

"Tsunami: A Challenge to Christian Communications"

Message from Meeting

The tsunami that raced jet fast across the Indian Ocean on Dec. 26 left hundreds of thousands of people dead or presumed dead. The magnitude of the human catastrophe quickly impacted millions upon millions of other people. Intense worldwide coverage by communication media triggered immediate responses of sympathy, solidarity and support for the many hundreds of thousands who survived the calamity.

As the weeks passed, however, the tsunami made fewer headlines and compassion gradually waned, long before most survivors could regain a sense of normal life. Now, several months after the event, all too many who endured the devastation still struggle and remain vulnerable. Assisting the tsunami survivors continues to challenge many humanitarian and religious organizations.

Like other organizations, the Church in Asia must ask itself how adequately it was prepared to respond to the tsunami on the morning after Christmas 2004:

- How quickly was the Church able to muster material relief and provide solace for the suffering?
- How well did the Church use its own communication means and cooperate with other media to communicate vital information to the public?
- What lessons has the Church in Asia learned from the tsunami experience for its communication abilities?
- Will those lessons increase its communication capacity to respond to other crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is spreading unrestrained in most countries of Asia?

Such issues emerged during several days of deliberation and reflection on the Church's communication response to the tsunami. The gathering, held May 18-22 in Bangkok, focused on the Church's response to the tragedy and the extent to which media coverage augmented the Church's service. Taking part were 42 representatives of Caritas-Asia, Signis-Asia, the Office of Social Communications of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Catholic Social Communications of Thailand and Church media professionals.

Secular and commercial media were the primary carriers of news about last December's tsunami similar to their coverage of Pope John Paul II's death and Pope Benedict XVI's election.

The Church cannot assume it will be equally privileged whenever it wishes to communicate its concerns on values and principles that are not shared by media audiences and decision-makers in the media industry around the globe.

Within Asia, the last 15 years have seen enormous changes in the mindset of audiences, especially the young. The satellite transmission of news and information throughout the continent as well as the rapid introduction of mobile telecommunication technologies in virtually every

country of Asia have been creating a pattern of rapid information flows at relatively low cost that could not even be imagined a generation ago.

The continuing introduction of "third generation" (3G) telecom technologies that converge voice, video and data, along with the launch of low-cost computers, accelerate this transformation, reduce the digital divide and bring information within the reach of even more people -- especially the young.

Church media cannot compete with secular and commercial media, but the Church in Asia should learn to work with them. But before it can network effectively, it urgently needs to develop a mature communications culture. Church personnel in many localities are inadequately prepared to interact appropriately with professional media. Most do not even understand the culture and environment of media.

Media interest in the Church in Asia is high but many local Churches fail to respond appropriately to communication opportunities because they lack spokespersons who can work well in a professional environment to communicate the Church's position on issues of mutual concern and interest.

That may be a reason why the response of the Church in Asia to the tsunami has not been adequately reflected in media coverage of the event and its aftermath. Limited coverage of the Church's response to the tragedy is a sign that the Church in Asia must inculcate a more interactive communication environment (a) within its own institutions, and (b) improve its presence in mainstream media at local and international levels.

Recommendations

1. Bishops' conferences, dioceses and development/aid agencies such as Caritas must develop a more professional approach to communication media, one that enables Church personnel to understand contemporary media and thereby empower them to make better use of different communication opportunities.

2. The Church must act as a catalyst between Christian believers and society at large, rather than just tolerate an attitude of "what cannot be suffered must be endured." Therefore, the Church must increase its interaction with mainstream media, and develop a proactive attitude and approach to those media.

3. To this end, the Church must develop competent communications professionals through a series of intensive training programs. These courses should help the trainees master practical skills in media liaison and interaction, learn how to set up and maintain an effective media relations office, and study basics in information technologies such as the Internet. Minimal requirements to take part in such training must be spelled out in advance and applied when men and women apply to participate.

4. Bishops' conferences, dioceses and development/aid agencies such as Caritas must make an inventory of available communication resources, such as publications, websites, electronic media, and then properly assess their relevance in today's media environment. This should lead to a more rational use of resources and may even require the elimination of some Church media activities that are no longer justified.

5. Better networking must be developed among Church personnel in Asia, especially those engaged in communication and development services. The resulting spirit of openness and trust will ensure the flow of the right kind of information between Church communication officials and development/aid agencies such as Caritas. Communication officers of bishops' conferences should establish whatever structures are needed at continental and national levels to foster this kind of constructive interaction and networking.

6. To be better prepared and more effectively manage natural disasters and other crises, Church authorities, especially at continental and national levels, must immediately identify the vulnerabilities of Church communities and introduce appropriate crisis management systems that are designed to minimize and mitigate the impact of such disasters. Periodic meetings of "crisis management committees," practice drills and networking with appropriate civil authorities should help assure that lessons learned from the tsunami have been put to good use so that such a devastating experience need not be repeated.

7. With the approach of calendar markers such as six months, nine months and one year following the tsunami, Church national communication offices and Church-related NGOs should plan suitable activities to remember the tsunami's victims. Such special programs should commemorate the disaster and highlight its spiritual dimensions. Every effort should be made to have stories of tsunami relief transmitted in a professional and credible manner through various media.

8. Bishops responsible for social communication, Catholic media organizations, communication centers, as well as development/aid agencies like Caritas, and especially the organizations represented in this gathering should assess the progress of tsunami-related communication projects within their respective spheres, as well as the implementation of these recommendations throughout Asia.