

Recommendations on Planning and Organizing a **PUBLIC COMMUNICATION/RELATIONS OFFICE** for Bishops' Conferences

Manila, Philippines
March 10-20, 1999

Based on the teachings and considerations of the Pastoral Instructions *Communio et Progressio* (174-176), *Aetatis Novae* (No. 31), and the *Orientations and Recommendations* of the Bishop's Institute for Social Communication on "Church and Public Relations (BISCOM I September 1-5, 1997) we, Bishops, priests, religious and lay persons involved with the work of Catholic Bishops' conferences gather for a training seminar on "Church and Public Relations" in Manila from March 10-20, 1999.

The Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC-OSC) organized the seminar. We were 21 participants representing 12 countries: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Philippines, Korea, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

The seminar was organized to train participants on Public Relations. Experts and resource persons from different countries conducted sessions on: Public Relations, relations between Church and Media, Crisis Management, and concrete planning for a Public Communications/Relations Office. We engaged in various workshops as well as exercises on news reporting, feature writing, conducting interviews, managing crisis, and dynamics of a Public Communication/ Relations Office. Having realized the value of our learning, we propose similar activities for those countries, which were not represented in this 10-day training seminar.

As a result of these, we came up with practical applications of what we have learned and suggest the following design for a Public Communication/Relations Office:

OBJECTIVES

1. To build good relations with external audiences based on good communication and unity within the Church herself.
2. To provide information that is authentic, relevant and timely.
3. To respond to the issues of the times, faithfully presenting the mind of the Church in order to improve mutual understanding (cf. *Communio et Progressio*, Nos. 174-175)

MAIN TASK

To communicate the vision and mission of the Church in understandable language and to build good relations, especially with the general public. The office will work as a service unit of the Bishops' Conference, helping other service units/commissions with external audiences. It will make sure that all communication with different audiences will be congruent with the chosen identity of the Church in that particular country or region.*

AUDIENCES

1. Media
2. Government
3. NGO's
4. Internet Users

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A public Communication/Relations Officer, duly appointed by the Bishops' Conference, shall direct the activities of the office. Adequate human resources must secure the functions of a Public Communication/Relations Office including:

1. Information assessment and dissemination
2. Research and Documentation

The activities shall be supported by a Crisis Management Team, Writers' pool and Legal advice. Crisis Management Teams shall be convoked in the event of a crisis, comprising of a team leader, relevant experts and a spokesperson. Dealing with crisis situations should be set up in a Crisis Management Plan, which should be regularly evaluated. The individuals chosen to assume these posts should be committed persons. They should be authentic, knowledgeable, truthful and sincere. They should work in harmony with other responsible persons of the Bishop's conference as well as with people outside the Church.

ACTIVITIES

1. Dissemination of information through bulletins, timely press conferences and press releases.
2. Responsive to the press which should not only be critical but also positive.
3. Collection and publication of stories about the activities and life of the Church.
4. Monitoring media's coverage of the Church.
5. Networking with diocesan Public Communication/Relations offices.
6. Design and undertaking research programs.
7. Training of Public Communication/Relations personnel.
8. Giving feedback to internal Church audiences for possible revisions and corrections.

HARDWARE

Appropriate technical equipment should be provided for the different activities.

FINANCES

Sufficient financial support should be provided for the establishment and/or operations of the office.

LOCATION

The most appropriate location is the General Secretariat of the Bishops' conference or in the capital city.

CHALLENGE

Possible obstacles e.g. financial constraints and non-availability of suitable persons should be overcome by those responsible within the Church through their mutual concern for a good public image of the Church and her members.

** This presupposes that the Church defines what she stands for (core values) which, beside others, is reflected in her apostolates and ways of proceeding in a particular situation. The Communications/PR personnel should help to discern a congruent identity and thus, bring about a unity of mind and heart within the Church. Authentic relations with outside audiences must be based on such internal unity.*