bricks Without Straw

Understanding the value of journalism begins with knowing what it is not. Journalism is not marketing. The American Marketing Association<sup>1</sup> defines its craft as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” Certainly, there is some overlap. Journalism as a product may be used as raw material for marketing campaigns in ministry, but journalism as a craft is altogether different. A call to action, central to marketing messages, is supposed to be left to the audience and, in our case, to the Holy Spirit.

Many ministries want their communicators to focus only on marketing / fundraising material: brochures, scripts, videos, speeches, social media posts. All are important, to be sure. But without the raw material of journalistically reported stories, leaders are ordering bricks without straw. Instead, ministries could see journalism as a key element of communications that helps them narratively educate their audience about their particular cause and its place in God's mission.

The American Press Institute defines journalism as “the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, journalism's purpose is “to provide people with verified information they can use to make better decisions.”<sup>3</sup>

Sounds suspiciously like Luke 1:1–4, doesn't it?

Luke mentions someone named Theophilus in the opening verses of both his gospel and Acts. There's a strong possibility—whether Theophilus was one person or a group—that this was Luke's patron, the one who commissioned his journalistic work. If that is true, then Luke's journalism was at once independent, yet also sponsored by someone with an interest in the success of a movement. Luke and his patron(s), and the other gospel writers, were confident

enough in the story's power that they simply reported it, either through what they had seen themselves or through eyewitness accounts. The Holy Spirit speaks to individuals through the story itself. No promotional call to action needed to be inserted. The whole Bible is a call to action.

Now think in today's terms. Good journalism is not confined to independent news outlets, but may be found even among social, political and faith movements—even individual organizations and missionaries. (Awful journalism exists among these outlets and movements, too, of course.) Regardless of who funds it or publishes it, good journalism remains a relentless search for, and exposition of, truth. Sometimes that truth confirms suspicions. At other times it is decidedly inconvenient because it upends our notions of what is working and what isn't. There are even times when it can challenge our perspective so radically that it topples our worldview.

All of this, of course, requires a passionate dedication to ethics in reporting and publishing news, whether you're the *New York Times* or a small ministry. What we produce must be honest, thorough and fair. The news media (in all generations) have been rightly criticized for sometimes failing in all three of these attributes. Journalists within a ministry organization or movement must hold to an even higher standard, because we are agents of God's truth in the world. They also must extend dignity to the people being reported about, demonstrating the biblical truth that all human beings are equally created in the image of God.

### A Strategy-Setting Tool

In 2013, a colleague and I (Jim) were sent to Jordan by the Christian agency we worked for. The war in Syria was almost two years old and Jordan was overwhelmed with refugees. This represented a great challenge to the Church in Jordan (a tiny minority population) to serve hurting people with the love of Jesus. Given limited resources, what were the best ways to do this?

We were asked simply to go find stories. We found more than we could ever tell—in homes, refugee camps and churches serving as aid stations. We interviewed families who had just arrived after harrowing journeys out of Syria. We watched the processes of feeding and housing people, educating kids. We interviewed weary pastors and aid workers. We saw the desperation in people's eyes as they arrived at a church, UN refugee

papers in hand.

At the end of our week there, we debriefed with local leaders from our agency. What, they asked, did we see as the most urgent ministry opportunities? Which efforts were working? Which weren't? Based on the stories we gathered, how might they consider tweaking their strategies?

We all realized we were onto something: journalism reveals the way God is carrying out his mission. Then, it can feed mission strategy. A journalist is trained to gather information, to sift and process and distill it, but always through the eyes of real people living the story. And always a little detached, with an eye toward reporting the complete story—alternating between ground level and thirty thousand feet—rather than a singular view.<sup>4</sup> A mission organization that helps develop a journalism team can experience enormous returns on investment. Forward-thinking mission leaders can use well-reported stories to measure impact, assess strategy and adjust accordingly to the ways that God is working at any given time or place.

Yes, we were on to something. No, the idea didn't take off. In a recession, our personal missionary funding lagged. Mission agencies have long subscribed to the notion that in God's economy, funding follows vision. This is largely true, but it isn't always immediate. Those early glimpses of success were important, but so were the frustrations. God allowed a few (still-productive) years to consecrate them.

### Journalism Expands Our View

A Christian reporter recently told me (Heather) that most Christians understand the global Church through the dual lenses of humanitarian work and persecution. Organizations involved in these causes often share their stories well and broadly. This work is important, but should we view God's mission only through these lenses?

Another common view of global mission comes through ethnocentrism: “If *those* people were more like us, then life would be better for them.” Adding the Christian layer: “If *those* people had our church denomination or expressed their faith in our cultural forms, then their Christian faith would be genuine.”

Mission agencies sit on the corrective content that would change these misperceptions, but often neglect to tell these stories. So the Church languishes in ignorance and inward focus, not knowing how God is carrying out his mission and never growing to understand the vast depth and treasure of





knowledge and experience that is contained in equal measure across multicultural facets of the church.

Positioning themselves as doers who need resources to “accomplish the task,” rather than taking responsibility to educate from their experience, mission agencies fail to inspire the whole Church to join in God’s mission. They perpetuate the myth that it can be outsourced to professionals, and the only role for ordinary churchgoers is to send money. But participation in God’s mission includes both resourcing professionals and being personally engaged in it in everyday life. It is for everyone, everywhere. Taking journalism as a serious means of global education promises to radically shift global

Church engagement in God’s mission.

A ministry leader once told me (Jim) that, given the choice between hiring a journalist or a grant writer, he would always choose the grant writer. When funds are uncertain (as they always are), the expedient approach is to create a direct line between your organization and potential funders.

But what is being lost when stories of the wondrous work of God are told only to those who we think might write a big check? What doesn’t take place when those stories go unreported and unknown to the wider Body of Christ? Are we faithfully stewarding the glory of God? Are we taking Scriptures like Psalm 96:3 seriously? “*Publish his glorious deeds among the nations. Tell everyone about the*

*amazing things he does.*”

Good evangelism training usually concludes with something like this: “Simply tell your story. Point people to Jesus. Do your part. Then let the Holy Spirit do his.” The gospels turned the world upside down. Could we reasonably conclude that God continues to engage people in his work through well-reported, compelling stories? What is the eternal cost if we fail to do this?

What would Luke say?

## A Visionary Model

Let’s review. The global church is growing and maturing at an accelerating rate. Mission agencies can play a key role, which they often neglect or distort, by educating and engaging the church in God’s work.

Worldwide, we see a vast army of trained and passionate journalists who have been downsized out of their chosen careers. Many are Christians. We see many more who feel called to this role (both inside and outside the church) but who need training and opportunity. Were this army to be turned loose, the church might engage with missions like never before. But, anyone wishing to be a missionary journalist faces a create-your-own-adventure and raise-your-own-funds proposition. Not many new university grads are willing, networked or debt-free enough to do that. So most give up on the idea.

Among the career journalists who do work at mission agencies, many are walking away discouraged because their leaders have decided their craft is expendable and that their time would be better spent writing fundraising letters and marketing brochures.

Enough. COVID-19 gives the global church a golden opportunity to pivot, to rethink, to innovate. We anticipate tightened budgets and (greatly) reduced international travel, likely for years. This could force mission agencies to become more localized. Yet, global connection about the work of God will be even more crucial. The biblical mandate remains: *Publish his glorious deeds among the nations.*

Global and local journalists can still be mobilized. It’s time to link supply and demand, calling and opportunity. It’s high time for agencies to move beyond, “That’s a good idea, but it’s not what we do.”

Here is how we can get there:

- Mission leaders and influencers must advocate for journalism. Not just media production, marketing and public

relations. All have important roles. But journalism is the raw material for it all.

- In a rapidly maturing global Church, imagine how journalism could help network and engage us all in vision, strategy and prayer. Imagine journalism not just as storytelling, but intelligence gathering.
- Give up the need for full control. Kingdom above all. Mission agencies can share costs of full-time professional journalists, freelancers and volunteers who together can serve the kingdom movement, not just the individual ministry. In fact, existing mission networks could provide central hubs for this type of collaboration.
- Travel within regions will likely open before much global travel is allowed. Identify key regional locations for hubs, then identify, train and deploy networks of journalists in these regions. Imagine an Associated Press model, where regional stories inform the Church and mission in those areas. The best and most significant stories funnel to a global audience as well. (While we're at it, imagine a member/subscription model that helps fund it all.)
- Leverage nearly universal audio and video technology that enables authentic and credible content gathering as well as journalism training from afar. Refine opportunities for local and global reporters to strengthen contributions from both talent pools.

Examples do pop up here and there in the mission world: an agency here or there with a media training program.<sup>5</sup> Another that has a team of full-time and part-time writers, photographers and videographers tasked with simply telling stories ... to “encourage the church for the glory of God.”<sup>6</sup>

These are hopeful signs. They are not yet a movement. They are oddities, struggling year to year to survive because—to borrow the pandemic term—they are not yet considered

essential. When journalism is considered a luxury, it will never withstand shifts in funding, strategy and personnel, let alone a global crisis.

This can change, if influential leaders collectively understand journalism's value and biblical roots. The change indicator will be resourcing the movement adequately. Money and staffing are a start, of course, but the real impact comes with long-term, cultural buy-in. Building sustainable capacity to report and share God's stories, for God's glory, needs to become a core value for every mission organization.

Idealistic? Sure. Achievable? Yes. Let's develop and implement a bold, interagency strategy. Our generation has a historic opportunity to help the global Church engage in the work of God. The dearth of professional reporting about mission has caused the Church to mostly tune out, believe it's not their job—or assume the enemy is winning. God has given us the people, the tools, and the biblical mandate to show otherwise. Let's use them.

For his glory alone. 

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## Notes

1. American Marketing Association, <https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>.
2. Walter Dean, “What is journalism?” American Press Institute, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/>.
3. Walter Dean, “What makes journalism different than other forms of communication?” American Press Institute, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/makes-journalism-different-forms-communication/>.
4. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The danger of a single story,” recorded July 2009, TEDGlobal 2009, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).
5. See for example, ABWE's Storytellers Abroad – Multimedia Workshops, <https://www.abwe.org/work/projects/storytellers-abroad>.
6. See On Field Media (OFM), a ministry of Africa Inland Mission International, <https://aimint.org/ofm/>.